

LENT 2022

SIGNS *of* LIFE





FOREWORD

It has been said that the Gospel of John is ‘a book in which a child may paddle but an elephant can swim deep.’ Whether you consider yourself a child, an elephant, or something in between, the Gospel of John is a place where you can paddle or swim in rivers of living water. This Gospel is often given to people who are new to following Christ, as they seek to learn more about who He is and what He has done. But this Gospel has also been studied by great theological minds over the centuries and its depths have never been fully plumbed. Whoever you are, wherever you’ve come from, and however much of a journey you have walked with Jesus, this Gospel has something to say to you.

We don’t need to wonder why John wrote this Gospel, because he tells us at the end of chapter 20:

‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’

The purpose of this Gospel is to lead the listener or reader to life in Jesus' name, through believing that He is the Messiah (God's promised Anointed One) and the Son of God. We are presented with both the teaching and signs of Jesus' ministry in a way that invites a response. Will we respond like the Samaritan woman or Pilate, like Nicodemus or Martha? Jesus addresses us both as individuals and as members of a community, and invites us to put our faith and trust in Him.

As we move through the season of Lent and see Winter give way to Spring, we see signs of life springing up all around us. Whether it is daffodils bravely peeking through the snow, or bare branches blossoming with new buds of life, these signs are all around us in increasing number. So also as we journey through the Gospel of John together, let us notice the signs of life that Jesus brings. Whether it is bringing light into the darkness, or healing to the sick, or peace to the storm, or raising the dead back to life, Jesus is bringing the life of God to the world.

Jesus Christ continues to bring life today. His life in all its fullness is a gift to be received in faith. Let us respond in faith to our Saviour who gave His life to give us life in His name.

Amy White, Lay Training Officer.

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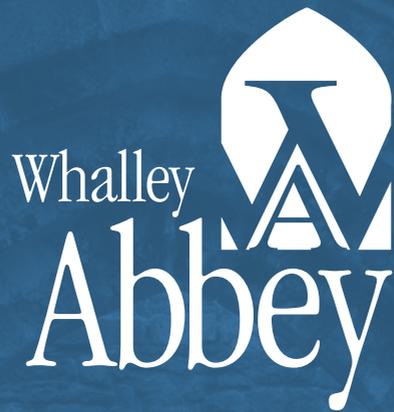
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COME AND BE CHANGED

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WEDNESDAY 2ND MARCH

Ash Wednesday

Read: John 1:1-9

'In the beginning...' **John 1:1a**

The start of something is always a time of mixed emotions. I remember when our first child was born feeling both excited and petrified! The beginning of this season of Lent may find you juggling a range of thoughts and feelings.

It's usual to talk about self-denial and "giving things up for Lent", but if that sounds negative, it's chosen to bring about something positive, for the key to self-denial is to do with understanding a paradox about our human nature, namely that the more we indulge ourselves and seek our own interests, the unhappier we become. Conversely, the more we deny ourselves and choose not to seek our own interests but the interests of others, the happier we become. This divine paradox is at the heart of all our self-denial. As St John of the Cross says, "Deny your desires and you will find what your heart longs for." John opens his Gospel with some of the most wonderful words possible, words that are soaked in theological depth and meaning, words that speak of Jesus' own self-denial as He renounced the comfort of His heavenly home in order to come and live as a light in the darkness of this world.

Many of us today will experience the service of ashing; a deeply moving service that has a feel of stripping us back to the beginning. Taking us back to our roots, reminding us of our utter dependence upon God as we recognise that our very being is in His hands. Dust and ashes. As our reading says, '*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*' (v.3). We're all just beginners in living the Christian life and so we heed the wisdom of Brother Lawrence: "In the beginning of the spiritual life we ought to be faithful in doing our duty and denying ourselves." In doing this there is no other purpose than to lead us to abandon ourselves in everything through faith to the love of God where there is to be found life in all its fullness, for in Him is life (v.4).

It's when we no longer have anything that we have everything. Our earthly pilgrimage is one of continually giving up again and again in order to be found once more. John the Baptist knew this to be true. He knew his role was to decrease in order that Jesus Himself could increase. This too is our calling. Lent is an opportunity once again to go deeper with God and in doing so to point others to Jesus that in Him they may find meaning and purpose to life.

The Revd David Craven, Priest-in-charge, St George's, Preston.

Read: John 1:10-18

'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' **John 1:10**

Anyone who has experienced the bitter taste of rejection knows how difficult it can be to live with. From being picked last for a sport, to not getting offered that job you wanted, even unrequited love. Doubtless we all have our stories and our scars.

At a time in the Christian calendar when we think very carefully about Jesus' scars, there is one that this passage points to that doesn't always feature in our consideration – His rejection. This is a constant refrain through His life and in this passage we can see it as a defining feature of His experience of life on this Earth. How very hard that must have been and how painful, even with an understanding of the bigger picture. The rejection described here is what ultimately leads to Jesus' death and somehow comes even after the great revelation of the Word becoming flesh, and despite so many having seen His glory.

There can be no greater human folly than the rejection of Christ, yet it is something each one of us is as guilty of as Israel, 'His own', was two thousand years ago. It is a sign of our world's ambivalence to Christ, and maybe even the lukewarm nature of the Church, that rejection of Him today might be quieter than the heat of the moment cries of "crucify Him". The words of furious rejection are no longer audible; but they are no less damning.

As The Revd Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy puts it in his poem set closer to home:

**"When Jesus came to Birmingham we simply passed Him by,
We never hurt a hair on Him, we only let Him die;
For we had grown more tender, and would not give Him pain,
We only just passed down the street and left Him in the rain."**

Whether rejection comes with murderous cries or simply through ambivalence, the ultimate consequence of this rejection of God is the same – death instead of life, darkness in place of hope. Our job is not, however, defined or even impacted by the world's rejection of its creator. If anything we should be energised by it! We, like John the Baptist, must still point to the source of all grace and truth, the creator and sustainer of all things, and cry out so that others might come to know Him as The Messiah and find their salvation in Him.

The Revd Sam Cheesman, Chaplain to the Bishop of Blackburn.

Read: John 1:19-28

'Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,"' as the prophet Isaiah said.' **John 1:22-23**

John the Baptist, son of a priest, the oddity who lived in the desert, was attracting large crowds enthusiastic enough to walk out into the desert to listen to him. What was it all about? The Jewish leaders wanted to know, and so they sent a delegation of Pharisees to the desert to question John, probably hoping to discredit him and quieten the situation down. But it didn't turn out like that. They didn't meet someone who was full of himself, claiming to be the Messiah, or Elijah, or a Prophet. They met John, humble, sure of and secure in who he was not, as well as who he was.

In answer to the Pharisees' questioning about who he was, John quotes Isaiah (40:3): *'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* As the son of a priest, John could have followed in his father's footsteps and lived the comfortable life of a priest – however John is absolutely clear about his calling to prepare the way for Jesus and bear witness to Him. This is illustrated in verse 27: "I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandal". John in his humility said he was not even worthy of a slave's role. He was called to make a way – just as sirens blaring in our streets clear a path for a vehicle to get through.

In this season of Lent, what can we learn from this? I believe that John the Baptist shows us an example of both humility and greatness. He didn't overstep the boundaries of his calling, but lived an authentic life, revealing 'the one who is to come'. He was not interested in building a following for himself, and quickly cut off misleading speculation about who he was. And for us, it isn't about our performance, what we do, it's about the presence of Christ in our lives, lived out in humility. It's about prayerfully seeking God in all things, and sometimes moving out of our comfort zones. Are we able to point people to Jesus Christ, do we truly know Him ourselves? Is our faith a reality? Whatever our gifts and vocations, we are called to do as John did, live in the humility of a life lived for Jesus Christ, and lead people to Him.

Ruth Haldane, Warden of Lay Ministry.

Read: John 1:29-34

“And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

John 1:34

If you have ever sat on a jury you will know the importance of eye-witness evidence. You are meant to listen to the evidence and reach a verdict. John, the writer of this Gospel account, wants us to reach a verdict about Jesus. To help us do that he brings forward a key witness, who tells us that he is convinced that Jesus is the Son of God. He admits that, although he is a prophet with a God-given ministry, he would not have known who Jesus was without God’s direct intervention (v.33). That is why it is always important to pray before reading our Bibles. We can ask God to reveal the truth to us about Jesus, especially who He is, and what His mission was, when He came that first Christmas time.

Here before us today is the evidence of this key witness, the man we call John the Baptist. His testimony is summarised in two sentences found in verses 29 and 33:

First, *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (v.29). In the Old Testament lambs were sacrificed as part of the religious life of the temple for the forgiveness of sin. The Passover lamb was annually sacrificed as a reminder of God’s rescue of Israel from slavery. Now the Lamb of God has arrived and will take away the sin of the world. Not just for Israel, but One with a universal reach, for all of us. The testimony of John is in the present tense. *“He takes away the sin of the world.”* Although his death was 2,000 years ago it is still available today. For those who turn to Him in penitence and faith, their sin is taken away. However, John’s testimony doesn’t end there, though.

