

**Characters from the margins
of scripture that are central to
God's plans**



**Nottingham North East Circuit
Reflections for Lent and
Holy Week**

The year's series of reflections from Lent is focussing on characters that are not necessarily prominent in the bible stories we are familiar with. Indeed it is possible you might not be familiar with some of them at all.

These characters may appear on the margins of the stories we hear, play a minor role in the events taking place or just be mentioned almost as an afterthought. But far from being on the periphery, they are central to God's plans.

Over the next 6 weeks or so let's stop to actually think. Think about what that brief appearance might actually mean to how God might be working through them to bring about God's Kingdom right here on earth.

The Circuit staff team

Ash Wednesday King Josiah Read 2 Kings 22-23



The Old Testament is full of Kings (and the occasional Queen) but I suspect many of us might start to struggle naming many of them after Saul, David and Solomon. No worries, I am not really concerned with all their names but rather their qualities as

'Kings'.

An on line search for such information suggested that the vast majority were regarded as being rebellious, bad, wicked, evil, sinful, the worst to that point, disobedient, wayward, terrible, abysmal, full of vice, idolatrous and perverted, with the kings of the north being rated much, much worse than their southern counterparts .

This is perhaps because it is thought by biblical scholars that it is the scribes from the south who wrote down most of the OT history during the exile, the northern kingdom having been destroyed a century earlier.

And as we know history is often written by the winners

When it comes to the good kings (and there are not that many) Josiah,(604-609 BC) is ranked second best, only losing top spot to King Hezekiah 715 - 686 BC. Josiah was a godly king who began his reign at age 8 after his

father was assassinated. He is introduced by the words... “And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.” In the eighteenth year of his reign, he raised money to repair the temple, and during the repairs the high priest Hilkiah found the Book of the Law. When Hilkiah read it to Josiah, the king tore his clothes, a sign of mourning and repentance (hence it’s place here on Ash Wednesday)

Q: As you read 2 Kings 22-23 how many words beginning with ‘Re’ can you think of that describe what King Josiah did? I can think of at least a handful.

What positive lessons do you think we can learn from King Josiah regarding age, actions and affirmation?

Thursday 23rd Feb Lydia Read Acts 16:13-15, 40.

Lydia is one of many minor characters we find in the Bible, yet she is still remembered for her contribution to early Christianity. She is regarded as the first documented convert to Christianity in Europe.

Paul had a vision of a man telling him to go to Macedonia and preach. Yet here, he approaches a woman.



Paul discovered Lydia gathered with a group of women on the bank of a river to worship. What is the significance of this location?

Her husband is not mentioned, does this suggest she was a widow?

We read that Lydia is a seller of purple, which may imply a higher-than-average status. A business woman who exported purple dyed goods from Thyatira to Philippi. What is the significance of the colour purple? What do we associate with this colour?

Have you read the book or watched the film “The Colour Purple” by Alice Walker. Why do you think it was given this title?

Luke tells us that the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to believe, this is similar to Luke 24:45 when Jesus opened the hearts of his disciples so they could

understand the scripture. Lydia believes because she is able to understand and accept the gospel Paul preaches.

As a result of Lydia's faith, her whole household were baptised. What does this infer?

She offers Paul and his companions' hospitality in her home creating one of the first home churches.

What is the significance of Paul reaching out to this particular woman? Does this impact on how we do church today? Is this a model for ministry?

Lydia is a great example of a female disciple. Are there any other female disciples you can bring to mind from the New Testament? Were there few female disciples of this time, or is that they were not written about?

Can you think of women that have played an important part in your faith journey?

The Lord opened Lydia's heart to the good news; in turn she opened her home to Paul and his companions. Let us pray that our hearts are open to God's word. And that we too are open to practising hospitality and generosity.

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Friday 24th Feb

Unnamed Disciple

Read: John 21:4-22

Imagine being a disciple at this time, in this place. You've seen remarkable things – miraculous healings, teaching, compassion, love for the ones society

casts out – and you've also seen tragedy, trauma, pain and a horrific death. But then, it turns around again, you see Jesus alive again, resurrected, healed, restored.



Nothing is going to be the same again. Jesus was dead, and now he's alive – all that he spoke about before is proved to be truth.

The Kingdom of God, the Son of God, a new era of love and peace. He is the Messiah. So you're feeling joyous, elated, excited for the future. And yet...

Imagine being the disciple that is not Peter – Peter is the one that looks like a favourite, and yet Jesus isn't supposed to have favourites, is he? How can he be making a special deal of talking to Peter after his denials? They talked about Judas' betrayal, but Peter betrayed him too, didn't he?

And yet... here is Jesus talking to Peter, showing everyone that he still loves him, and asking Peter to confirm his love for Jesus. Maybe you, as another unnamed disciple, wonder why Jesus does this. Why doesn't Jesus just send Peter away? Get away from me betrayer, you let me down. Instead, you witness this remarkable scene, Jesus confirming Peter's position, as chief disciple almost, his three questions 'do you love me?' and Peter's response 'Yes Lord, you know that I do.' Wiping out his three denials, erase his guilt and sin, and make his slate clean again, free from sin, forgiven as only Jesus can.

Jesus is always full of compassion. He understands that we fail even we try our best not to – but he also understands the need for forgiveness, and if anyone can forgive us completely – it's Jesus.

For further reflection:

Do you appreciate the unnamed disciple's position? A little jealous that Peter is reinstated after his denials and betrayal, or happy that Peter is forgiven?

How do you think you would feel, facing Jesus after a denial like Peter's?
How could you begin to apologise and ask for forgiveness?

Saturday 25th Feb Mephibosheth Read: 2 Samuel 9

I'm not going to pretend I understand what happens between David and Saul, or the "It's complicated" status that comes from the relationship between David and Saul's son Jonathan. I'm not going to try and work out how I reconcile the call of God to war between two groups. I'm not even going to mention what sort of ulterior motives David might have for wanting to show kindness to Mephibosheth (Political ploy? Easing guilt?).



This is my starting point: David is King. David loved Jonathan. And I'm choosing to believe that because of the latter, and in his role as the former, David wants to show kindness to anyone of the family of Saul who is still alive.

"To whom can I show God's kindness?"

That in itself is a good enough question for us to ask.

"To whom can I show God's kindness?"

But that would be a reflection on David. What about Mephibosheth?

He responds to the invitation of a King seeking to show him kindness; He recognises his struggles, limitations, and questions his value; He is honoured, given blessings and an inheritance; He eats at the King's table as if he was the King's son.

Sometimes it's easier for us to ask the question of what we can do to show kindness instead of wrestling with the question of how we receive kindness. I find it easy to question my value, and in turn can reject kindness and compassion. And yet we are offered kindness by the King of Kings himself, as well as from those seeking to share their experience of God's kindness to them with others.

Maybe the lesson from Mephibosheth is this:

How ready am I to humble myself and accept the King's kindness?

May we humbly accept the honour, blessings, and inheritance offered.

May we accept the invitation to eat at the King's table as if we were the King's sons and daughters.

Sunday 26th Feb Tabitha / Dorcas Read Acts 9; 36-42

Luke introduces Tabitha (which in Greek is Dorcas) in Acts 9 by calling her a *disciple*. Like many kind women, she helped the poor and the widows. However, her story does not just stop here.

Tabitha got sick and then died. While waiting for burial, other believers heard that Peter was in a nearby town, so two of them went to find him. When Peter reached Tabitha's home, many people gathered upstairs mourning her. The widows were crying and showed Peter all the robes and clothing Tabitha had sewn for them. Then, Peter prayed for her, and she came back to life, which brought many to the Kingdom of God.

In Tabitha's story, we see the ripple effect of a Christian life that is well lived. Even though her role is not tremendously active, nor with any words, in the story (she is ill or dead for most of it), the way her community mourned her demonstrates the impact her life had on those around her.



Clearly, Tabitha was beloved and treasured by those she helped in the community. In her time of need, when she could do no more, her legacy lived on and motivated others to do all they could to help her in return. The seeds of kindness and love she had sown brought her back to life, by which the Power of the Holy Spirit is at display.

I wonder how we are living our Christians lives now and what impact we wish to make in our local community. What influence have we made to those around us and what legacy do we want to leave behind? On the other hand, having received help and support from others, are we showing gratitude and motivated to offer help back to them when they are in need? May Tabitha's story inspire us to live a life that is worthy of our salvation. Let us also be encouraged that the seeds of kindness and love we have sown will live on and continue to display the power of the Holy Spirit in our local community and beyond.

Monday 27th Feb

Cyrus

Read Isaiah 45: 1-3



In 587 BC, the nation of Judah was defeated by the Babylonian empire. The Jewish people were taken off into exile and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. What had been seen as impregnable was suddenly no more. And why had God allowed it to happen?

For around 150 years the Jews lived in Babylon. But then in Isaiah 40 God showed up and things were going to take a very surprising turn.

In prophecies that started to resonate with hope, God announced that he was going to raise up Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians and allow the Jewish people to return home. But Cyrus was a Persian King. He was not Jewish and indeed he did not even know or acknowledge God. But despite this, Cyrus is labelled with one of the most important words in the Bible. He is called the Lord's anointed, which we often translate as messiah.

How could a Persian King, who did not know God, be described as the messiah, the one who would save the people. In the past, because people could not understand how this could be correct, some scribes who copied the Bible would replace the word Cyrus with the word Kurios (which means Lord).

But God speaks of the treasures of darkness, the riches hidden in secret places. This verse (3) reminds us that it is often at our darkest moments, when our present seems at its worst, when there seems to be no hope for the future, that we can discover the treasures of darkness, those riches stored in secret places.

It is indeed, often at these most difficult times in our lives that we once again experience the love and grace of God, the God who summons us by name.

This passage speaks poetically of the God who can constantly surprise us and indeed the whole of this part of Isaiah remind us of the God who can do more than we might ever imagine. A beautiful summary of these chapters might state that in such horrible circumstances, the Judeans did not need a bigger faith in God; they needed a faith in a bigger God.

Can you think of times in your life when you have discovered the treasures of darkness, those difficult moments when you know that God is still with you?

Tuesday 28st Feb Onesiphorus Read: 2 Timothy 1:16-18, 4:19

“May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me.”

What a short, but significant tribute!



Not everyone gets to be Paul, but to be the person that loves and encourages Paul like this? That's someone worth teaching Christians about.

I long for churches to be full of people whose lives are lived out by that kind of testimony.

May we all be the kind of person who refreshes others, who isn't ashamed of them even when others reject them, who seeks them out.

May we recognise the work of Christ and the workers of Christ in their Kingdom-building endeavours.

May we champion, encourage and support the showing of God's love and proclamation of the Gospel where we see it happening.

And if we are the worker like Paul, may we recognise and express our gratitude for those who support us, without whom we would struggle.

To those who work so faithfully in serving the circuit and churches here in NNE - Thank you!

To those who are champions of the workers, encouragers of the work, supporters in word, deed, finance and prayer - Thank you!
This is Church!

Wednesday 1st March

Nathan

Read: 2 Sam 12:1-1

Being a prophet is never easy, these days you'd be ignored, laughed at, ridiculed. In Nathan's day, he was still laughed at by some, ignored by others, but also held in high esteem by others. Listened to by the great and the good of the day – which of course comes with its own problems. Nathan had been tasked by God to be a prophet, to tell the people – and the King – what God needed them to hear. As a trusted adviser to King David, Nathan was expected to speak to him the word of God, to tell him what God's message was, when he was going wrong or when he was going right.



This passage tells us about a time when David was clearly going wrong. He had killed someone, and God was not pleased. So, Nathan, as the Lord's prophet, had to tell the King that he had to change his ways. I wonder if he was nervous doing it, I mean King David was the most powerful person in the land, he could easily have ordered Nathan killed.

But Nathan knew he had God on his side, what he was doing was right, God had given him the words and the message to give to the King. Whether the King listened was another matter. Nathan spoke to the King in an unusual way for Old Testament times; he used a parable, which is normally how we think of Jesus teaching.

Initially David thought it was about someone else, and he was enraged, but then Nathan tells him – this is about you. You did this. It's hard to speak truth to power, sometimes it hard to speak truth to someone who is not in power, but we have to be honest and sometimes that's difficult. We like to call it feedback 'I'm saying this with love, but that sermon you preached wasn't good because...' 'I need to tell you that this thing you're doing is not

helpful...' trying to be honest is always best, but it can be difficult. Nathan had to be honest to the most powerful king. Most of us don't have to do that, but we can respect Nathan for what he had to do – not only telling the truth to a king, but also having total faith in the God he loves.

For further reflection:

Have you ever had to tell someone a hard truth?

How would you deal with telling someone in authority that they're wrong, when you're certain of the truth?

Thursday 2nd March Annas Read John 18: 12-14, 19-24

Since the death of the Queen there has been much media speculation about the role of a hereditary monarchy in a modern society. Is someone who is born into a certain family the best person to take on a leadership role? It is a divisive subject that will rumble on, with those of differing opinions unable to agree.

There is nothing new about hereditary positions. In our scriptures priests were born into priestly families. Annas was the first Chief Priest of the newly formed Roman province of Judaea in AD 6 and he served in that role until AD 15.

Annas had five sons who all held the office of high priest. His son-in-law was Caiaphas, the high priest we tend to associate with the arrest and trial of Jesus.



As leader of the Sanhedrin, Annas sat at the height of Jewish aristocracy. He was wealthy, well-educated, and in league with the Roman authorities. Even when he no longer held the title of high priest, Annas continued to command the power of the office. Whilst Caiaphas was the high priest at the time, it is Annas who takes responsibility for the preliminary investigation following Jesus' arrest. When Jesus responds to his questioning about his teaching, he is struck by one of the police, because he does not answer with enough respect.

Was Annas just a traditionalist who believed that Jesus was a false prophet? Was he influenced by his social standing and did not want this maverick preacher to rock the boat? Did he think that by ridding the community of Jesus he was protecting the family business? It seems to me that he was not prepared to listen to Jesus as it might shake his authority.

Annas was also involved in the persecution of the early church and was part of the Council who told Peter and John they could not teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus (Acts 4). Rejecting the authority of the Council the disciples continued to spread the gospels. In fact, the more the authorities tried to intimidate them, the more the gospel spread and the church grew.

Is our experience of God less than someone who has inherited a particular position? Are we sometimes afraid to challenge those in positions of authority? Or are we leaders who have rejected someone's experience of God because we thought we were better than them? As we move through Lent we should reflect on our attitudes to those in the Easter story and on whether our actions are mirrored in the story.

Friday 3rd March Habakkuk Read: Habakkuk...but esp Chapter 3

It was our first Old Testament lecture and we were given 38 book names on little slips of paper. In groups we were tasked with putting them in order and working out which one was missing. Earlier that morning I had had a burst of creativity, coming with a series of chords and a melody, and I had flicked my bible open to find the words I needed to go with it.

In both instances the answer was Habakkuk, though it took my fellow students a while to work out because it's so often overlooked as a book. The

lecturer asked us a series of questions: How many of you have ever read Habakkuk? How many of you have read it in the last 2 years? In the last year? In the last 6 months? It wasn't even that many questions until I was the only one with my hand up.



As a short book it's well worth a read in its entirety, but chapter 3 is my favourite. That's where this song came from: Habakkuk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPSVcmLgPzM> .

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Mike Ginn was a friend of mine. The blurb on the back of a book of his diary entries, published posthumously, says this:

Mike Ginn, a 28-year-old family man and husband to Fiona. A respected teacher, loving new father and dedicated sportsman. He was in the prime of his life. In July 2016, just 3 months after the birth of his miracle daughter, his world is completely rocked by his Leukemia diagnosis. Given just 20% chance of surviving past 5 years.

On the day of diagnosis Mike decided to write a diary. This diary enabled him to express his emotions, openly discuss his Christian faith and document his extensive chemotherapy treatment and how cancer impacted their daily lives. This real life diary is hard hitting yet humorous. Inspiring, positive and hopeful as lives are thrown into complete chaos and uncertainty where strength, courage and faith are the foundation of this true story.

The day he died, 23rd August 2017, I cried. I wanted to try and make sense of his faith and hope, as well as my own grief. I composed a melody, and somehow found verses from an old hymn that I had never come across before, adding my own pre-chorus, chorus and bridge: Yet I will Trust:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB7z12G94jE>

Life is difficult. I wonder what parts in your journey have left you saying "Where are you God?". I wonder how many times you've cried out for God to show up like God has shown up for other in the past?

I wonder if you struggle as much as I do with reaching the point Habakkuk does of saying "even in this moment when it appears you're not here, I will not only trust in you, but even REJOICE in you, God."

Saturday 4th March Simon the Pharisee Read Luke 7: 44-48

I saw a man the other day who was different than every other man I had ever encountered. Every other man I see spits on my face in the day and then wants something from me at night. But this man was different. I couldn't put my finger on it but I wanted to find out more. I heard that he was attending a dinner with Simon the Pharisee. Obviously a woman like me would never be

invited, but this meal was held in an outdoor courtyard so I could creep up to the edge to see what was happening for myself. And then, when I got there, despite having invited him, Simon treated him with a total lack of respect.

To be honest, I don't know what came over me, but I crept forwards towards this man and I prostrated myself at his feet and kissed them. I think in my mind I thought I was giving him the kiss of greeting that Simon had ignored.

Anyway, for one moment I stopped and looked up at him and for the first time



in my life I saw a man looking at me with neither lust or disgust, but with love. And boy, did the tears flow. I could not stop myself. The tears were flowing from deep within me for all the pain and sorrow I had known.

After a while, I realised I needed to dry his feet as I had soaked them with my

tears. There was no point in asking for a towel, so I let down my hair.

I had let down my hair with many men over the years, but this time, this final time I was doing it right. And then I took the flask of perfume from around my neck, the thing which made my night time role slightly more bearable in such a hot country, and I poured the whole thing over this man's feet.

Unsurprisingly Simon was not impressed at this turn of events, and he muttered that this man could be special if he allowed me, a sinner, anywhere near him.

But then this man did the most incredible thing. He spoke to Simon, but he was looking directly at me. And he said to Simon "do you see this woman?" What was he doing? Was he trying to see if Simon could see me differently? Was he trying to get him to recognise me as a child of God?

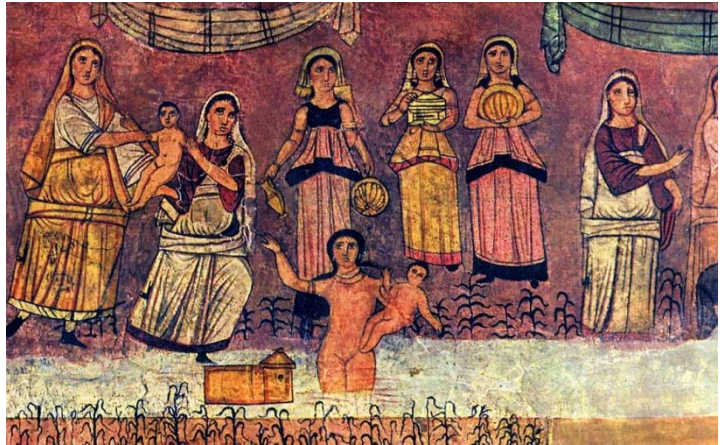
Was he trying to get Simon to see me through his eyes?

Sunday 5th March Mothers, Sisters, Midwives

Read Exodus 2:1-8

Although you might want to read from the start of Exodus to gain a greater understanding of the context in which this narrative unfolds.

The Israelites were living in Egypt, in fear and under the oppression of forced labour, exiled, enslaved and afflicted. This was a time of darkness.



Who is this unknown mother that we read about in Exodus 2:1-8? She is not actually mentioned by name until Exodus 6:20, why do you think this is and does it impact on the narrative?

We read of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. They dedicated their lives to protecting the lives of babies and mothers, they valued new life. To consider killing a child would go against everything. How do you think they would have felt being given such an order?

Jochebed trusted God to take care of her baby, she showed incredible faithfulness. Did Jochebed know of God's plan? Did she know who her son Moses would grow to be and the role he would play in history?

We hear on the news as parents live in such desperate situations where they fear for their safety, for their lives and attempt to make the journey by boat to a place of refuge.

What lengths would you go to in order to protect a child?

Moses' sister played a pivotal role in this narrative, do you agree? Does she sometimes get overlooked?

Without this arduous birth story, perhaps the Israelites could not have been born into a new life of freedom. These midwives assisted in the birth of the redemption; perhaps they hastened its coming? Who better than midwives to deliver us.

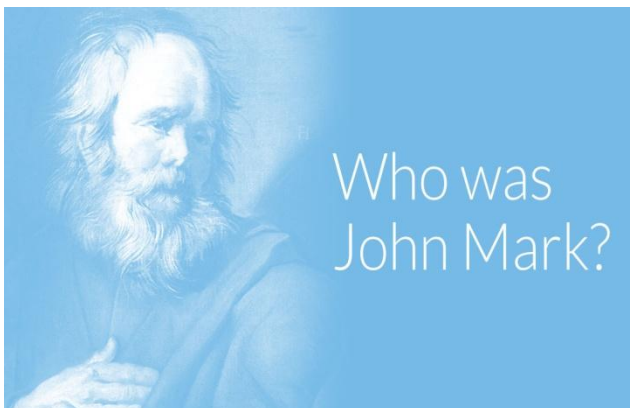
The Hebrew word for basket is also used to describe Noah's Ark. Can you see parallels between these stories?

What things do we need to entrust to God? What do we need to place in the basket? What do we perhaps need to let go of?

Holding her vulnerable baby,
filled with maternal love,
surrounded by grieving mothers,
facing an impossible situation,
fearing for his life,
she placed him in a basket,
into the river Nile,
and into God's care.

Monday 6th March John also called Mark
Read Mark 14 v 51–52

I must confess I have a bit of a soft spot for John also called Mark. He is mentioned several times in the book of Acts and Paul's letters. However, it is these verses from Mark's gospel, where he isn't actually named at all, which are the reason I chose to look at this character on the margins. You see, I once played the part of John Mark in an Easter service.



I sat with the other disciples at the front of the church, trying to keep attentive. Then when Jesus was arrested, I shrugged off my jacket leaving it in the hands of a soldier and ran down the full length of the church (not naked I hasten to add!), out of the door, round the outside of the building, back in through the side door ready to come back into the

church through the front transept door to inform the followers gathered Jesus had been arrested!