Second, John also testifies that Jesus *“baptises with the Holy Spirit”* (v.33). This is also in the present tense. Jesus brings to us the very life of God, life in all its fullness.

These two sentences sum up the mission of Jesus. He came to be the Lamb of God and take away our sin. He came to bring us life so that we might become the people God wants us to be.

Alleluia! What a Saviour.

The Revd Alan Hogarth, Vicar, St Paul’s Withnell, & St Barnabas, Heapey.

The First Sunday of Lent

Read: John 1:35-51

“The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.’ John 1:35-37

John the Baptist had a ministry of redirection and we see this beautifully reflected in the first part of today’s reading, *“Look, here is the Lamb of God!”*. Throughout his ministry, John points the way to Jesus, but at the appropriate moment, John’s disciples must encounter Jesus for themselves. In this episode it was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who heard what John had said and responded.

A personal encounter with Jesus is at the very heart of John’s Gospel and we will see this happen time and time again throughout the next twenty chapters. The same must also be true for us in our own journey of faith. We can hear about Jesus, we can read about Jesus, we can observe Him in the lives of others. But for faith to become real and life transforming we must encounter Jesus for ourselves; we must be willing to step out of the comfort zone of our limited understanding into the uncertainty of a personal relationship.

Jesus’ first words to Andrew, and indeed His first words in this Gospel are *“What do you want?”*. The German theologian Rudolf Bultmann suggests that *“it is the first question which must be addressed to anyone who comes to Jesus, the first thing about which he must be clear.”* For Andrew and the disciple with him, we can assume that they wanted to find the Messiah and were following John’s direction (v.41) to follow Jesus and discover for themselves who this man was. The consequence of this encounter was simple. Andrew, convinced in his own mind that Jesus was the Messiah ran to share this good news with his brother, Simon. And so began a ministry of introducing others to Jesus. Andrew’s greatest joy, it would seem, was sharing the good news of Christ and bringing others into the presence of Jesus.

Personal introductions are so important in life. We often feel unworthy to walk up to someone we do not know or are unfamiliar with. Many people feel the same way about Jesus. They are convinced that Jesus is not interested or has no time for them. That’s why bringing people to Jesus is such an important ministry that we are all called to participate in. As we journey further into Lent, spend some time praying about who you might bring into the presence of Jesus. And then, consider inviting them to church on Easter Day!

The Very Revd Peter Howell-Jones, Dean of Blackburn.

Read: John 2:1-12

‘When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk.

But you have kept the good wine until now.’ John 2:9-10

The turning of water into wine is one of Jesus’ more famous and unique miracles. It is a passage often read at weddings and is quite familiar. John says that this was Jesus’ first public miracle and so it sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel, giving us a sneak preview of what to expect.

At the very centre is this miraculous turning of water into wine. John is showing us that this Jesus is someone special, someone who has power over nature itself. Jesus uses massive stone jars used in purification rituals to store the wine He makes. He is repurposing this religious symbol of purity, pointing towards His identity as the long-awaited Messiah foretold by the Jewish prophets. This story also reminds us of Jesus’ humanity. He’s at a party with friends and family, something very normal. Like any thoughtful adult, He also listens to His mother and is willing to help with a need she has pointed out to Him.

Unlike the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus doesn’t have to act as some kind of miraculous caterer here. Whereas then people were hungry for food, more wine isn’t necessarily needed here. Whilst it would have been a social error to provide insufficient wine, the steward tells us that a considerable amount has already been served. Jesus still steps in though and not only creates a massive amount of wine (690 litres!) but we are told that it is also the best wine.

This miracle not only points to Jesus being a special and powerful person, but it also shows us Jesus’ abounding love. This love and care which is shown by Him going out of His way to look after those at the wedding party, responding to His mother, Mary, and especially protecting the social respect of those organising it. The wine is also offered to all at the party, no questions asked, or expectations had. Jesus has this unconditional love for us too. The love that overflows and abounds. That cares about both what we need and what we want. That can radically change a situation.

Why not take a few moments today to just think about how much you are loved by God. You could generously butter your toast or go on a walk and appreciate the extravagant beauty of nature, thinking about how much God lavishes His love on us.

Pippalina Daniels, Ordinand.

Read: John 2:13-25

‘Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. [...] Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”’ John 2:15,19

We’ve all been in positions where we have lost our temper with those around us — it might be out of frustration that things are not going the way we think they ought to go; anger that things we feel are important are being belittled; perhaps even righteous indignation when that which we hold most dear is being given little respect.

And to an extent that is very much what we see going on in our passage for today. Jesus loses His temper, and does so in a spectacular way. It is almost the caricature of someone throwing their toys out of the pram — though in Jesus’ case it isn’t so much His toys, as the toys of the money changers and animal-dealers in the Temple, when He sees them misusing his Father’s house and putting up barriers for others to worship God. It’s the very antithesis of the traditional image of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’.

And yet what Jesus does serves an important purpose. It reminds us that if we are not careful, we can all put barriers in the way of our faith—barriers which need, at times, to be driven out; to be cleansed. We may smile slightly at this image of an enraged Jesus venting His anger at those who sold the items in the precincts of the Temple. But as we do so, let us remember there are times in our own lives where the tables need to be turned.

Lent gives us an opportunity for this self-examination. As we hear of Jesus cleansing the Temple, we are, in a strange way, assured that our lives too can be cleansed, and that Jesus has the authority to do it.

And we are assured of that when Jesus says, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*” (v.19). He is, of course, pointing us to the great events of Easter. His death on the cross cleanses us of sin and opens the way for us to enter into the presence of the living God. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus not only reconciles us with our Father in heaven - He fills us with His Holy Spirit and make us temples of the living God - He gives us the gift of cleansing in our own Christian lives.

The Revd Canon David Arnold, Vicar, St Andrew, St Mary Magdalen & St Peter, Accrington.

Read: John 3:1-21

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' **John 3:16-17**

Nicodemus was an exceptional man. He was a Pharisee, a well-educated leader, a man of standing in his religious community. He was also exceptional amongst his fellow pharisees; rather than showing animosity towards Jesus he was compelled to seek Jesus out to find out more for himself. Jesus' miracles, teachings, and the tangible way He demonstrated the presence of God were irresistible.

In his evening encounter with Jesus, Nicomedmus hears of the limitless and all-embracing love of God; *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...'* (v.16). God has given the best that He has to give - His own son - to offer us the chance to be part of His family as His children and live in His kingdom. He offers a different way of life free from fear of judgement, and full of light and life.

These loving and well-known words are first uttered to a Pharisee. However, Nicodemus was confused by this invitation of a new life. Jesus explains that the means of receiving this new life is a work of the Holy Spirit and it is like being born anew. It is a life-changing encounter with Jesus made real through the Holy Spirit. This can't be earned by trying hard to follow a rule book for life. God generously offers His love for us to receive, believe, and trust in.

How do we respond to this? John Newton, a former slave trader, wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace' in response to the preciousness of grace that relieved his fears. During this time of Lent, let us take time to reflect on God's life-giving love. Like John Newton, many people are amazed by God's love perhaps because of a sense of not feeling good enough or feeling shame. What does Jesus say about this? Take some time to re-read John 3:16 inserting your name into the verses and receive His reassuring offer of new life.

'For God so loved (your name) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone (including your name) who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn (your name), but in order that the world (including your name) might be saved through him.'

Joy Rushton, Diocesan Being Witnesses Manager.

Read: John 3:22-36

"He must increase, but I must decrease." **John 3:30**

Thomas Aquinas once described envy as sorrow at another's good for the simple reason that his or her good surpasses our own. I find that definition deeply challenging because it gives a name to that faint pang of sorrow we feel in response to that home-group member's desirable house, or relationship, or job ... or the 'successful' church down the road ... or when someone receives more recognition for their ministry than we do for ours. The name for that feeling is envy. It strikes me that the events in today's reading could have presented John with ample opportunity for envy.

Whatever the nature of the dispute in verse 25, it evidently caused John's disciples to reflect on his ministry in comparison with the rising popularity of Jesus. Their exaggerated, *"all are going to him"* (v.26) has an air of envious resentment on behalf of their beloved teacher. John had faithfully carried out his ministry as prophet of God – a vocation involving significant personal cost (v.24). But now the crowds are deserting John and flocking to another Rabbi – the very one John had brought to their attention.

But John himself apparently feels nothing of sorrow that Jesus' good surpasses his own – only joy (v.29). His example is instructive for us.

First, he does not envy God's right to give what He wills to whom He wills (v.27). He does not share in our culture's prevailing attitude that he is entitled to this or that. He recognises God's prerogative as Giver. Second, he recognises the incomparable and incomprehensible worth of Jesus (vv.31-36). This thing we call life is not John's (or our) 'big day' but Jesus' (v.29). John's joy is found in Christ being exalted and honoured, and he is happy to play whatever role assigned in making that happen.