Now while John Mark isn't mentioned by name, it is widely accepted that this is who the young man was.

We next come across John Mark in Acts 12 v 12 when we hear that, on his escape from prison, Peter went to the house of “Mary, the mother of John also called Mark”. I imagine this young man sitting listening to the stories which Peter told of a man called Jesus, of miracles, teachings, and of his personal relationship with Peter.

Later John Mark went with Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey but he left Paul and his companions - the bible doesn't tell us why. This clearly didn't go down well with Paul as he and Barnabas subsequently parted ways when Barnabas suggested John Mark re-join the team. However, there was reconciliation between him and Paul because Paul mentions several times that he was with him and even goes so far as to say that “he is helpful to me”.

So how was John also called Mark central to God's plan? He had run away (twice) and caused a massive rift in the early mission of the church. He was central to God's plan because it is probable that he was the first person to write down the story of Jesus, he is the likely author of Mark's Gospel, the first Gospel to be written and the foundation, certainly of Luke and Matthew's versions. He must have spent time with early Christians in his mother's home, time with Peter, Paul and Barnabas, watching and listening, absorbing what impact this Jesus had to so many people. He realised what Good News this was and would be and he wrote it down. We still read it 2,000 years later. A character, unnamed in the gospel, but most definitely central to God's plan.

To ponder – John also called Mark

- Left his coat behind – is there anything we need to leave behind?
- Ran away (twice) – do we run away when God calls?
- Listened to those around him – do we listen to God, to each other?
- Told the story – how might we tell our story?

Tuesday 7st March Deborah Read Judges 4 v 1~15

Deborah is one of the most influential women of the Bible. She is known for her wisdom and courage and is the only woman of the Old Testament who is known for her own faith and action, not because of her relationship to her husband or another man. Facts about Deborah in the Bible

She was only one of five women described as a prophet in the Old Testament. The four others are Miriam, Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), and “the prophetess” (Isaiah 8:3).

The only other person in the Bible who was said to be both prophet and judge was Samuel.

Deborah is the only female judge mentioned in the Bible.

Deborah's Roles

The Judge



Judge Deborah was one of the rulers of the Hebrews (and the only female leader) in the Old Testament. These rulers were called “mishpat,” which is translated as “judges.” Judges sought guidance from the Lord by praying and meditating before proclaiming their

ruling on a matter. Deborah would sit under the palm tree in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites would line up for her to rule on a matter.

The Warrior

Deborah, upon receiving instructions from God, called Barak, an Israelite warrior, to bring 10,000 troops up Mount Tabor to attack Sisera, Jabin's commander of troops. Barak responded by saying "If you will go with me, I will go; if not I will not go" (Judges 4:8). Deborah agrees to go to battle with Barak and the troops but share with him:

Judge and warrior Deborah went off to battle with Barak, and, as foretold in prophecy, Sisera fell at the hands of a woman – but not Deborah. It was Jael, the wife of a clan leader, who would avenge the Israelites by driving a tent peg through Sisera's head with a mallet when he asked for water and respite.

What do you think can we learn from Deborah's story?

Wednesday 8th March Matthias Read Acts 1:21-25



Matthias is the chosen but unsung disciple. His name only appeared in this short passage in the entire Bible. Jesus personally called 12 disciples. When Judas Iscariot died, the disciples decided to find another one to replace him. Matthias was called out by lot.

Although his name was not mentioned in any other places, Acts 1:22 tells us that he was there when Jesus was baptised; he was there watching Jesus ascending to heaven; and he was there when Jesus gave them the Great Commission to preach the Good News to all nations. According to church tradition, he was martyred for his faith. It really does not matter whether we know him or not, heaven knows him and sings his praises.

We tend to marvel at great faith heroes and admire those who have a notable ministry. Sometimes we may even feel we have nothing special to offer. It is great to hear how an atheist came to Christ, or a drug addict was set free, or a murderer became a pastor by the transforming power of God. But, what about me who grew up in a Christian home? Since Sunday school, I have never left church and had nothing exciting to give a testimony on.

But isn't that a great testimony already? Isn't it encouraging to all believers that you have never left church since Sunday school and kept your faith until today? I am sure your life has not always been blue sky all these years. But you have not abandoned your faith through life's ups and downs. This is a great testimony of God's sustaining power and faithfulness, his comfort and strength. It is praiseworthy

Aren't we all chosen but unsung disciples? Although we are not world renown, we heard the Lord's call, and followed him. When a stranger was thirsty, we were there to give water; when a homeless person was hungry, we

were there to give food; when children were deprived, we were there to send clothes; when there was a war, we were there to receive refugees.

The Body of Christ can do all these wonderful works because every single one of us. We are all chosen but unsung disciples. The world may not know us, but heaven knows every single disciple's name and sings our praises.

Thursday 9th March Melchizedek Read Genesis 14 v 18 – 20

Hands up if you have heard of Melchizedek! I must confess that until a few months ago I hadn't. My study bible says that Melchizedek is one of the most mysterious people in the bible. He appears out of the blue for two verses in the early chapters of the Genesis, and then disappears again. So who was he and why was he central to God's plan?



Melchizedek was a person of faith, a "... priest of the God most high", but not a Jew. Even this early in the bible we see that God isn't just for the Jews. Abram is returning from defeating Kedorlaomer and his allies. Melchizedek appears carrying bread and wine; he blesses Abram "...by God most High..." and finally reminds

Abram where the victory has come from, "...blessed by God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand."

So, three verses and four blessings.

Firstly, a practical blessing of bread and wine.

Secondly a blessing from God for Abram.

Thirdly a reminder to Abram of the part God has played and encouragement that Abram should also bless God.

And the final blessing, this time from Abram to Melchizedek when he gives him a tenth of everything.

How can we emulate the part that Melchizedek played in God's plan?

- We can show people that all are welcome in God's kingdom, regardless of race or background or who people think they are – **How?**

- We can bless people with acts of kindness, with hospitality, with the practical things they need – **How?**
- We can tell people of the things which God has done for them, of the things God can do for them. We can tell our story – **How?**
- We can make them welcome in our churches helping them to worship and bless this God Most High for themselves – **How?**

In fact, we do hear of Melchizedek twice more in the bible. In Psalm 110, David talks about being a priest in the order of Melchizedek forever. And then in Hebrews 7 v 4 the author says of Melchizedek, "...Just think how great he was...". I think this can be a real encouragement to us.

So often we feel our actions are fruitless, that we don't see any rewards, that what we are doing isn't making any difference. If we assume that this meeting took place approximately 2000 BCE (based on Abram's birth date), and that Hebrews was written sometime before 70 CE we can see that this mysterious man's actions were still having an impact over 2000 years later.

We have no idea what effect our blessings may have on those around us, but we ourselves can be encouraged by this encourager from Genesis. And finally, remember that like Melchizedek, by blessing others we ourselves may well be blessed.

Friday 10th March Women in God's story

There are 93 women who speak in the Bible, 49 of whom are named. These women speak a total of 14,056 words collectively; roughly 1.1 percent of the total words in scripture. Some of these biblical women are prominent and well-known, like Jesus' mother, Mary, who utters just 191 words. Mary Magdalene says 61 words, while Sarah, the wife of Abraham, says 141. Yet many of the female characters have largely been silenced over the centuries.

For every Eve, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, Mary, Lydia and Pricilla there are many simple referred to as the wife, daughter or mother of. Many are unnamed such as the woman at the well, the Syrophonecian women wanting crumbs from under the table, the woman caught in adultery (note no mention of the man caught in the same act), the widow in the temple with her mite or the woman suffering with the issue of blood

Many might seem insignificant, marginal figures and yet they are central to God's plans. Using this crossword let's reflect on some of these women

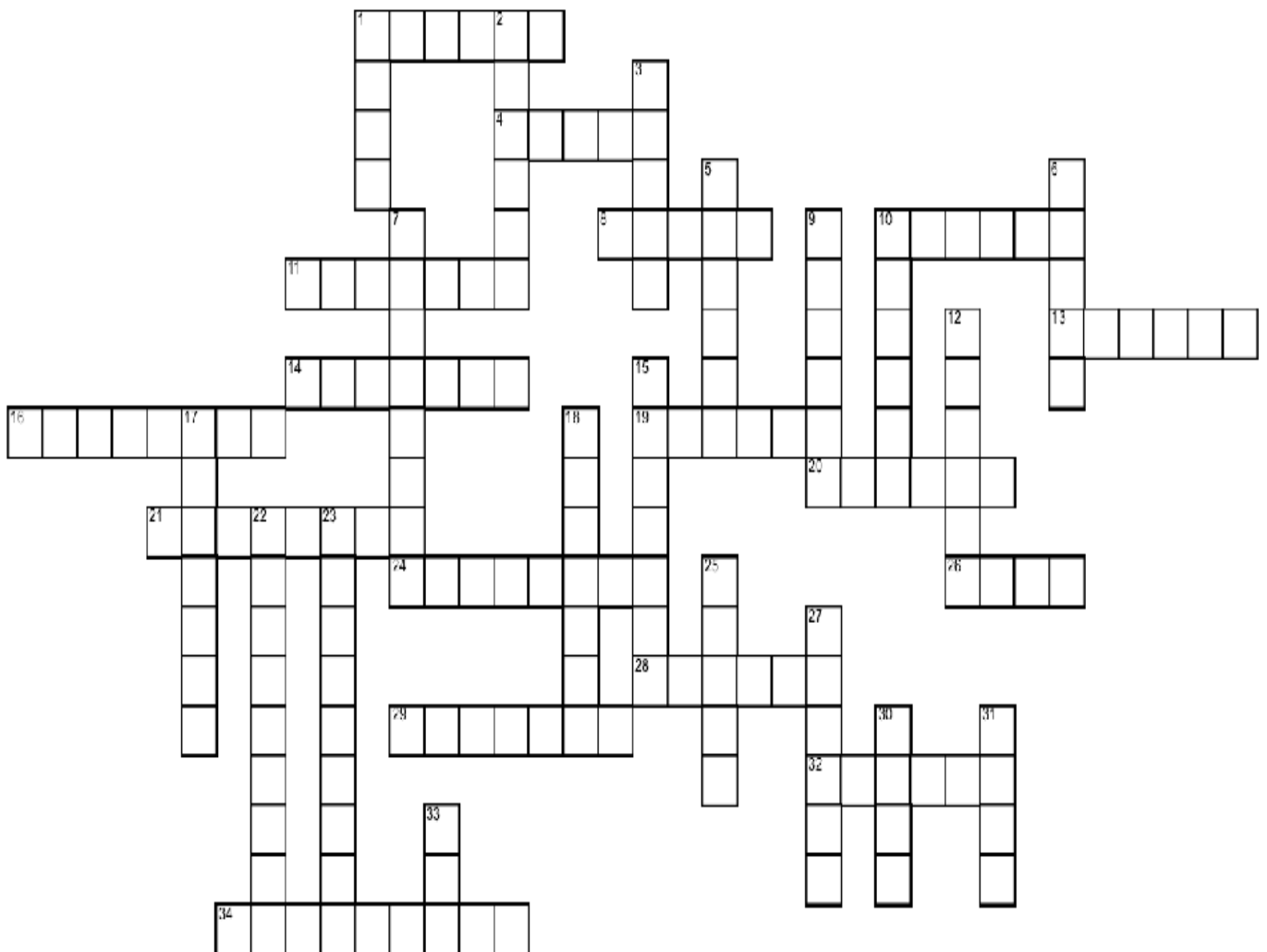
Across

1. Mary's sister (John 12:2)
4. A dealer in purple cloth who hosted Paul and his missionary team when they were in Philippi (Acts 16:14, 40)
8. Sarah's servant and mother of Ishmael (Genesis 16:15)
10. Cuza's wife and supporter of Jesus (Luke 8:1-3)
11. Married Isaac and was the mother of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 24:67)
13. Sister and helper to Moses (Numbers 26:59)
14. Lady prophetess and judge (Judges 4:4)
16. Mother of Moses (Exodus 6:20)
19. One of those who cared for the needs of Jesus and His disciples (Mark 15:40-41)
20. Protected Israel's spies in Jericho (Joshua 2, 6:25)
21. One of three women whom Paul complimented saying they "work hard in the Lord" (Romans 16:12)
24. The wife of Ananias who sold a piece of property and lied about its sale price (Acts 5:1)
26. Timothy's grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5)
28. Samuel's mother (1 Samuel 1:20)
29. God used Peter to raise her from the dead (Acts 9:36-41)
32. Timothy's mother (2 Timothy 1:5)
34. Mother of King Solomon (2 Samuel 12:24)