So today, John shows us what one pastor has called 'the freedom of self-forgetfulness'. That is, not thinking less of ourselves - John doesn't strike me as someone with low self-esteem. But rather, being freed to think about ourselves less. Only when our heart and mind has been captivated by a greater vision of Jesus' worth can we then be set free to love God and others – to be content and even joyful to see Him increase and ourselves decrease.

The Revd Andy Meeson, Vicar of St John's, Leyland.

Read: John 4:1-42

‘Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’” **John 4:16-18**

This passage from John’s gospel may, initially, seem like a fairly simple conversation between Jesus and a woman at a well but there is so much going on here. Just the fact of a Jewish man, a rabbi to some, having a conversation with a Samaritan woman is incredible. As it continues, we hear about what is needed to sustain life, not just physical, here and now, but spiritual and eternal; and then we move on to the subject of her marital status, and the coming, indeed very presence, of the Messiah. What I want to consider here is the issue of relationships that is touched on in the conversation about her husband(s). Relationship is one of the key features of John’s gospel and, I believe, a fundamental element of Christian living.

This woman has had many husbands and it calls into question just what her relationship is with her current partner. So it is that she is challenged about the status of her current relationship. However, this conversation is operating on another level too. This woman is representative of the Samaritan people, a special case, in many ways. Our natural inclination is to keep things simple by thinking of people of that time as being either Jew or Gentile but Samaritans don’t fit into either category. They were a part of the chosen people of Israel, true descendants of Jacob. When Samaria was invaded by Assyrians, the Israelites were taken into captivity and replaced by foreign settlers who brought their pagan rites into their new home. From then on, the Samaritans became increasingly at odds with the people of Israel, and their relationship with God was called into question.

All relationships need work and our relationship with God is no different. In this time of Lent, I think it would be appropriate for us to reconsider our relationship with Jesus; it is not simply enough to be baptised and wear the label. So, let’s ask ourselves whether our relationship with God has become stale or, whether, perhaps we let other considerations get in the way? Are we really working at it and giving it the time and effort we should? Do we have an active, sustaining, loving relationship that demands effort and sacrifice but also brings joy and hope – who or what are we committed to?

The Revd Andy Shaw, Vicar of Over Wyre.

Read: John 4:43-54

‘Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” [...] Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way [...] The father realised that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he himself believed, along with his whole household.’ **John 4:48,50,53**

Choice. In Lent it is often a practice to choose to either give or take something up; probably something that has a mental, physical or spiritual benefit. In this passage, the royal official chose to believe Jesus. He chose to take Jesus at His word and believe that Jesus could physically heal his son’s sickness. The next day the royal official came to a belief in Jesus as the Messiah. I bet the question rattling round in his head was, “Was my son healed because of Jesus, or healed because I believed?”

Many people are looking for a miracle, a new opportunity, or maybe healing of sorts. But the father didn’t need to see Jesus heal to believe in His words.

Are you choosing Jesus? Are you choosing Him for the very first time, choosing to try and understand who this famous prophet was and why He has such an impact on the world? Are you choosing Jesus after some time away, some time focussing on other things? Or are you continually choosing Jesus?

May I encourage you this Lent to choose Jesus, as well as giving up something negative and taking up something positive. Start small. Take time to stop. To see the miracles, the wonders and the beauty of God’s creation, and His active role within it. Maybe keep a prayer, or a gratitude, journal, so that after Easter you can look back and see how God has moved in you and those around you. Jesus Christ continues to bring life in all its fullness to this day.

There are times and seasons where God heals miraculously and brings abundance. And I encourage you in the times where you may feel distant to Jesus or feel like you are stumbling in your faith to take ten seconds to remember the royal official. That through trusting and believing in Jesus’ word both physical and eternal life came to his family.

Jesus is always ready to talk, whether for the first time, after a long time away, or as part of an ongoing relationship. And He wants to be part of that ongoing conversation with us, no matter how big or small. Like in verse 48, we may not see the signs but by having faith in Jesus, we can receive the gift and fullness of life.

Alexandra Uffindell, Lay-member of Buckshaw Village Church.

The Second Sunday of Lent

Read: John 5:1-18

‘Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”’ **John 5:6**

I love John’s Gospel but in today’s passage Jesus asks a seemingly bizarre question: “Do you want to be made well?” We may well ask what sick person does not want to be made well, especially when they have been ill for thirty-eight years as was the case for the man in the passage? Whatever our misgivings about the start of the conversation, all ends well as Jesus intervenes and makes the man well in the third of seven signs in John’s Gospel. In this passage someone who has been ill for thirty-eight years is gifted with healing and wholeness as a sign of the transformation that Jesus can bring into every situation, but Jesus’ initial question is not as odd as it might first appear.

Over the years, I have encountered many people who do not want to be made well, especially when we move beyond the bounds of physical illness into the mental and spiritual parts of who we are as human beings. To be made well by Jesus is to be changed and most of us are less willing to be changed than we like to admit! It is often hard to accept that who we are needs to change and harder still to accept that we cannot change ourselves; yet the core of the Gospel is that Jesus comes to transform us in ways we could never do for ourselves. We see this in His life, His miraculous signs, and supremely in His death and resurrection for us where He makes a way for us to be healed from all of our sin.

So today hear afresh the Lord asking you, “Do you want to be made well?” Take time to be with Him and invite Him to change you so that you may be freer from sin and so become more like Him. As you do this, do not be afraid because He came that you may have life and have it abundantly.

The Revd Nick McKee, Director of Vocations.

Read: John 5:19-29

“The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished.” **John 5:20**

At first reading, this passage seems to lack drama. The signs and miracles already witnessed include some of the most iconic stories of Jesus. We have witnessed the miracle at Cana, the Samaritan Woman, and the Sabbath healing of the lame man. In each of these, Jesus faces or initiates conflict of one sort or another. Amid the joy of God’s promises in these stories, there is a gathering storm against Jesus.

Jesus explains the nature of His ministry giving context to events that have gone before. We learned in 5:18 that the Jews were ‘seeking all the more to kill him’ because, by calling God His Father, He claims equality. The tension is ratcheted up at this point when Jesus amplifies His claim to equality, effectively signing His own death warrant.

So, what exactly does Jesus claim? That the Son does nothing alone, for “whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (v.19), employing a homely image of the love between an earthly father and son. Not only are the two of the same substance, but the Son is shaped and inspired by His Father, rather as Jesus must have been as He shadowed Joseph in the carpenter’s shop.

Jesus then considers the spiritual significance of the relationship. The hostile audience can have no doubt that He claims powers usually ascribed to the Father: He gives life, both temporal and eternal, and executes judgment. The Jews’ anger must have been palpable.

Finally, Jesus turns to His hearers, the Jews of First Century Palestine. If they are to have eternal life, they must respond to Jesus on the terms He has laid out. He also addresses readers down the centuries to the present day.

So what do we learn? That we must hear Jesus’ “words and believe in him who sent me” (v.24). Jesus does not shy away from discussing the ‘condemnation’ which is the flip-side of the forgiveness and acceptance He offers. We can be assured though, that His ‘judgment is just’ because it derives from the Father, and is grounded in that loving relationship between them. May we today respond to the Father through Jesus His son, in love, faith, and trust.

William Young, Lay-member of St Paul’s, Adlington.

Read: John 5:30-47

“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” John 5:39

I recently went for my second optician’s appointment. This second visit was much easier, because I knew where I was going and what was going to happen. You never want to be the person who has to ask where Specsavers is and discover you are standing right outside! Once inside, while doing their various tests and shining bright lights in my eyes, they then ask me to start reading some letters – how do you expect me to do that, I think to myself? I can’t see a thing except the lights still in my eyes. I hope that they know that my eyes need a few minutes to adjust in order to see anything!

I wonder what you are seeing as we journey through John? Or I wonder who you are seeing? Hopefully you may be seeing some things that are familiar and some things that you’ve never noticed before. However, sometimes, when we journey through the Bible, we can fall into the trap of just learning some facts, just ticking off another chapter of the Bible.

In our reading today Jesus seems pretty annoyed with His hearers. No-one seems to be getting it. No-one seems to be able to see clearly. Of course, the hearers think they get it. They think they know God; they think they understand and know how things work in God’s kingdom, but Jesus says, *“You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* Jesus is saying, “You are reading the scriptures, you are reading the bible, the story that tells you all about me, but yet you can’t seem to see me, you ignore me. I’m standing right in front of you longing to give you fullness of life. Look up child, look at me, and come to me. Receive from me’.

My prayer this Lent, is that we don’t just read the words of John’s Gospel, we don’t just think about the words in the Bible, but we lift our eyes to the One who spoke the words, we lift our eyes to the One whose story we read, and we come to Jesus. We meet with Jesus; we sit and invite Him to sit with us; and show us once again the life and the love He has for us as we reflect on His story together.

The Revd Alice Cole, Assistant Curate, St James, Darwen & St Paul’s, Hoddlesden.

Read: John 6:1-15

“When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.’ John 6:5-6

The issue raised by today’s reading is this: “What sort of a Messiah are we looking for?” The episode begins with Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee and landing on the remote eastern side of the lake. Despite the spot being in the back of beyond a large crowd quickly gathers and John explains that the people came, *“because they saw the signs that (Jesus) was doing for the sick”* (v.2). So they came because of the fantastic health-care He offered – and it was completely free! For some in the crowd there will have been a personal, and possibly urgent, need of healing, but probably most were there just hoping to be amazed by a spectacle. Either way the people were missing the significance of the signs that Jesus had been doing – they saw Him as offering nothing more than relief from the problems of this world.

But are the disciples more perceptive than the masses? You’d hope so. And in verse 5 Jesus singles out Philip and puts him to the test by asking if he knows anywhere local where they sell food. It was a ridiculous question and probably the way to understand the conversation between Jesus, Philip, and Andrew is to hear it with an element of light-hearted banter between friends:

Jesus: “Have Tesco got any shops here in the wilderness?”

Philip: “Probably – but don’t ask me to buy lunch for this lot, I’ve been skint since I started following you!”

Andrew: “Panic over – there’s a boy over here willing to share his picnic – but it may not quite stretch to 5000!”

Everyone probably smiled, but clearly the disciples weren’t expecting much from Jesus, which means they’d failed the test. Nonetheless Jesus immediately works yet another sign to teach them to expect more from Him. The people are told to sit on the grass; Jesus takes the loaves and fish, gives thanks, and shares the food; and they all eat as much as they want (v.11). There are even loads of leftovers (vv.12-13). Their needs are more than met.

And that’s the kind of Messiah we should be looking for – One who more than meets our needs. And you’ll notice that our real need isn’t a fabulous NHS; nor is it a fantastic political leader (v.15), nor even a free lunch (v.26); rather it’s Jesus Himself (v.35). And that’s what He gives. But is that what we’re looking for?

The Revd Canon Mark Jones, Vicar of Padiham Parish.

Read: John 6:16-21

‘When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.”’ **John 6:19-20**

What is it that terrifies the disciples? It isn't the storm that is raging all around them. It is something much more awesome that arouses their fear – the sight of a figure walking confidently across the foaming water towards them. It should not surprise us that it is this that fills their hearts with terror. The Son of God, the Word made flesh, is demonstrating His supreme authority over the natural world He created. It's a shocking supernatural display of Jesus' divine nature. So much so that the disciples fail to recognise Jesus until He identifies Himself with words of authority and comfort, *“It is I, do not be afraid”*. The words “It is I” not only identify Jesus as their familiar Teacher and Friend, but also as God Himself - before translation, the words echo the name “I AM” by which God identified himself to Moses from the burning bush. The disciples' Teacher and Friend is also the Creator and Holy God of Israel, and yet He assures them that they do not need to be afraid in His presence. This is God's One and Only Son who has come to be their Saviour. His presence brings comfort and safety, not fear.

After the disciples recognise this Jesus, in the midst of the storm with them, everything changes. Until then, the disciples have spent many hours in the dark, straining at the oars, fighting a stormy sea, being battered by a strong wind, making little progress towards their destination. With Jesus in the boat with them, they *‘immediately’* (v.21) reach the land they were headed for. Without Jesus they were frustrated, going nowhere fast, despite their own best efforts. Having welcomed Jesus into their boat, they are safely brought to shore.

This same Jesus, Mighty God and Gentle Saviour, will gladly be with us too in our frustrations and storms of life, if we welcome Him into our hearts. He does not promise to bring all our difficulties to an immediate end, but He speaks to us those same words of authority and comfort, *“It is I; do not be afraid”*.

Will you let Jesus speak those words to your heart today, stop relying on your own efforts, and trust Him to bring you safely to the other side of whatever struggles you face?

Carolyn Bullock, Lay-member of St Paul's, Withnell.

Read: John 6:22-59

‘Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty [...] I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”’ **John 6:35,51**

It is impossible to read this passage of John and not think about the Lord's Supper. Jesus talks about the eating of His flesh (His body), and the drinking of His blood, and how they are essential for gaining eternal life. What explains Jesus' teaching here, and explains the significance of the Lord's Supper, is Jesus' death on the cross.

Jesus is talking to the crowd in Capernaum, many of whom had eaten all the bread they wanted at the feeding of the five thousand, and now they want more. They are seeking bread that will satisfy their appetite today, but leave them hungry again tomorrow. Instead, in a conversation similar to the one He had with the woman at the well, Jesus offers them a bread that will feed them forever. Jesus Himself is that bread. Just as physical bread will feed and sustain the body, Jesus, the spiritual bread, will feed and sustain the soul for eternal life. Jesus' death on the cross pays the penalty for human sin, and opens the way to eternal life for His people. His body and His blood is given, and eternal life is received.

The reason I like the practice of giving something up for Lent is that it always points me back to what Jesus has done for us on that cross. We spend our lives trying to feed our hunger for things that will not satisfy us forever. Many of those hungers are good things like family, or success in our chosen pursuit. Many of them are trivial things like the next Amazon purchase, or the next day off. But when we give something up for Lent, and we sit with that desire being unfulfilled, it is an opportunity and a reminder to think about Jesus and how His death for us has satisfied our greatest need.

How much of your time do you spend trying to satisfy one desire or another? How does this compare with the amount of time spent with the Lord, thinking about the eternal life He has given you, praising Him, and thanking Him? Lent is a great time of year to refresh our spiritual lives, because it points us towards Easter Sunday, where we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead, and opening up the way to eternal life for us.

The Revd Paul Davies, Assistant Curate, St John the Evangelist, Whittle-le-Woods.

Read: John 6:60-71

‘When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it? [...]” Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” **John 6:60,67-68**

We have come to that point in John’s gospel where many of Jesus’ disciples drew back and no longer followed Him on the journey. It’s a turning point in Jesus’ ministry, where He challenges the twelve with the question, “Do you also wish to go away?” This can be true in our day also. Many people start out the Christian life and seem to do very well for a while, but then the journey gets difficult and they fall away.

The season of Lent however is not some kind of spiritual boot-camp where we push ourselves to extremes, rather it is a journey of discovery and reconciliation with the traditional ‘three pillars of Lent’ - almsgiving, prayer and fasting – as our starting point. Taken seriously, this will be a hard discipline and as we make this journey we will find ourselves echoing the words of the disciples “*this teaching is difficult*”.

In yesterday’s passage we heard Jesus say “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever*” (6:51). That which is required to sustain us on our Lenten journey is the Eucharist in which we receive food for the journey.

The Eucharist is at the heart of the Church and we perhaps found out how profoundly this is so during periods of lockdown. Without the Eucharist, something is missing from the Church. Many felt spiritually impoverished without receiving Holy Communion. The Eucharist should be both our “duty and our joy” to quote words from Common Worship.

In his book *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dom Gregory Dix writes powerfully about the different ways that the Eucharist has sustained Christian life through the centuries. It is a book known as much for its devotional approach to the Eucharist as its historic approach (you can find it by googling “Dom Gregory Dix: Was ever another command so obeyed?”). It may be that this Lent, as we journey through John’s Gospel, we see the Eucharist in a new light and place it more centrally in our thinking and devotion.

As our Lenten journey continues, we would do well to heed the words of the fourth century saint, Gregory of Nazianzus, “Without shame and without doubt, eat the flesh and drink the blood, if you are desirous of true life.”

The Revd Neil Kelley, Rector of St Laurence’s, Chorley.

The Third Sunday of Lent**Read: John 7:1-9**

Jesus said, “Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet come.” **John 7:8**

Many of us have become wary of mixing in crowded places as a result of the pandemic. Church members were perhaps disappointed not to see the large crowds at Christmas carol services that they had been used to before Covid.

Reflecting on this I am struck in John’s Gospel by how actively Jesus seeks to avoid the crowds and sends people away. In John 6 He thinned out the hungry crowd of five thousand down to just eleven disciples by the end of the chapter, as He raised the bar and challenged people to seek not the food that perishes but the food that endures to eternal life. At the start of this chapter He avoids the crowds at the Festival of Booths and even persuades His brothers to go up to the festival so that He can have some time alone, because, as He explains, “*my time has not yet come*”.

Jesus tries to keep away from the spotlight, aware that the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill Him (v.1). There will come a time when Jesus does make a public entrance into Jerusalem accompanied by great crowds (John 12:12-19), but it will be at a time when He is ready, not at a time determined by His enemies, or by His sceptical siblings (v.5).

Jesus’ brothers, it seems, wanted Him to make His mark and use His supernatural powers to draw a crowd. If I am honest, I can think of times in my life as a priest when I have wanted to make my mark, or felt under pressure to show that my ministry is being fruitful. However the work of God is not to be rushed. I can learn from Jesus, who takes His time until He is ready for the final climax. In the meantime He devotes Himself to listening to the Father, and to investing time in building a small team of disciples who will change the world.

God willing there will come a time when churches can gather crowds again more easily, but in the meantime let us, like Jesus, take time to listen to the Father and to quietly form deep disciples. That way, we shall be ready for the new opportunities and challenges that will come in God’s time.

The Venerable Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn.