Down

1. An angel said to her, "You who are highly favoured" (Luke 1:27-28)
2. Prophetess in King Josiah's time (2 Kings 22:14)
3. Mother of Isaac (Genesis 21:3)
5. Younger daughter of Laban (Genesis 29:16)
6. Ruth's mother-in-law (Ruth 1:3-4)
7. Her daughter danced for Herod on his birthday (Matthew 14:6)
9. Queen who saved the Jews
10. Esau married her when he was 40 years old (Genesis 26:34)
12. Daughter of Saul and wife of David (2 Samuel 3:13-14)
15. The daughter of Potiphar who became Joseph's wife (Genesis 41:45)
16. She was with King Agrippa when Paul pleaded his case (Acts 25:23)
18. Samson fell in love with this treacherous woman (Judges 16:4)
22. She and her husband Aquila helped spread the gospel (Acts 18:2, 18, 26)
23. Mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-60)
25. Daughter of Leah (Genesis 30:19-21)
27. She was a deacon or servant in the church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1)
30. Elderly prophetess who rejoiced at the sight of Baby Jesus (Luke 2:36-38)

31. The older daughter of Laban (Genesis 29:16)
 33. The mother of Cain, Abel, and Seth (Genesis 4:1-2)



Saturday 11th March Judas of Straight Street
Read: Acts 9:1-19

There's a knock on the door and in comes the infamous Saul. You haven't quite formed your opinion on him yet, but with the entourage he's got you know he's not someone you're going to turn away. He's supposed to be in town to deal with some of the unrest caused by those Jesus followers shaking things up. You haven't quite decided about them yet either... But you're "Judas of Straight Street," 5* rated on Trip Advisor, and yours is the place to stay. Full beds, with full board for a few days and that will help pay the bills for a while!

Something's off though. Saul appears to be blind. No-one has been able to give me an answer as to what really happened.

Three days later Saul and some of his entourage are still here, trying to work out what to do next, and praying. You don't think you've ever seen someone pray as much as Saul appears to! He really is committed to God. There's another knock on the door. It's Ananias. He's one of the locals. You haven't seen him for a while, but the rumour is that he's fallen in with the "Followers of the Way." Moving out onto the street and closing the door behind you, you try and steer him away. If the rumours are true then Saul is here to get rid of people like him, and all told Ananias is harmless enough.

STRAIGHT ST

Ananias seems more anxious than usual. There's something he wants to say, but it's just not coming out. Eventually he tells you he's here to see Saul. Apparently God has told him to come and talk to Saul, to heal his blindness, and to give him a message from God. Apparently those bits of story you picked up about Jesus making Saul blind have more weight than you initially thought! But still, this is your business, your home, and your carpet should things get messy. You're hosting a devout theologian who speaks and works for God, and here you have someone else who follows Jesus, who understands God differently, who wants to sit and meet with him. He who has come to arrest Ananias...

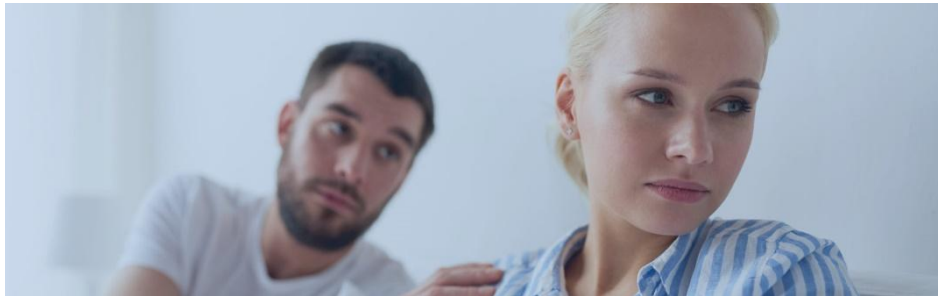
Because Ananias isn't going anywhere else and is so adamant that he needs to see Saul, you ask for five minutes to find a space to meet. You prepare a room and sit in on this remarkable encounter just in case anything goes awry. It's a meeting filled with grace and healing, courage and authenticity. Two people, so different, even enemies on paper, who are united by an encounter with this Jesus. By the end Saul can see, but more than that he seems to be different. They part ways with a hand shake and Saul wants to settle his account for his stay.

What a privilege to play host to such a meeting, to see such healing, change and unity! How exciting to see theologies and understandings grow through a gracious encounter! Maybe there's something to learn from how people share their encounters with Jesus with each other? I wonder whose stories and conversation I could listen to next?

Sunday 12th March Abigail Read 1 Samuel 25: 23-33

My husband is an absolute idiot. I guess most wives feel that way about their husbands from time to time, but mine is especially dumb. I guess I should have seen this coming, since his name, Nabal, means fool. But man alive, he keeps surprising me with the depth of his stupidity.

Anyway Abigail' I hear you say, 'what has he done this time?' The answer; well essentially he has picked a fight with the wrong man. David and his men, who had been good to us in the past, had asked for a favour and Nabal told them to get lost.



I am not sure David was in a very good mood anyway, but this has almost certainly pushed him over the edge. Way to think through the consequences, Nabal! David is now on his way over here with his men to destroy us.

Basically it is up to me now to do something and I need to act quickly. I guess life throws up these moments when essentially it is down to us to step up and do anything that we can. I know who David is and most importantly, the God whom he serves. So I have gathered together a load of food supplies and I will go and get to David before he gets to us.

When I get there, I will throw myself down before him, with my face to the ground, and I will deliver the most humble, heartfelt plea for David to spare my dumb husband's household. When I do this, I hope he will know that I am not saying this because I am afraid but because David's life is in God's hands.

God is going to do amazing things through David and he does not need to have on his conscience the staggering burden of such needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself.

I do not know how he will respond. But if I intercede in this way, if I plead for David to respond with the mercy of God and not from a place of anger because he has been living in exile, who knows how he will respond?

Can our prayers turn someone's heart back towards the will of God?"

Monday 13th March Herdsman Read: Mark 5:1-17

So let me tell you about this thing I've just witnessed – you might not believe me, but trust me – it's absolutely true. This demon possessed man had lived in the area for as long as I can remember almost, and no one could control him. He was dangerous, strong and incredibly scary. And then along comes this Jesus, who thinks he can heal him.

Of course he does, but what a way to do it! He's ruined us. The demon has to come out of the man, I accept that, but did Jesus have to put the demons into our pigs? I mean, it was amazing to see the man healed, rational, not scary anymore and I admit that it was impressive that he could now have a normal, better life. But me and my fellow herdsman had lost our livelihoods. Our pigs were now at the bottom of the cliff, all dead.



Was Jesus going to reimburse us for that? Doubt it. If he's powerful enough to cast out demons, couldn't he have cast them out somewhere else? Into birds or spiders or ants or something – did it have to be our pigs?

Feeling annoyed at the loss of livelihood was one thing, but I also felt fear. Witnessing the power of this man was something else. I'd heard of him, everyone had heard of this man going around healing and performing miracles, but this was the first time I'd actually seen it for myself. And what a sight! The man that was totally unapproachable before, now standing upright, healed, smiling, happy.

The demons leaving him and going into the pigs, sending them into a frenzy, and then over the cliff they go, all at the command of this one man. It was

frightening – if Jesus could do this, what else could he do? Where was this power from and what was he going to do with it?

For further reflection:

Do you think Jesus was right to send the demon into the pigs? Was there a better way, than killing the livestock?

After the miracle the people tell Jesus to leave – would you have wanted him to leave too, or would you have asked him to stay? Why?

Tuesday 14th March Caleb Read Numbers 14

Once the children of Israel reached the Promised Land, Moses sent 12 spies, one from each tribe, to scout the land and assess the strength of its people. The spies travelled to Zin in the south to Rehob in the north (Numbers 13:12) a distance of approximately 250 miles. When they returned they reported they were impressed with the land – “it flowed with milk and honey!” just as God had promised. But also they were discouraged because the inhabitants were very strong.

Ten of the spies concede that it would be impossible for the Israelites to conquer the land. But Joshua and Caleb were confident that God would give them the land because he had said he would!



The twelve spies were all on the same mission, they noticed the same things, but Joshua and Caleb perceived something beyond the obvious – they realised that God was greater than any enemy. Caleb was wholeheartedly loyal to God, and along with Joshua he

trusted God and saw the opportunity rather than the obstacle, they knew that God would lead them and give them the land.

Faith and obedience are what matters to God – the people of the exodus had failed to trust God to lead them to the Promised Land and because of this God declared that no-one over the age of 20 would enter the Promised Land – except Joshua and Caleb. The entire adult generation would die in the desert, so tantalizingly close to their destination. It was then that the people

almost unanimously decided that they should enter the land after all and do battle with it's people! God warned against this course of action but they proceeded anyway and were defeated.

Caleb went on to become the first real Giant-Slayer, (Joshua 14:6-15) he stands out as a fearless fighter, tough in his old age, not thinking of settling into retirement. He was a man who had real trust and faith in God, he was tough, a soldier, a man of vision and a Patriot who believed that God had sent Abraham to the Promised Land and 400 years later used him to fulfil the promise God made that the descendants of Abraham would inherit the land. What a man!

Q: How does Caleb's example give you courage to see beyond the obstacles in your life to the power and the presence of God?

Wednesday 15th March Joanna
Read: Luke 8:1-3, 23:55-56, 24:1-12

Faith: complete confidence or trust.

Tenacity: the quality of holding fast, persistence.

Among the first women to discover the empty tomb (Luke 24:10), Joanna was the wife of Chuza, the household manager or steward of King Herod Antipas. She was a follower of Jesus and helped to provide financially for Jesus' ministry, along with Susanna and many others (Luke 8:3).

Joanna showed tenacious faith when nearly everyone else deserted Jesus. Being married to King Herod's chief steward, she was an unlikely convert, but she became a loyal follower after Jesus healed her.

She travelled with Jesus from village to village, supporting him and possibly the other apostles out of her own means.



She followed him to Jerusalem and when the crowds and apostles turned against Jesus, betrayed him, denied him and abandoned him, Joanna was one of several women who stayed through his crucifixion, following his body to the tomb. It was Joanna and these women, not Peter or the apostles, who were first to see the empty tomb and learn Jesus had risen.

What an honour to tell the disciples that Jesus was alive! Joanna's loyal faith meant staying with Jesus when hope seemed lost and witnessing the miracle that Hope was alive.

Faith: complete confidence or trust.

Tenacity: the quality of holding fast, persistence.

What do those things look like in your life?

Thursday 16th March Bezalel Read Exodus 31:1-5, (Then Chapters 35-39)

This little passage pretty much sums up that Bezalel is Israel's genius artist, not a prophet, not a priest, not a warrior, but the craftsman who has the ability and talent to build a home that God is pleased to dwell in.



We know that God spoke to Moses and gave him the specifications to build the Tabernacle, but if you read Exodus from chapter 35-39 carefully, it is actually Bezalel who did all the work!

When God told Moses to build a Tabernacle in the wilderness, it seemed like an impossible task

because the Israelites just came out of slavery in Egypt. However, with God nothing is impossible. God filled Bezalel with his Spirit and gave him incredible skills and knowledge to complete the task.

Apostle Paul says that we are the spiritual Temple of God- the Church where his Spirit dwells. The very Spirit of God that inspired Bezalel is now living in us and blessing us with many gifts. What is the gift inside of you? What skills, talents, expertise, and experiences you could offer in the life of your church?

You may think that I am not good at art, or I cannot sing or play the piano, so I have no gift to offer. But the gifts for the life of the Church are far more than that. Can you read stories to children? Can you help with administration or organisation? Are you good at handy work around the building? Can you knit, sew or crochet? Can you show others how to use zoom?

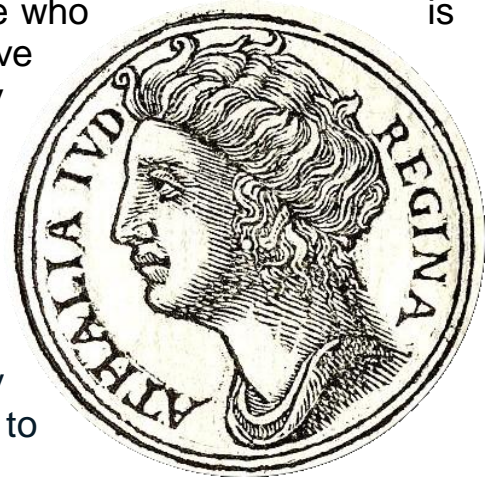
Everyone is gifted by the Spirit as everyone has a unique role to play in his kingdom. We are gifted not so we can take pride or benefit for ourselves, but to equip God's Church through which the world may see his splendour and loving beauty.

Prayer: Creator God, may you stir up our hearts, inspire us and empowers us for every task that you called us to do. Amen.

Friday 17th March Athaliah Read 2 Kings 11 v 1 – 21

You look at me and you judge me don't you? You, who know nothing about me. You read my story and wonder how someone who is a Queen, a mother and grandmother could behave in such a despicable way, murdering my grandsons.

I need to explain more to you about who I am. I was Queen of Judah from 841–835 BC and the only female monarch to sit on David's throne in biblical history. I'm very conscious that my reign was sandwiched between a number of overly zealous Kings but my initial intention was always to offer my best to my country.



My parents were King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel. My husband Jehoram (son of Judah's King Jehosaphat) was King of Israel until his death

in 841BC. I don't mind telling you that my husband's behaviour was disgraceful and Ahaziah my son was of the same mould.

I'm a worshipper of Baal by the way.

My grief was beyond measure when I found out that Ahaziah, who had only been king for a year, was assassinated by Jehu a commander in King Ahab's army and anointed by the prophet Elisha. Jehu's intention had been to end my father's dynasty by putting him, my mother and my brothers to death and Ahaziah was killed too.

When I find out that my beautiful son was dead, I was heartbroken. It made sense to me at the time to seize the throne and kill Ahaziah's sons, my own grandsons, so that there were no more members of the royal family left and I could take the throne. You might think my methods a little unconventional, but I had a strategy, to become Queen.

My plans were thwarted however, because one of my grandchildren, Joash, was taken by his aunt and hidden with his nurse in a bedroom. I later found out that Joash was smuggled out of the castle and taken to the temple where he was hidden for 6 years during my reign. I continued to establish Baal worship in Judah. When Joash reached the age of 7 he was crowned king and I heard that the temple of Baal was destroyed. My life will soon be over.

Did I tell you that my name means either 'God is exalted' or 'dealt violently with by God'? Do you think that my story was a part of God's plan? What would you have done in the same circumstances?

Saturday 18th March The Witch of Endor: Read 1 Samuel 28 : 3-25

I am sure, like me, you have at times wondered whether God is listening to your prayers. We open our hearts, bringing our troubles to God and the response is nothing, just silence. As Christians what is our response? What are we supposed to do? I somehow doubt that many of us have, however, followed Saul's actions and consulted a medium, more commonly known as a witch, to try and get an answer.

In Lent we often talk about the desert, reflecting on Jesus' time in the wilderness and how he resisted temptation. What desert are you in at this time and what might you be willing to do to escape it? Temptation for an easy solution is very real, but seldom has a good outcome.



Saul's visit to the witch goes against his own decree that all mediums and wizards were expelled from the land. However, his fear of the invasion from the army of the Philistines and the lack of a response to his prayers lead him to seek out a witch for answers.

Saul asks her to summon the spirit of Samuel, but instead of the positive response he desires he receives a prophecy of doom. The prophecy is correct and Saul's armies are defeated, Saul is wounded and commits suicide.

Who do you think the witch in the story summoned? Was it really Samuel? Even the witch seems surprised at his arrival. Do you think that Spirits can really be summoned by magic? Many in our communities do believe that so we should not dismiss their beliefs out of hand. Going back to our story some believe that the vision was in fact the devil disguised as Samuel because in 1 Corinthians 11:14 Paul wrote that 'Satan can transform himself into an Angel of light'. For them, witchcraft is a reality as that is the reason it is prohibited in scripture. There is a reality to magic. Or perhaps the witch's surprise indicates that she was not responsible for summoning Saul's spirit but it was the work of God.

Just like so many things in our journey of faith what we read, even what we believe, seems irrational. We can be tempted by easy answers, but our bible is full of stories which challenge us. We should not be afraid to sit with those passages that disturb us or tempt us to give glib responses that imply naivety. God reveals himself to us in many ways. Don't be tempted away from opportunities to learn more about him because the scriptures seem disturbing.

Sunday 19th March Mordecai Read: Esther (It's good!)

Which Word?

Sometimes people just are the salt of the earth.(1) Mordecai is one of those people. And he doesn't lose his saltiness even when (2) it might be justified that he gets salty.(3)

Here are some of the words that came to mind when I focussed on his character in the book of Esther:

Honourable, compassionate, fatherly, wise, caring, watchful, aware, courageous, honest, faithful (to the king), resolute, steadfast, faithful (to his God), respectful, mournful, honest, real, discerning, listening, humble, disciplined, unwavering, gracious, unrecognised, under-appreciated, remembered, honoured, promoted.

I wonder what words came to mind for you?

And after it all, even when he was raised in status, Mordecai remained faithful to God. The celebration he initiated, Purim, was about recognising how God was working (albeit through him) to save his people:

Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration.

He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. So the Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them.(4)

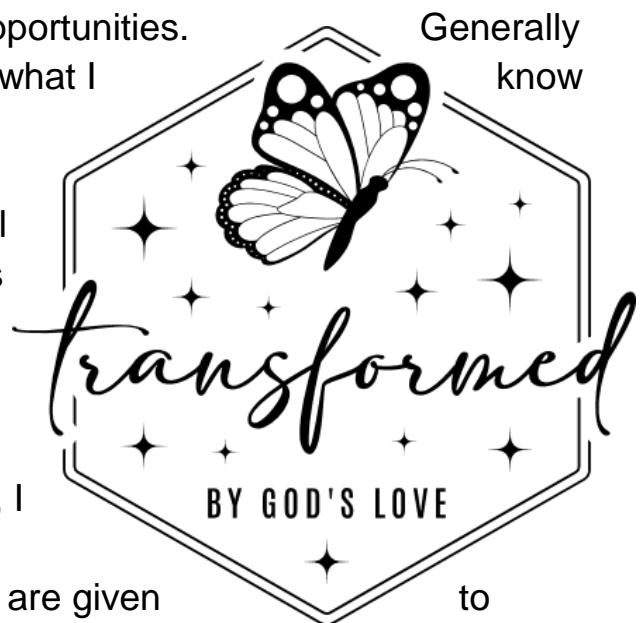
May we also be salt of the earth. May we not lose our saltiness.
May we recognised the faithfulness of God as we seek to be faithful.
“a person or group of people regarded as the finest of their kind”. Common parlance, taken from
Matthew 5:13.
Matthew 5:132
“ADJECTIVE: If someone is salty about something, they feel bitter or resentful about it. [informal]”³
Esther 9:20—23

Monday 20th March Onesimus Read: Philemon (all of it!)

Read it, then search for the following video on YouTube. Bible Project videos are a great way to quickly find out more about what might be going on in and around books of the Bible, and what we might be able to learn from them.
Bible Project, Overview: Philemon - <https://youtu.be/aW9Q3Jt6Yvk>

I get asked to write references for young people from time to time when they're applying for jobs or volunteering opportunities. they're pretty easy to write, because from what I of the young people they want to be hard-working, have a whole range of gifts and skills that they could bring to a role, and all make excellent contributions to the groups I see them in their own way.

Sometimes I use some creativity to help sell a young person because whilst they might not have exactly the thing asked for, I believe they have the potential and will use any opportunity they are given to grow, learn and shine.



Paul's essentially writing a character reference for Onesimus here in his letter to Philemon. Except it's not a case of trying to introduce someone new. Paul

has to choose his words carefully as he seeks to redress a power imbalance between a slave and their master. As he seeks to mediate reconciliation between a wrongdoer and the wronged. He's trying to help Philemon see that Onesimus is a changed man, that he has been transformed by an encounter with God's love, equipped by Paul's witness to the person of Jesus. Equipping transformation through God's love. (That would make a good vision wouldn't it ;) But the real challenge of Onesimus is this:

How do we truly welcome and accept those who have been transformed?

How do we see the partner and sibling in Christ, rather than the former way?

How do we celebrate and recognise the transformation?

We don't know exactly what Onesimus did to offend Philemon. We don't know the punishment that would have been warranted. But Paul presents a changed man and vouches for him. I do know what I've done in the past. I know how difficult it should be for me to be accepted and welcomed. But Jesus presents me as a changed man and vouches for me. And I'd hope that's a referee presenting a character reference worth having!

May we remember the transformation that has happened in us. May we see transformation through God's love in others. May we recognise that Jesus vouches for all he transforms. May all be welcome with us.