Read: John 7:10-24

‘The Jews were astonished at it, saying, “How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?” Then Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.”’ **John 7:15-16**

In today’s passage, Jesus is at the Festival of the Booths, or the Feast of Tabernacles as it is sometimes called. Jesus had sent His brothers ahead of Him to the feast and had arrived later ‘in private’. At this point in His ministry, Jesus attracted a crowd wherever He went, so had He made Himself known, the people would have surrounded Him and made a commotion about His presence. Some needed healing, some wanted to listen to Him, and others were looking for an opportunity to catch Him out so they could ultimately sentence Him to death. Jesus wasn’t afraid of confronting this, but being aware of God’s perfect timing, He waited several days before He went to the temple and began teaching. On hearing Jesus speak the Jews were amazed, and it appears that they have missed the point of His message because the Jews were preoccupied with the idea that Jesus had never formally studied Scripture. I wonder if we sometimes get caught up in stereotypes and ignore what God is saying to us because we think the teacher is not very educated (and so couldn’t possibly have anything to teach us) or they are too educated (and so think their preaching isn’t relevant to everyday life)?

Jesus responds to the people by saying, *“My teaching is not mine but his who sent me.”* In other words, the concern is not the person speaking, but the message that is spoken. God can, and does, speak to us in a number of different ways. He can speak to us through the words of a child, the wisdom of a grandparent, or the thoughts of a new believer. He can even teach us through the voice of a non-Christian, however, we must be open to instruction and aware of the barriers that we put up, caused by our preconceptions. Whilst we seek to grow in our understanding of God’s word by removing these barriers, Jesus also warns us to watch out for false teaching (v.18). We can guard against this by being alert to who’s values are being advocated (the world’s or God’s), and by finding out for ourselves whether their message is backed up by Scripture. This might feel complex, however, studying the Bible each day (as we’re doing in this devotional) and asking for help from those who know the Scriptures better will grow our faith as we hear God’s truth and then apply it to our lives.

Sarah Earnshaw, Diocesan Children’s Work Adviser.

Read: John 7:25-36

‘Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come.”’ **John 7:33-34**

In this passage, Jesus says a couple of apparently completely indecipherable things first to the Jerusalemites, then to the Pharisees’, would-be arresting delegation, about where He has come from and where He is going. The passage is positively dripping with dramatic irony. While those to whom Jesus is talking are utterly nonplussed, we know exactly what He’s talking about. It’s so obvious to us, this side of His death, resurrection, and ascension, that we struggle to understand how they could struggle to understand.

We know, for instance, that the Jerusalemites don’t know, despite their assertion, where Jesus is from (v.27) – not really. They might know that He kinda comes from Nazareth, but they don’t know that Jesus’ personal origins are eternal – they don’t know that ‘in the beginning was the Word,’ and that it is this Word which “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1,14). We know that Jesus is ‘from’ the Father (v.28) – both in terms of His eternal being (‘true God from true God, begotten, not made’) and in terms of His mission (His being sent from the Father ‘for us and for our salvation’). We know that Jesus, after His dying and rising, will ascend to the Father’s right hand in heaven (v.33). And in an extra twist of irony, we know that while Jesus is not bodily about to go around the Mediterranean to preach even to the gentiles (v.35); through His gospel carried along by His Spirit on the lips and pens of His apostles, He soon will!

But Lent is hardly a time for being smug that we’re ‘in’ on something that was beyond those befuddled first-century Jews. Instead, it’s a time for being rebuked for refusing to accept what we do know Jesus was saying. Jesus says that those who do not accept His identity and authority do not know God (v.28). Jesus says that those who reject Him cannot come to the place where He has gone (v.33). If we operate a lazy, unexamined relativism (‘all religions lead to God’) or universalism (‘everyone goes to heaven’), it can only be because while we, unlike the Jerusalemites, know exactly what Jesus was saying, we still won’t believe it.

The Revd Tom Woolford, Vicar of All Saints, New Longton.

Read: John 7:37-52

‘On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”’ **John 7:37-38**

The Rolling Stones famously sang, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” Looking out at our desperate and busy world it seems like they weren’t the only ones. Looking in at my cluttered and messy heart, I wonder whether I’m among their number too. Don’t get me wrong; relationships, money, success, children, and fame all bring great joy (at least, so I’m told by those who have enjoyed them!) Yet the high fades and we’re left thirsty again. Where are you tempted to look to find your fix?

Jesus says, “*come to me*”. He’s not offering a pill, a self-help book or a new fad. He’s offering Himself. Other religious leaders say, “I’m here to help you find God”. Jesus says, “I’m God here to find you”. Jesus is the thirst quencher we so desperately need. As our bodies need water, so our souls need Jesus. Augustine said to God, “Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in You.”

The person who drinks of Jesus need never thirst again (John 4:14). More than this, out of once thirsty people will flow rivers of living water (v.38). Not a drop or a drizzle, but a river. Refreshing water, not based on external circumstances, but flowing out from within.

Jesus is talking about the Spirit (v.39), the only permanent source of refreshment and life. The One who will come into a believer and unite them to God. The One who brings peace and a taste of that future world where we will walk with God in unhindered fellowship and satisfaction.

In order to benefit from Jesus’ offer we have to run to the weak man from Galilee (v.41,52). We need to admit we cannot rescue ourselves, that meaning is not found from within, that we cannot quench our thirst. Instead, we look to the despised man who hung on a cross and cried out, “*I am thirsty*” (John 19:28). Jesus was God-forsaken, so we would never be. Jesus was thirsty so we need never thirst again. Jesus died so we can live.

As we continue our journey through Lent, why not reflect on this question: When your heart is restless, anxious or sad where do you go for satisfaction? Then, talk to Jesus about this and ask Him to show you how He can truly quench your thirst.

The Revd Dan Freeman, Assistant Curate, The Risen Lord, Preston.

Read: John 7:53-8:11

‘Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.’ **John 8:6**

Do you recognise the movie scene? A lynch mob has already decided the fate of someone who is either different, an outsider, or someone without power or place in their society. They have torches lit, and they are jeering and egging each other on. That is the scene here in the Gospel of John. This much debated passage has a mob of men dragging a woman to Jesus demanding that He judges her.

It’s another trap. The Law of Moses said that the punishment for adultery was death, so if Jesus lets her go, He is violating the Law. By 30AD the Romans had forbidden the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, from trying capital crimes. If Jesus judges a death sentence then He is breaking the Roman law. Jesus is trapped.

But Jesus wants a personal relationship with each of us, and wants one with the woman caught in adultery. He does the most extraordinary thing. He kneels at her feet. He makes Himself physically lower than her and the mob; as they get angrier and angrier. Perhaps you can imagine their questions getting louder and them crowding around Him, just as they have intimidated her.

He stands up to their behaviour, looks them in the eye and asks the man without sin to cast the first stone. The only one there without sin is Jesus, and His words shame them in to leaving.

He kneels again, until He is alone with the woman and shows to her, and us, that God’s forgiveness is for all. When He stands in front of her, perhaps taking her hand to stand, He doesn’t stand against her, but with her, alongside her.

This Lent who do I accuse, damn, want God to judge? In the dark of the night or the early hours of the morning, with pitch-fork and torch, or Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, when I allow my anger to rule in my heart, who is it that I accuse and egg others on to attack? God is kneeling before them, writing our sins in the earth, thankfully standing up to us and turning us around.

Help me Lord to be free of bitterness, anger, resentment, and the hatred that leads me to attack the outsider, the weak, the vulnerable, and the lost – the very people you call me to love, to care for, to stand up for, and be alongside. Amen.

The Revd Adam Thomas, Director of Whalley Abbey.

Read: John 8:12-20

‘Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

I love going for walks in the Lake District hills with my friend Tony. He’s a fully qualified Mountain Leader, for one thing, so even if the fog descends and obscures our surroundings, he knows how to make sure we stay on course. But more importantly, he’s been walking those hills for years and knows all the best routes, and he also knows me pretty well, to know how tough a route I can cope with at what pace, and how often I need to pause and rest.

Navigating all the challenges and uncertainties of day to day life is a much trickier task, I find. If only we had a reliable friend and guide to help us, someone we could really trust!

Jesus offers Himself as being just such a guide. Today’s reading opens with the second of the famous ‘I am’ statements of Jesus as recorded by John. “I am the light of the world”. It’s a huge claim, the validity of which the Pharisees immediately dispute, and the remainder of the passage records Jesus’ defence against their challenges. Jesus says that whoever follows Him will have the light of life. But honestly, what does that look like for us in practice? How do we know where He’s leading us in order to be able to follow?

I’ve found it helpful to think back to one of the images of God’s light leading His people in the Old Testament, where in Exodus 13:21 we read of how the LORD went in front of his people *‘in a pillar of cloud by day ...and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light’*. Numbers 9:15-23 gives some more detail of how this pillar of cloud and fire guided the people, and what struck me is that it showed them not just where to go, but also when. If the pillar of fire stayed put, so did they, whether that was only for a night, or for a whole year.