To God be the Glory, Reawaken Hymns - <https://youtu.be/FEC8pJsOVvc>

Tuesday 21st March Phoebe Read Romans 16: 1-2

Sometime around AD 56, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. The letter he sent was arguably his theological masterpiece and has shaped Christian faith ever since. He entrusted this letter to Phoebe, the deacon of the church at Cenchraea.

The church in Cenchreata had been established under Phoebe's patronage. She had been a benefactor of Paul and many others. It was a short walk from the centre of Corinth to the eastern Corinthian port of Cenchraea. Perhaps Paul had no doubt made that 9 km journey lots of times during his 18 months in Corinth.



Noted Biblical scholar Paula Gooder wrote a whole novel entitled Phoebe, which is based on this woman. That is quite some feat given that the two verses in Romans are the only reference to Phoebe in the Bible. It is not much to base this reflection on, never mind a whole novel!

However, in these two verses, as Paul introduces Phoebe as his emissary to the Church at Rome, he indicates that she is both a “servant” and a “patron” of the Church. This is the only place in the New Testament where a woman is specifically referred to with these two distinctions.

The word translated as deacon is the Greek *diakonos*. In other places in the NT, the term sometimes refers to a someone designated to serve as a specially-appointed "assistant" to the overseers of a church.

At other places it refers to "servants" in a general sense. In this passage, it is unclear whether Paul had a particular office in mind or something else, but in either case it suggests that Phoebe was a woman who helped others.

In particular, she was also called a *prostatis*. This GK word was used to mean either a chief or leader, or a guardian or protector. It came to be used to understand the Roman concept of a patron.

All of this suggests that Phoebe was a woman of means, who, among other things, contributed financial support to Paul's ministry and probably hosted the house church of Cenchreata and provided shelter and hospitality to Paul when in the town.

If someone was introducing you, what two words would they use?

Wednesday 22nd March Noah's Daughter in Law

Read: Genesis 7:11-16

It's hard to describe how I felt when my father in law told the family that he'd been told by God to build an Ark, and that we would all go and live in it. I felt shocked, a little angry that we were being told rather than asked, but that was typical. It was strange to think that Noah had received a message direct from God, and doubly strange to think that God had not only told us he was going to flood the earth, but also that we as a family would be saved, with pairs of animals, so that we could live on after the flood was gone.

Of course, out loud, I never said a word, it wasn't my place to disagree or question, but my mind was working overtime. God had never spoken to me directly, so I couldn't imagine what that was like, but lots of our neighbours laughed, they didn't believe what Noah was claiming, God wouldn't flood the world and kill everyone.



Of course he wouldn't do that. They thought Noah was acting ridiculous and as he began to build this enormous boat, they laughed even more, but Noah was adamant, he carried on, determined, sincere, full of faith in the God he loved and what he had been told. And the flood came, and we watched from the safety of our Ark, as God wiped out the inhabitants of the world. All except us.

Noah's faith was what sustained us, his complete trust in the message he'd received from God, and that God would do whatever was required. I had faith in God too, but not like Noah. His faith was complete, and all-encompassing. I had no choice, my husband did what his father told him, and I did what my husband said, but watching Noah's faith in effect saving us was inspirational.

And as I stand here now, on the deck of our Ark, watching the waters recede, looking out over the treetops and seeing birds flying overhead, I appreciate Noah's faith, I appreciate his love for us – that he saved us, and I am inspired by his faith. It was difficult to follow someone else's faith, but I'm glad I did.

For further reflection:

Why is it difficult to simply follow another's faith?

Why is it difficult to share / explain faith?

How would you react if someone told you that God was telling them to do something radical

Thursday 23rd March Drusilla Read Acts 24 v 24 - 27



Drusilla is reported to have been very beautiful. She came from a royal but dysfunctional family; her father, Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great who slaughtered all baby boys in Bethlehem in an effort to destroy the Messiah, and her older sister Bernice had a long and chequered history culminating in an incestuous relationship with their brother Agrippa II. An interesting family background!

Drusilla was married at 14 to Azizus, King of Emeza but apparently the marriage was not happy and she later had a relationship with a man called Felix who took Drusilla as his third wife.

A Jewess herself, she was married to a man who was well acquainted with Christianity. After Paul was arrested, Governor Felix heard the charges brought against him as he presented the gospel as part of his defence, and it was later that Felix and Drusilla called Paul for another hearing. We believe that she was curious to hear about what Paul had to say because there was no reason for her to be present.

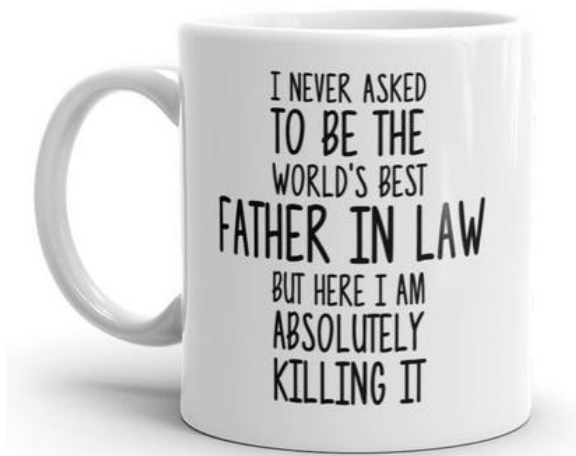
Paul spoke about his faith in Jesus and although we do not know about Drusilla's response, we think that Paul's preaching may have disturbed her. As Paul spoke to the court in Caesarea, reports suggest that Drusilla may have seemed to be as far from Christianity as a person can be, yet she was drawn to the message.

The gospel has power to reach even the hardest hearts. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

He proved his boldness concerning the gospel when he preached to Felix and Drusilla.

Friday 24th March Jethro Read Exodus 18:1-27

Not everyone gets along with their in laws. Indeed some comedians appear to have made a very good living out of a stream of jokes all told at the expense of mother in laws.



Yet Moses and his father in law Jethro appear to have a positive relationship with Jethro being a valuable confident for Moses and a good and trusted source of sound advice

Jethro advised Moses to pass on his knowledge of the law by teaching and instructing others. Moses alone cannot be the sole keeper of knowledge of the law and so Jethro advises him to instruct others so that the task is shared

Jethro advised Moses to appoint others as officials over the people by selecting capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials...have them serve as judges for the people at all times.” (v 21-22) In other words, this advice to Moses to delegate authority is in part responsible for setting up the political and legal system of judges.

Jethro advised Moses to prioritise where his time and efforts would best be spent by only taking on only the most difficult cases. An example of this in Numbers 36 when the issue of land inheritance for women popped up. It was a unique case that needed Moses’ personal attention and guidance.

Who would be your ‘go to person’ for advice?

How easy do you find it to delegate?

How do you prioritise your life?

Saturday 25th March Zebedee Matthew 4 v 21, Mark 1 v 20

Zebedee is mentioned several times in the New Testament but we only actually “meet” him once, when Jesus called the four fishermen to follow him, and they left Zebedee with his hired men. The other times he is merely referred to as the father of his more famous sons, James and John. So how can this man, who we only “meet” once have a central role in God’s plan? I think his role is as background support.

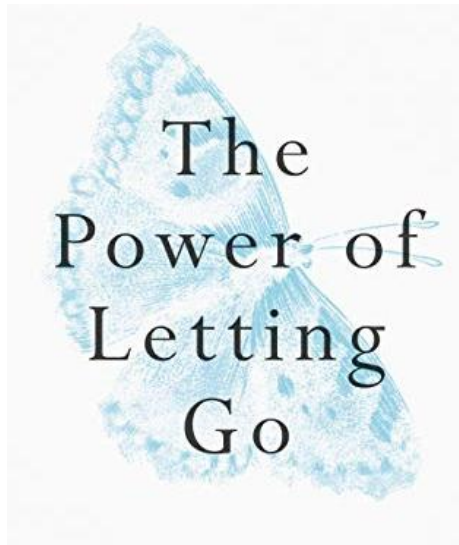
Think about that incident on the seashore. Put yourselves in Zebedee’s shoes. You are preparing your nets with your sons. A man appears and says to them “Follow me”; and they do without a backwards glance.

If that had been me, I think I would have said, “What do you think you’re doing? Do you even know this man? Is it safe? You have a perfectly respectable job and prospects here. What about me – how will I manage without you?”

And yet he didn’t, it’s as if he just said – “Here’s a great opportunity, off you go!” What a supportive parent!

Zebedee was married to Salome (Mark 15), named as one of the women watching the crucifixion and later going to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body.

Salome was clearly one of that group of women who were supporting Jesus in his ministry.



Did Zebedee question her, make things difficult? There is no evidence to suggest this. We can assume that he was the supportive husband she needed, but again very much in the background.

We are not all called to be frontline people. Indeed there are times in our lives when we are just not in a position to be so. Does that mean that we have no part in God’s plan? I don’t think so, because there is always the need for people

to be background support, just like Zebedee.

I was watching breakfast television a few days after the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. It was showing a team from the UK getting ready to go out and be part of the rescue effort.

The presenter made the comment that we mustn’t forget the families who watch them go, knowing that they are going into the unknown, into dangerous situations, seeing things which will stay with them for the rest of their lives. And, yet like Zebedee, they just wave them off while providing that invaluable support in the background.

In Hebrew, Zebedee means “my gift.” Sometimes our gift is as background support – and there’s nothing wrong with that!!!

- Who has been your background support?
- How might you be background support in God’s plan?
- Think about one thing which happens in your church. Pray for their meeting each week, ask those who run it how it is going - be interested.

Sunday 26th March Ehud Read: Judges 3:12-30

Maybe also read:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christian. Pacifist. Assassin? Emily Larsen
Whitworth University¹

“Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly ... and the land had peace for 80 years.”
(3:21; 30)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian and pastor, who was passionate about Jesus and how we are to live as disciples. He recognised injustice in the Nazi- led government around him in Germany.



He said:

“It is an evil time when the world lets injustice happen silently, when the oppression of the poor and the wretched cries out to heaven . . . when the persecuted church calls to God for help in the hour of dire distress and exhorts people to do justice, and yet no mouth on earth is opening to bring justice.”

Partly due to that conviction, he was also a member of Abwehr, the counterintelligence agency of the armed forces of Nazi Germany, which was also the primary centre of the resistance movement against the Nazis.

As such he became a key player in several assassination attempts on Hitler’s life. Bonhoeffer was able to align his theology with God’s call for liberation and the need for action to ensure that liberation. He found himself in a position to work for liberation in plotting the assassination of Hitler.

Ehud was the same, though his left-handedness and escape plan worked where Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators failed, and peace came sooner.

There are all sorts of debates to be had about ends and means, how we justify actions, and to what extent we should encourage or condone violence and murder... And both history and the Bible are full of material that can aid

the argument on either side of the debate.

I don't think there's an easy answer.

But let's have a conversation towards seeing liberation.

<https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=th314h1>

Mark Theiessen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, and Daniel P. Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*2
(Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2013), 63

Monday 27th March The Unnamed Woman Read Luke 7:36-50.

Here is one of many examples of Jesus showing compassion to someone considered an outcast, and as a result those in power challenging his authority.

There are gospel parallels to this story. Compare with Mark 14:3-9, Matthew 26:6-13, John 12:1-8. What similarities and differences do you find?

What do we know about this woman? She is not named, does that matter? She was a woman in the city and a sinner. Why are we told this? What was her past life? What would it be like to be labelled a sinner?

Discovering that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's home she came uninvited. Was she all too aware of the response she would receive from the Pharisee? Yet she was determined to see Jesus, why was she attracted to him?



We see this woman show extravagant hospitality and devotion, when the Pharisee failed to demonstrate even the basic hospitality required of that time.

This woman didn't speak, but perhaps her actions spoke louder than any words. Jesus noticed every gesture, her tears, her kiss, the perfume. What can we take from this? How did the woman react to what was said?

In Luke's account we read that the Pharisee said to himself, he objected silently. In the other accounts these objections were voiced. Yet Jesus was able to perceive the Pharisee's thoughts. Perhaps this fulfils the words spoken over Jesus by Simeon, that because of him the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed (Luke 2:35). What thoughts would be revealed in our hearts?

Jesus told them that the woman's many sins had been forgiven and she had shown great love towards him. But that the one whom had little forgiven, loves little. Do we find that to be true today? What do we learn from this passage about forgiveness?

Could we read this anointing story as preparation for Jesus' death and resurrection?

Picture yourself in the place of this woman, imagine yourself sitting at Jesus' feet. Allow yourself to rest there for a while. How do you respond?

Tuesday 28th March Jehosheba Read 2 Chronicles 22:10-12)

Athaliah was an evil mother who killed all royal heirs in the Southern Kingdom and made herself queen. Up to this point, there had always been a descendent of David on the throne in the Southern King because God made a covenant with David that He would establish his throne forever.

When I read about Athaliah's reign, my heart sunk. She was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel from the North. What happens to the promise of God to David? Is the line of David broken? No! Thank God for Jehosheba, the wife of a priest. She stole baby Joash the only surviving royal heir, and kept him in the house of the LORD for six years. When he was seven, he was successfully crowned as king and Athaliah was defeated.



This little-known woman, Jehosheba, had a crucial place in God's plan of the ages.

Through her courage and ingenuity, she preserved the royal line of David through which the Messiah would come.

She was a brave woman- she saved a baby in the face of a monstrous regime.

She was a caring woman- she raised and nurtured an orphan in her own home

She was a godly woman- she kept Joash in the house of LORD with her priest husband and taught him the righteousness of God.

She was a sagacious woman- she saw the God-given purpose in Joash, and safeguarded him until he reached his full potential.

The Bible is full of broken relationships and broken families. Joash is one of those who was orphaned since infancy. Since his father Ahaziah died, his grandmother killed all his siblings and relatives. But because of Jehosheba, not only did he survive, but also became the next king.

Many children today have become victims of broken relationships and broken families. Athaliah is at play in many different forms- computer games, drug addiction, alcohol or pornography, which kill the creativity and God-given purpose of many young children.

Imagine if we, the people of God, could be like Jehosheba, give attention to the young children in our local community, especially those who are deprived or orphaned, see their God-given potential, and be courageous and caring enough to nurture them in a godly way through church activities or personal connections, how many lives would be different tomorrow?

Athaliah may begin her work, but may God raise up a Jehosheba for every child in every generation.

**Wednesday 29th March The Maidservant of Naaman's Wife.
Read 2 Kings 5:1 – 19a**

Read the account in whichever translation of the bible you would usually use. Read it again slowly, almost word for word, and jot down anything which comes to you under the following headings. There are no right or wrong answers.

Who?

What? (is happening)

Where? (is it happening)

When? (is it happening)

Why? (do you think this is in the bible?)

Any Questions?

Did you learn anything?
Did you notice anything you hadn't noticed before?
What is this passage saying to you today?
Try repeating the exercise using a different translation.
Does anything different speak to you?

Thursday 30th March Huldah Read 2 Chronicles 43:22-28.

You have already read about the context in which Huldah appears, in an earlier reflection about King Josiah that paused at a cliff hanger moment...

When the Book of Law was discovered and read to Josiah he realised just how far Judah had fallen from the Law. He sent his men to seek a word from God.

Enter Huldah.



We know her husband's name and that he was the "keeper of the wardrobe". We also understand that she was an important teacher of the Torah in her day. Importantly, Huldah was recognised as a prophetess; she could reveal the heart and mind of God. She knew the word of God and could declare it.

Why don't we hear about many female prophets? Can you think of any other examples? Or does the fact that no particular significance was drawn to the fact that Huldah was a female prophet mean that they were actually fairly commonplace?

What does a prophet do? What do we mean by foretell and forth tell?

Huldah remained faithful to the Lord during a very dark time in history, whilst others were sinning she continued to serve the Lord. Her faithfulness allowed her to share God's words of judgement and of comfort with Josiah. She played only a small role in the bigger story of Judah's unfaithfulness to God. Yet she had a big impact, she was part of events that changed her nation.

Perhaps this could encourage us, knowing that our actions can have an impact.

The message Huldah proclaimed wasn't an easy one, it was a message of judgement and destruction. In the history of Israel, prophets had been ignored or even executed because of the message they brought. Yet she was unapologetically confident in speaking the truth, she spoke with the authority of God.

Why do we think the king choose Huldah, especially when the prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah were also around?

Have you ever had to deliver a difficult message? What do you think is the best way of doing so?

Friday 31st March Nicodemus Read John 3:1-21

Nicodemus which means “conqueror of the people” needed to face and conquer his own fear in order to become a follower of Jesus. He was an orthodox Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin council, a respected teacher and religious leader in the Jewish community, and may have gone to see Jesus under the cover of night for fear of criticism.

It's interesting that Jesus ignores Nicodemus's praise and cuts right to the heart of Nicodemus's need. No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.

Nicodemus was undoubtedly familiar with the concept of spiritual rebirth – when a Gentile converted to Judaism he was said to be “reborn” however Nicodemus still confused Jesus words with physical rebirth.



Jesus tells Nicodemus that true new birth is of water and the Spirit or like the wind that we cannot control the direction of. New birth comes from God and although we cannot completely explain or understand it, we can witness its effect in the life of a believer.

We learn later in the story of Nicodemus that when the Sanhedrin discussed arresting Jesus, Nicodemus defended his cause (John 7:50-52). After Jesus death it was Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea take his body from the cross so that it could be prepared for burial (John 19:38-42). The fact that

John seems so familiar with the details of Nicodemus's life suggests that Nicodemus, certainly an unlikely follower of Jesus, may have become well known among his followers.

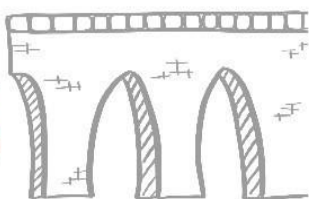
Nicodemus was as a man with questions seeking God under the cover of night – Who do you know who might be a bit fearful to take that first step towards Jesus?

What does spiritual rebirth mean to you? How would you describe it?

Saturday 1st April Aquila Read Acts 18 and Romans 16;1-3

Aquila was originally from the Roman province of Pontus on the south shore of the Black Sea. His Latin name, Aquila, means “eagle.” Along with his wife Priscilla he had fled from Rome because of a decree by Claudius commanding all Jews to leave the city. Aquila met Paul on his first visit to Corinth.

Let's build
BRIDGES



It's possible that Aquila could have heard the preaching of Peter in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. It's also possible that he and his wife Priscilla could have been part of the Jewish delegation from Rome that made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Was Peter invited by Aquila to minister in Pontus on his first missionary journey **in AD 40-42?**

This would have been a follow-up ministry visit to those who had come to faith on the day of Pentecost ten years earlier.

Did Peter take Aquila with him as a disciple when he ventured to the city of Rome after his first missionary journey?

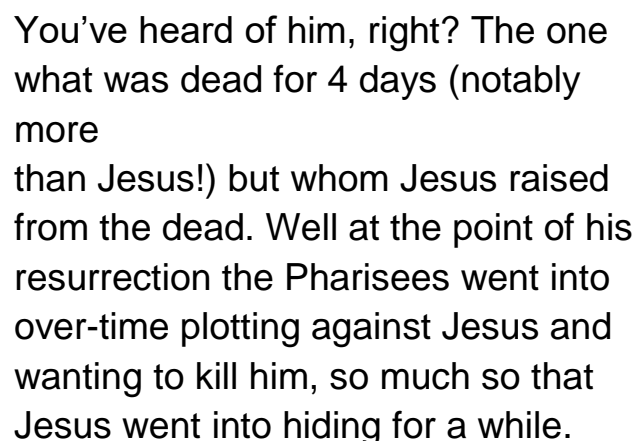
If this is the case, it would account for how Aquila got to Rome.

Does a “nice Jewish boy” from Pontus marry a Christian girl from Rome after Peter introduced them to each other?

The Apostle Paul was attracted to this couple, not only because of their faith in Jesus, but also because of their common occupation. Luke records: “for by occupation they were tentmakers”. Both were involved in this trade which indicates that it was a family business.

Can we learn anything from Aquila's story about hospitality and generosity?

I know we're reading in Mark, but I didn't want to write about the donkey or the donkey owner. I didn't want to be one of the disciples or a Pharisee or someone in the crowd. And Jesus is slightly more than a "bit-part" in the story. So I read the other accounts for a named character. I found Lazarus.



Lazarus: “You know they’re looking for you, right? You know they want to kill you? People have been looking for you all through the preparations, wondering if you’re going to show up in the city! They’ve been out here, the spies who are looking for you. They will have told them where you are.

You've not exactly kept a low profile this last week and the rumours that you're going into the city today can't have gone unnoticed! Are you sure you're making the best choice?"

Jesus: "It's what I need to do."

Lazarus: "It's just that, well, I've been dead before, and, well, I know I'm not a normal case, but, well, it's not exactly something I'd choose to do again in a hurry. Plus, it's not like there's another you out there waiting to call out in a loud voice 'Jesus, come out!'"

Jesus: "Lazarus. I'm going."

Lazarus: "I get that you've made up your mind, but have you thought about everything you've achieved!? Have you really considered how much more you could do? I mean, everywhere you go people start following you. People have met God. Things are changing. Lives are being transformed. If you are killed, that'll all stop. What's going to happen to those of us that get left behind?" "

Jesus: Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

Holy Week Monday A moneylender Read Mark 11: 15-18



All four gospels record this incident. Some believe that this incident was the spark, the tipping point, the single thing that triggered Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. If we take the Biblical text at face value, it seems to indicate that Jesus really had an objection to the moneychangers and dove sellers, suggesting that the place he believed was a house of prayer, had become a robber's den.

But why? Well the Temple in Jerusalem was one of the richest organisations in the Roman empire. Not only did every Jew living in the empire have to pay a Temple tax, there were also tithes of agricultural produce collected as well.

However, Passover was a particular prosperous time for the Temple authorities, as they made money from every pilgrim coming to the city through the sale of sacrificial animals and daily offerings.

All this money had to be processed by the moneylenders, as it could only be paid for in one official currency, the Tyrian shekel. And although some might argue these coins were chosen for religious reasons, the reality was far more nefarious. It was the most valuable coin, with the highest silver content. In all of this, the moneylenders were sanctioned by the Temple authorities. So we might suggest, that it was not these moneylenders that Jesus was attacking that day, it was the whole system of economic exploitation.