Sometimes I get impatient, wanting God to show me where He’s leading me next, but it may be that I’m to stick where I am for now, and take time to worship God in the midst of my current circumstances. As I do so, I need to keep alert to the prompting of His Spirit showing me when it is time to move on and where. Will I trust Him to do that? Will you?

Sue Champness, Lay-member of St John’s, Leyland.

Read: John 8:21-30

“I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.” They said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Why do I speak to you at all?” John 8:24-25

By the age of nine, I felt like I had picked up enough about life to play my part in maintaining what I understood to be the ‘proper order’ of things. Basically, it meant the following: respecting your elders, obeying those in authority, being polite to everyone, and always, always rinsing the nozzle of the squirty cream before putting it back in the fridge.

Here, in this reading from John 8, there’s a moment to shock my nine year old self as Jesus seems some way short of meeting (nearly) all these standards. “*Who are you?*”, they ask. “*Why do I speak to you at all?*”, Jesus answers (pretty rudely, whilst probably not rinsing the squirty cream nozzle...). Perhaps the NRSV translation doesn’t fully capture Jesus’ response to the question. Other translations have Him answer something like, “what I’ve been saying from the beginning”.

To make sense of this, it helps to remember whom Jesus is addressing. ‘They’ are ‘the Jews’, specifically those who recognise and identify with the Jewish authority structures centred around the Temple. They have a pretty clear idea about the ‘proper order’ of things.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem, up the Temple Mount, up to the treasury in the Temple, and there He faced up to those who had set themselves up in authority. He told them that He is from above and they are from below and this is simply too much for some to bear. Jesus is the One who is from the beginning. He is before and beyond all human authority, and structures, and this is bewildering to those who know how things ‘are’ and beguiling for those who imagine how things could be.

As John continues to tell the story, many will continue to look down on Jesus, so much so that they will see to it that He is ‘lifted up’ on the cross. Only those willing to start at the beginning with Jesus can let go of what ‘is’ to find out who He is. There is no way forward for those who think themselves above Jesus. It is a spiritual roadblock that must be addressed. It is simply out of order.

Maybe today Jesus has something to show us about the ‘proper order’ of things. If we are asking ‘Where to start?’, so that we might play our part, then Jesus says: “*I am*”.

The Revd Matt Allen, Blackburn Centre Lead Tutor, Emmanuel Theological College.

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Read: John 8:31-59

“But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?” John 8:45-46

A very wise man once said to me, “In every situation I find myself wondering how I might be changed by it”.

We spend a lot of our time expecting that we are right. Modern trends in life do little to address this. There is a great danger with the use of social media and electronic devices that we develop a culture in which we confirm our opinions without listening to other people.

The above can lead to a sense of entitlement. In our culture somebody from my background, with my experiences, expects to be heard. That should not convey a sense of arrogance it's just the way that things are set up. This is very much the case too with Jesus and those He is in debate with throughout today's passage. To be fair to them they have been told that they are the Children of Abraham, the Chosen Ones who live in a Promised Land, and that brings with it an automatic sense of entitlement. So, when Jesus comes along to present them with an alternative view of their needs, they are shocked. “How can we be enslaved and need to be freed when we are those to whom God has given His promise?”

Jesus uses the passage to explore some of the great themes that we hear in John's gospel - Freedom, Life, the Truth that God's liberation brings. Also, towards the end of the passage the sense that in Jesus we see the glory of God fully revealed. As if all that wasn't enough Jesus ends with an “*I am*” statement - those three letters conveying His claim to divinity, as well as humanity, echoing the words of God to Moses from the burning bush.

Today it may help us to reflect on where we are entitled. Rather than simply running to judge those who struggle to hear what Jesus is saying, let us try and see the ways in which we would find it most difficult to hear Jesus' challenge. May we change our thinking also, ask ourselves in the coming days how are we making it possible that we will hear the views of others that we don't necessarily agree with? In that way we might just see how we might need to be changed by that experience and come into the truth that sets us free.

The Venerable David Picken, Archdeacon of Lancaster.

Read: John 9:1-41

*“Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking to you is he”.
He said, “Lord, I believe”. And he worshipped him.’ John 9:37-38*

The moment I saw the tiniest glint of light, I headed towards it. It was a hot summer's day, but the gloomy caves we were visiting on a family 'adventure' felt both cold and suffocating. Although my kids were loving the thrill of being in the dark in the daytime, they'd obviously picked up on my eagerness to get back into the sunshine. “Don't be scared Mummy,” my four year old shouted as he grabbed my hand, “I can see the light! Follow me!”

Have you ever longed to 'see' your way through a difficult situation: been desperate to glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel? In this incredible encounter Jesus not only performs the miracle of restoring physical sight, He brings a powerful moment of revelation of who God is. This is the God who does the impossible and who leaves people with the choice to either remain 'in the dark' or live the rest of their lives in wide-eyed wonder as to who God in Jesus, is.

At first glance it seems strange that no one is astonished, or even happy, about the fact that this man born blind is now able to see. Instead of celebration we see anger from the religious leaders and anxiety from the man's parents, fearful that they might get 'cancelled' if they side with their son. The leaders seem more interested in scoring some 'we-know-God-better-than-you-do' points than really seeing what's going on in-front of their eyes.

But it's the blind man who sees most clearly what's going on: he doesn't put faith in his religious conviction, or any intellectual understanding but simply puts his trust in the only One who could rescue him from the situation he finds himself in. He puts his faith in this brief but powerful encounter with the author of life and the lover of his soul.

There's an invitation here for us to join him in saying to Jesus, “Open my eyes to see who you are - and as I discover who you are, help me to trust you”.

Rachel Gardner, Lay-member of St Luke's, Blackburn.

Read: John 10:1-21

“I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” **John 10:9-10**

“*I am the gate*”. At first glance this seems like a very odd way for Jesus to be describing himself, but to a first century audience it would have made more sense. Communities used to share a stone sheepfold that multiple flocks of sheep would use over night to protect them from wolves, thieves and other dangers. There would be one small break in the stone wall through which the sheep could enter and exit. At night a shepherd would lay across this small entrance and would literally act as the gate. None could freely enter or leave without the shepherd’s say so.

Occasionally thieves would try and gain access to the sheep nestled within the safety of the fold by going over the side of the wall. But if they did make it in the sheep would not respond to their voice and go willingly: they would have to be forcibly taken. This is in stark contrast to how the sheep responded to the shepherd; remarkably the flocks encased in the fold would respond to the voice of their own shepherd. It would be easy for the shepherd to lead his own sheep out of the fold whilst other flocks remained. The sheep knew their shepherd’s voice and trusted him implicitly. He was the one that lead them each day to fresh green pasture and streams of sparkling water, and who lead them back to safety at night.

So it is with Christians and Jesus. Jesus is the Shepherd and leads His sheep each day to a life of abundance. Jesus is the only way to a life of abundance. A life of abundance is not an assurance of an easy life, or even a long life. It is a life with the assurance that Jesus will provide souls with all they are longing for: a deep satisfaction and contentment that can come only from Him.

To participate in this life of abundance we just need to approach Jesus, the gate, and He will let us in. As we spend time with Jesus each day we grow more accustomed to His voice and can follow along the path upon which He leads us.

Have you entered via the gate, and are you following the sound of Jesus’ voice in a life of abundance?

The Revd Liz Gethin, Assistant Curate, St Cuthbert’s, Fulwood.

Read: John 10:22-42

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.” **John 10:28-30**

Is it possible to be truly confident in the faith? Perhaps, like many of us, your faith can feel vulnerable? Maybe you find yourself doubting, or wondering how your faith would hold up in the midst of adversity or grief?

In today’s reading, winter has come to Jerusalem, and storm clouds of opposition are circling around Jesus yet again: “*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly*” (10:24, see 9:22). The real problem for Jesus’ opponents is a lack of faith (10:25-26). They had heard Jesus speaking. They have seen the works done in His Father’s name, and those works testify to a glorious reality: “*the Father and I are one*” (10:30, 10:38). Here was the ‘plain talking’ they were after! Yet sadly (and predictably) it only leads them to violently reject their Messiah.

But what of those who will listen to Jesus? For them, this ‘one-ness’ between Father and Son provides the security for a glorious promise: those sheep who follow the Good Shepherd, who obey His voice – they enjoy eternal life, and will never (ever) perish. Christ’s sheep are utterly un snatchable (10:28).

How can we be so sure?

Because to be in the Son’s hand is to be in the Father’s hand. Father, Son, and Spirit, though distinct persons, are one God, one divine essence. So it is with one unshakable power and purpose, says Jesus, that the Father and the Son are engaged in the eternal preservation of Christ’s sheep (vv.28-29). There truly is no stronger power, and no safer place to be in all of creation, than in the Creator’s hand!

That truth would have been a great encouragement to the blind man we met in John 9 - deserted by his parents, rendered an outcast by the authorities (9:22-23, 34) - and it is gloriously true for us today, tomorrow, and every day until we meet our Shepherd face to face.