What perhaps is most telling in this regard is the mention of those selling doves. At Passover, the Temple was a place of sacrifice. Rich people might be able to pay for an ox or a lamb to be sacrificed. But the offering of the poor was two doves. Away from Passover these would have cost at least a whole day's wage for a labourer. At the height of the festival, it was undoubtedly much more. A festival about God's protection of his people, had become a devastating imposition on the most vulnerable members of society.

Is it any wonder that Jesus was upset at such exploitation?

Holy Week Tuesday Salome Read Mark 12:1-12

Salome was another of Jesus' faithful female followers - another key member of a community of women who were central to the "household" that travelled with Jesus. They too were disciples and apostles, to be numbered in the household, to be recognised in the number, but to so often be overlooked in name through the canon.



Supposedly the mother of James and John, Salome witnessed the crucifixion and went to the tomb on Sunday (Mark 15:40; 16:1). She followed Jesus to the end. She would have been one of the referenced "Women of Jerusalem"

from the stations of the cross, following, watching, weeping.

She would have seen Jesus' final moments, heard his last breath, when most of the men had scarpered.

And as she stood with the other women, I wonder if she was remembering the last few days of his teaching? I wonder if she was recalling the Parable of the Tenants and the killing of the land-owner's son.

Could it be both a parable and a foreshadowing of what was to come?

What was the story about in that moment, back when it was just a story?

What was the lesson in the story before the story became reality!?

If it really was more of a story, then what comes next isn't good for the world!

And yet the Psalmist claimed that the rejected stone was becoming the cornerstone, and that the Lord was doing something marvellous in the eyes of the watching world.

Flash forward to Sunday and we'd find Salome among the myrrh-bearers coming to anoint Jesus' body. The last to see him breathe become the first to find him raised from the dead. One of many faithful female followers who followed in life, mourned in death, and built their lives upon the cornerstone in the resurrection. One of the many who have so often been overlooked, discounted and denied identification, yet without whom we would have a far poorer faith.

One of the first to hear Jesus' stories from his own mouth and to experience the significance of them in light of the resurrection.

Salome followed Jesus everywhere, as did that after which she was named: Shalom. Peace.

Holy Week Wednesday Priests and Scribes Read Mark 14:1-2

The time is significant. Since Passover commemorates the time when God raised up a great deliverer and freed Israel from foreign oppression, it was a time of great patriotic and messianic anticipation. The Romans were on guard and ready for any hint of revolt. At this time, Jerusalem was not only filled with pilgrimage Jews but also a great multitude of the Galileans who had high respect regarding Jesus and called him the Messiah (Mark 11:1-10).

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**THE
PLOT
TO
KILL
JESUS**

The Chief priests and the scribes had been trying to destroy Jesus since shortly after his ministry began. By now, they had become desperate! Although they were religious leaders who were responsible for teaching people the

reverence of God, they themselves had no fear of God. Nevertheless, they feared the people. They were not afraid to murder the Son of God. They just wanted to do it in a politically smart way so not to cause riot.

Jesus called these religious leaders hypocrites who honoured God with their lips but their hearts were far from him (Mark 7:6). If only they could drop their religious agenda and truly revere the living God!

This Holy Wednesday, may we sincerely examine our own hearts so we may truly revere the living God. When the political persuasion is pressing in, when the desire of our flesh is invigorating, when the voice of the crowd is deafening our ears, what is it that our heart is seeking?

Prayer: Gracious God, forgive us when we worshipped you with our lips but our hearts are far from you. May you draw us close to you through your Son Jesus Christ so we may truly know you. Help us drop our religious or political agenda and surrender to your will over our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.

Maundy Thursday Unnamed Disciple Read: John 13:1-15

I'm nervous as I watch Jesus approaching each of us. This doesn't feel right, Jesus shouldn't be on his knees before us. We've eaten our meal, and then Jesus stood up, wrapped a towel around his waist and picked up a bowl of water, and began to wash our feet. He's washing our dirty feet! I watch him as he goes towards a disciple, and he kneels down and proceeds to scoop water into his hands and let it fall over his feet. Jesus then washes the muck off, slowly, deliberately, with love. He goes over to Peter next, and Peter is horrified. 'Not me, Lord,' he says. Jesus tells him that he must, and I begin to realise that this isn't actually about washing feet, it's symbolic. I'm not sure how yet.



Peter sits uncomfortably as Jesus proceeds to wash his feet. Jesus, in his typical style, doesn't make a drama out of it, he's not making this action about him, it's just something that he needs to do. Jesus is showing us his ministry, his servant ministry, he's showing us how we have to act, the things that we have to do. It's not about feet (thank goodness) it's about servant hood. It's about Jesus demonstrating what he wants us to do, he wants us to live to show others what following Jesus is about.

Jesus approaches me now, he slips off my sandals and places my feet into the bowl of water. It's uncomfortable, because Jesus is a King, he shouldn't be doing this, he should be being worshiped by me, not grovelling on the ground. But of course, I need to see the bigger picture. This isn't really Jesus washing feet. It's his example to us all. It's not about power, it's about how we treat others, how we show our love, especially to the ones who need it the most.

For further reflection:

How do you think you'd feel if Jesus was to wash your feet? Would you understand the significance of the act?

How are you at serving others? How are you at being served, do you remember to let people help you too?

Good Friday The curtain is torn Read Matthew 27:45-53

"There is without doubt something special about this place. Something sacred. Something unquestionably holy. Here at the very centre of the temple complex. Here at the very heart of our faith. Here just outside the Holy of Holies, I always stand with fear and trembling at the knowledge of what lies just out of sight. Just behind that ornate curtain.



According to the Law of Moses, it is only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that the curtain is breached. The high priest brings the blood of sacrifices into the Holy of Holies to atone sin, slaughtering one animal and releasing the other, the scapegoat, into the wilderness burdened down with the sins of the people.

It is only the high priest who ever gets to enter that sacred sanctuary, even though it might not exactly be a safe space. A rope is always tied around his foot in case, well you know in case...I mean if you were going to enter into the very space where the presence of God dwelt, then wouldn't you would want to take some precautions and be able to be dragged back to safety if required. I know I would.

No, this was near enough for me. I wasn't all that keen on a close encounter of the divine kind. A little gap between me and the Almighty suits me just fine. I was happy to just continue doing what I normally do on a Friday in my role as a temple official and just keep God, well you know over there, at a safe distance, remote rather than intimate and personal.

Then suddenly I heard the sound, a sound that seemed to make the very foundations of the temple shake. The sound of a thousand threads being ripped apart. The sound of the veil between heaven and earth being rent asunder as the curtain was torn in two. And in that moment I was more afraid than when the curtain had been in place. With nothing now between us, keeping us apart, was I about to encounter God in a way I had never experienced before?”

What are your ‘sacred’ spaces where you felt God’s presence?

What barriers do you think restrict people’s access to God?

How can we help to ‘remove the curtain’ that often shields our faith?

Easter Saturday The in-between day

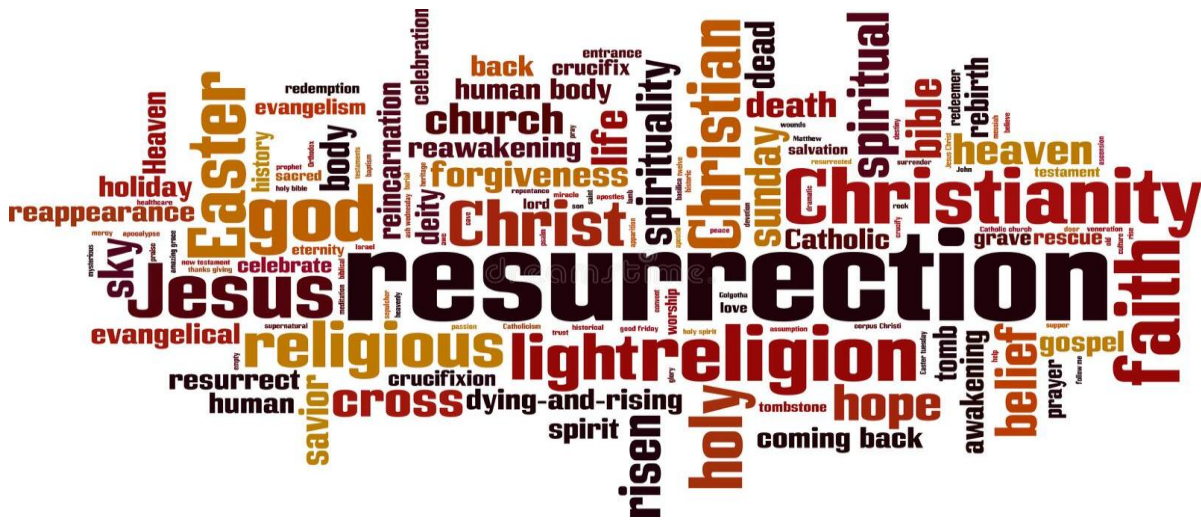


Holy Saturday can often feel like a nothing day caught as it is in-between the devastation of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday. A day when the world waits, holding it's breathe (even though we already know the end of the story).

It is a day of stillness, silence and space within the great story of Easter, one in which perhaps a multitude of different emotions are at play.

What word's, what emotions, what feelings are associated with Holy Saturday for you?

Easter Day Soldiers at the Tomb Read Matthew 27:62 - 28:15



It had been a busy few days. Three crucifixions: two criminals and a rebel preacher. And then there was the troublesome crowd. Those religious leaders really did want to see that preacher dead and they got the crowd behind them. Keeping them under control kept us on our toes.

Everyone was tired, but those chief priests insisted there was a guard on the tomb. Apparently Jesus had said something about rising from the dead and the chief priests seemed to think his disciples might steal the body and then pretend he was alive. Totally stupid idea. The stone was enormous and we had sealed the tomb, but we volunteered anyway. A bit of extra pay always helps.

The first night was quiet. It was a bit cold. We lit a fire to keep warm and talked about the strange events of the day. No-one came to bother us.

But last night ... Well, that was totally different. We were all exhausted, but we knew the job we had to do. We had done guarding jobs hundreds of times.

I'm sure I didn't fell asleep but what followed did seem a bit like a dream. Suddenly the earth was quaking and there was a bright light and the stone seemed to move by itself. No, the light seemed to move it. This may sound really odd but the light was like a human dressed in clothes which were incredibly white. I can tell you I have never been so frightened. First, I was shaking. Then, I couldn't move.

Then I realised some of Jesus' followers were there. A couple of the women. I expect the men were still in bed having drowned their sorrows as they had realised they had been following another upstart.

Honestly, I had not been drinking, but I really did hear that light say that Jesus wasn't there anymore. He had been raised just as he had said it would happen. The light said lots of other stuff, but my mind stopped at the idea that the body we had been guarding was alive.

We rushed back to the city and told the chief priests. They got into a bit of a panic and gave us extra money to say that we had fallen asleep and that the body had been stolen.

As I said a bit of extra money is always welcome, but I know what I saw. I saw a tomb opened by an angel and there was no body and I began to wonder. Perhaps this Jesus bloke was who he said he was.

One journey is over...another has just begun.
Let us continue to travel on together