We can certainly expect wolves and thieves will come, looking to snatch or steal (10:10,12); there will be situations that challenge our faith, people who lie to us, and threaten us in all sorts of ways. “But,” says Jesus, “I will never lose hold of my sheep”. So if you are following the Good Shepherd’s voice, rejoice today that you are utterly un snatchable, and eternally safe in His hands!

The Revd Simon Griffiths, Assistant Curate, All Saints, Preston.

Read: John 11:1-44

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." **John 11:25-26**

Life brings joy but death brings grief. The Scriptures say life is created by God, but death is a result of sin, and is the fiercest enemy of life. Despite all human efforts and advancements in medical sciences we are unable to triumph over this dreadful enemy. We need both tending and triumphing, and Jesus is the one who tends and triumphs.

Jesus tends in His love. Jesus loves the Bethany family; Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Lazarus has been dead for four days. His sisters and others are mourning at his death. To see them in grief Jesus is greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved (v.33). He weeps with them (v.35). He joins their grief, pain, and suffering. Jesus loves and tends each one of us too. He knows and feels our pain and suffering. He weeps and grieves with us.

Jesus triumphs in His power. Death is powerless before Him. Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (v.25). No other person in this world has ever made such a powerful claim. This is one of the *"I am"* statements of Jesus, which reveal Jesus' identity. He is the eternal Son of God; God Himself who is the Life (John 1:1-2, 14:6). Jesus not only claims, but also raises Lazarus from the dead (vv.43-44); a sign of life and the revelation of God's glory in Himself. In a few weeks' time Jesus will defeat death, through His own death and resurrection, giving life to all who may believe.

But the life which Jesus gives is not just 'existence' in this world, it is life in abundance (John 10:10), the life eternal. Jesus says, *"Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me will never die"*. The eternal life begins here and now, as we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, and will continue even at the time of our death and beyond. Jesus says to Martha, *"do you believe this?"* And Martha declares her faith in Jesus. *"Yes Lord, I believe, you are the Messiah, the Son of God"* (vv.26-27).

Faith in Jesus is the key to eternal life and joy. Martha believed, and so have many others since then. Therefore, let us affirm our faith in Jesus who tends us in our grief and triumphs over our fiercest enemy.

The Revd Munawar Din, Vicar of St Luke's, Brierfield & St Cuthbert's, Burnley.

Read: John 11:45-57

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." **John 11:48-50**

How many times have you had an emergency arise and your first inclination is to solve the problem? We all have some desire to control things and get outcomes that work for us. For most of the time, you can probably handle it. But what about all those emergencies that you do not have control over? For believers, we need to hold onto our faith and trust in God. We may not have power to answer but He always does.

By bringing Lazarus back from the dead Jesus had attracted the attention of the Sanhedrin. This 'rebel' was not only curing the sick, preaching hope for the forgotten in Jewish society and criticising Jewish leaders but now He had raised a man to life after he had been dead and buried for four days. The news was frightening to the Chief Priest, Caiaphas. Recalling the revolution of the Maccabees from just over a hundred years before, the Jewish leader was certain that the Romans would hear of Jesus' preaching and miracles, and react with vengeance on his people and the Temple. He advocates the killing of the self-proclaimed Son of God to the point of prophesying His death.

Caiaphas is looking for Jesus's death as a selfish way to protect not only his people but also his position in society. God's motivation is love for all the world by sacrificing His son and opening a way for all to come to Him. The way of Jesus is to reflect the love of His father. Despite the Jewish leaders' efforts to save themselves, in just a short time the Romans destroyed the temple and killed some of the people.

What can we draw from this passage, as we continue our journey through Lent? In whatever crisis we find ourselves in, God is always there, is always working and always loving us. In this most holy time of Lent, during confounding and confused times, let us not forget this truth. Let us follow the way of Jesus: love our God with all our mind, body, and soul; and love our neighbours as ourselves. Let God handle what we cannot and trust that His plan will always be the better one. Our individual power to do things is infinitely less than the power that God holds. This reading reminds us that the stage has been set for the greatest drama in history, during which man will do his worst and God will give His best.

Ryan Otley, Ordinand.

Read: John 12:1-11

‘Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.’ John 12:3

In this passage, we have another story about Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. Here again, they attend to Jesus’ presence with them; again, it is Mary whose actions seem the more significant. Here, she displays a profligate, extravagant love for Jesus, as she expends expensive nard in anointing Jesus’ feet. So generous was she with the stuff that its fragrance filled the house. Judas Iscariot, who was also present, reprimands Mary for her lavish attention; and, as the one who was to betray Jesus, is presented by St John as the antithesis of Mary: she expresses her love for Jesus, whereas Judas foreshadows his act of treachery.

We are told by St John, in his First Letter, that God is love (1 John 4:8). This means, in effect, that all human love is nothing other than a participation in the love of God. Just as we share in God’s life, albeit to a limited degree and qualitatively distinct from Him, so we share in His love. During Holy Week, we celebrate and commemorate the depth of God’s love for us, shown forth supremely in the Passion and Death of His Son.

Mary’s act of generous love in some sense reflects something of God’s love for us. Hers was an act of utter selflessness, and total giving, and is the best possible response to God’s love for us. Judas’ response, by contrast, is utterly self-regarding; he wanted there to be plenty of money in the common purse so that he could raid it for his own purposes.

In one sense, the extremity of the reactions to Jesus that we read of in the Passion narratives, as the adulation of the crowds turned to hatred, are seen in this brief passage in the closest juxtaposition. Mary’s disposition and actions embody the best of which human beings are capable; Judas’ the worst. Most of us sit for most of the time somewhere between the two, and Lent challenges us to take some steps in the right direction. Under grace, we can discover that our real treasure is to be found in Jesus and decide to give Him all the attention and love that we can muster, not just in Lent and Holy Week but at all times. Let us imitate the profligate love of Mary of Bethany, whose love in its turn represents a participation in the love of God for us all.

The Revd Canon Stephen Jones, Vicar of Christ Church, Carnforth.

The Fifth Sunday of Lent**Read: John 12:20-50**

‘Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!’

John 12:27

This is a hinge moment in John’s Gospel. For the first time, Greeks, not Jews, ask to see Jesus. It’s like that beautiful moment at the point of sunrise. The sky has been becoming lighter for some time, but at a certain point, the flaming sphere of the sun breaks over the horizon. The revelation that Jesus is for all people (v.32), for many seeds (v.24).

But just at this very moment of revelation, of light dawning, it turns out that the light by which we are all invited to see Jesus is not what we think. The way to see Jesus is in His death. His death is His moment of glory. Jesus repeats this over and over again; there is even an audible voice from heaven to underline this (v.28).

This way of revelation – death as glory – is so counter-cultural; in the first century and today. In fact, back in the 8th century BC, Isaiah had prophesied that people would have blind eyes and hard hearts to this (vv.40-41). Let’s face it. Our eyes are still blind to this. We squeamishly find it hard to see Jesus in pain, in death, in disappointment. In our comfort culture, pain and death are neatly tidied away, we hermetically seal away our own pain for fear of mess or tears. I wonder if we find it harder than generations past to grasp death as glory, to hear Jesus’ tender invitation to share in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 4:12-13)? Certainly, our brothers and sisters round the world in the persecuted church are ahead of us on this in the school of faith.

A wise priest in the Diocese said to me recently, “I try not to be scared of pain.” He pointed me to the giants of faith in our Christian heritage, saying, “they do know what it is to find ourselves sometimes in the valley of the shadow of death. They have learnt to trust that this need not be a place of fear...they know the safety of His tenderness come what may.”

Are you in the valley of the shadows? Is Jesus inviting you into pain or even death? Can you resist praying “Father, save me from this hour” (v.27)? Instead, ask to see Him in His glory. Follow Him to the cross. Trust His dawn will break and drive away the shadows of fear. May you see Jesus in all His tender glory.

The Rt Revd Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster.

Read: John 13:1-20

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” John 13:14-15

We can be so familiar with this scene at the beginning of the last supper that we can easily miss the scandal of what Jesus does. By this point in the Gospel Jesus has revealed Himself to be the Eternal of Son of God come in the flesh. He knows He is about to die and yet instead of turning inward and placing Himself as honoured guest, God on earth stoops down low. Normally it would be the lowliest servant’s job to wash the feet of guests at a meal, it would be unbecoming of a great leader, let alone the Son of God to undertake this task. Which is why Peter won’t have it. “You shall never wash my feet” he says in verse 8. It’s like his mind can’t comprehend that Jesus would really be this kind of servant. Like my response to watching the challenges in ‘I’m a Celebrity’ involving insects, Peter shudders with horror that his teacher and God would do such a thing.

But Jesus insists. *“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me”* (v.8).

The scandal of the humiliation of Jesus becoming the lowliest of servants requires not our horror but our worship. Unless we see in this cleansing act our desperate need for Jesus to cleanse us then we will find ourselves outside of His Kingdom. For His Kingdom is a kingdom where the King is the chief servant who cleanses our sin. The way into the Kingdom of God is through the cleansing service of Jesus, and the way forward in this Kingdom is to follow Him in service of others. To serve even in the lowliest of ways.

As we ponder the humble service of Jesus this week let’s pray that by His Spirit we might serve our communities, our churches, and our families in this same way. Let us pray that as we do this Jesus’ presence might be known through us and experienced by all.

Joe Houghton, Ordinand.

Read: John 13:21-38

‘After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.’ John 13:21-22

Time and chance seemingly happen to us all. There is a thick, impenetrable veil blocking our view of the future. Not so for Jesus. In the final hours of His earthly life, He knows exactly what is going to happen according to the plan He and His Father made in eternity. Yet as John’s Gospel turns decidedly towards the cross, Jesus for the third time is troubled in His spirit. Jesus is deeply disturbed, precisely because He knows what is going to happen.

Can you imagine walking with Jesus for three years as one of the Twelve only to betray Him? Neither can they. Unlike in children’s Bibles, Judas was not the shady-looking obvious baddie. Other than Jesus and Judas, no-one knows who it is. Even when Judas goes out, the rest don’t suspect Him.

Given the way they would have reclined around the table resting on one elbow, it seems like the disciple Jesus loved was next to Jesus, as was Judas. Judas still has time to turn back; perhaps he overhears Jesus’ answer to the other disciple. But as he takes the bread his betrayal is sealed, and he heads out into the dark night.

We might get hung up on Satan’s possession of Judas. The order of events is important here. Judas is tempted (look back to 13:2), he cooperates in betraying Jesus, then Satan enters him. My youngest recently, and quite fearfully, began asking about demons. I told her demonic possession is real, it is rare, and that she needn’t fear because Jesus is stronger (cf. Matt. 12:29). If we stick with Jesus, we cannot be overcome.

But what about Peter and the other disciples? They will shortly abandon Jesus. Peter for all his bravado will deny Jesus three times. This is a sobering passage; Jesus will go to the cross alone. This will be to His and His Father’s glory. Jesus says this will be the full demonstration of His love for His own and the new measure of the love He calls us to be known by. This might seem impossible given our weakness, but comforting words await us tomorrow.

For now, reflect upon how gracious Jesus is with His disciples even as He heads to the cross for them and us.

The Revd Jonny Lee, Vicar of All Hallows, Bispham.

Read: John 14:1-14

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” John 14:1

“He descended into hell,” reads the Apostles’ Creed (traditional wording); and in that short phrase is revealed the truth that there is no place beyond the reach of Jesus, no state of mind or heart into which He would not come to bring grace and peace. Irrespective of the theology behind that statement there is a crucial relevance to this life: Jesus’ forty-day walk through the wilderness was a preparation for His journey into the personal hells that were the hearts and lives of those He was to meet, touch and heal.

The truth is that, whatever today’s Gospel reading says, our hearts are often troubled – not necessarily by sin, but by our struggles in life, or simply by how we see ourselves. “Say that you love me the way that I am” sings the disabled girl in the Adrian Snell album, ‘Beautiful or What?!’ Her piercing question sums up our Lenten prayer – the cry of our heart that knows itself only too well, that steps into the light to be seen as it really is, and that dares to state its need to be loved by God irrespective of who we are or what might be going on inside us.

Jesus promises Thomas that He is the way to the Father. But long before that, Jesus is the Father’s way into our hearts. Jesus descends into whatever mess we find ourselves in: weakness, frustration, even sin. He sashays around our defences to catch hold of us and make us the place in which God will live – and make us beautiful.

There is a lovely Christmas anthem by Will Todd, part of which goes like this:

“His love will hold me,
his love will cherish me,
love will cradle me...
My Lord has come.”

If Christmas has revealed the coming of the love of God in humility, then Lent reveals it in its urgency. The urgency of love comes tumbling out of Jesus in today’s reading: “Believe in me... Believe me... Do you not believe... Ask me... I will take you to myself...”. It is as if Jesus is bursting to get His message heard: “I do love you the way that you are. Don’t delay. Come. Create a space for me. Let my love hold you there; let me cherish you, cradle you, delight in you. In me, your troubled heart can find rest”.

John Wilson, Lay-member of Blackburn Cathedral.

Read: John 14:15-31

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever.” John 14:15-16

Once when a friend of mine went on holiday, she asked me to look after her many plants. She sent me a list of instructions of how often to water each different plant. Those instructions were helpful, but it was difficult to know what to do on my own. It would have been much better if she had left someone with me who could show me what to do, who knew her incredible mind for plants and how to make them all grow amazingly.

When Jesus left Earth, He did leave behind lots of teaching, miracles that show us about Him, and parables that help us understand what His kingdom is like. This has since been written down and makes up much of the Gospels. But how can we understand them? Wouldn’t it be easier if Jesus was still here?

The Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is God. Although we might wish we could see Jesus on Earth, He is now with the Father praying for us. But God is on Earth with us. Jesus says: “*But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you*” (v.26). Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, the truth and, the One who will teach and remind us of Jesus. Those who love God, this passage promises, will have the Holy Spirit. Jesus says the Spirit “*abides with you, and he will be in you*” (v.17). Know that the Holy Spirit lives in you. God is still with us!

If the Holy Spirit lives in you, what is He teaching or reminding you about Jesus’ words? How is He showing you truth? When you’re reading the Gospels and you don’t understand what Jesus meant – ask the Holy Spirit to make it clear to you. When you are feeling discouraged, ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of the words of Jesus. When you need to make a difficult decision, ask the Holy Spirit to show you truth. For those who love God, the Holy Spirit lives in us and helps us grow.

The Revd Amy Bland, Assistant Curate, Euxton Parish Church.

Read: John 15:1-17

“I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”

John 15:16

Today’s reading is a very well known passage about the cultivation of fruit and Jesus’ clear instruction that He wants us to bear fruit. Whenever I travel, I am always incredibly interested to see fruits and vegetables growing in their native countries. I have been fortunate to see trees laden with ripe Mangoes. I have hand-picked grapefruit, limes and figs. marvelled at row upon row of deep purple aubergines basking in the sun. No matter how many times I have seen a particular fruit it always brings me joy when I notice the riches of creation hanging from branches. Discovering a new one, well that is simply amazing.

Being told to be fruitful creates lots of lovely pictures in my mind. However, as we cannot produce branches laden with plums from our bodies, and when telling us to bear fruit Jesus does not mention that He wants us all to become farmers, what is it that He is asking us to do? Jesus goes on to explain quite simply that He wants us to produce, grow, and nurture love. Well, that sounds easy enough. No need for digging, planting, watering, greenhouses and so on, all we need to do to obey Jesus’ command is to love each other.

Yet we all know that loving one another is not always easy and to be constantly in the production of love for everyone is close to impossible. Except of course for Jesus. His love is unconditional and never ending and if we stick close to Him, in fact He says if we *“remain in Him”* (15:4), we will be fruitful. Just as a branch is nothing without the vine then we are nothing without Jesus. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches (15:5). Just as the vine feeds and nourishes the branches from which the fruits grow, Jesus nourishes and feeds us (15:8) so that we are fruitful, we can love, and this love displays to all our relationship with Him.

Imagine yourself as a tree laden with your favourite fruits. These fruits are love and they are enjoyed by you, shared with others, picked by others, and replenished by remaining connected to Jesus. Lent is a time of repentance, renewal, and reconnection. We all wither just like the branch when it is broken from the vine. We repent of these times of being unfruitful. We all need to be pruned to allow for renewal and further growth. We pray for God’s wisdom and discernment. We all need time to reconnect ourselves to the vine, basking in the true light and love of the Son of God. Then feeling warm and replenished, Jesus’ love in us is seen by all.

Lisa Fenton, Diocesan Adviser to Primary Schools & Academies and SIAMS Manager.

Read: John 15:18-16:4

“I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.” John 16:4

With extraordinary abruptness Jesus moves us from *“love one another”* (v.17) to *“they will hate you”* (v.18). Why? Jesus taught us these things for at least two reasons. First, so that we should not be surprised. *“Be aware”* (v.18); *“I have said these things to keep you from stumbling”* (v.1); *“I have said these things to you so that you may remember”* (v.4). Jesus even adds that this hatred fulfils what was written in the Psalms. None of this is a surprise to God.

I am old enough to have grown up in a village where many of the people went to church and an essentially Biblical/Christian worldview was accepted by the majority. That has gone completely, but I still find myself surprised, caught out even, when Christian beliefs, ideas and practices are ridiculed and dismissed out of hand by our contemporary culture. I shouldn’t. This is normal, according to Jesus.

The world hates disciples because they belong to Jesus (v.19). He was hated during His lifetime on earth. Now He is going and so the hatred will fall on those who are His. For some today that means rejection, beatings, and even death. For us it is more likely to be sneering and ridicule (*“You’re not one of them, are you?”*). Whatever form it takes, we won’t like it. But it shouldn’t surprise us.

Jesus also taught us these things so that we should not be silent. There is a moving moment in Acts 18 where Paul is having a rough time (again!) and in a vision the Lord says to him, *“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent”* (Acts 18:9). That is the instruction here. Jesus is going and He is leaving His disciples. But He is not leaving them alone. The Holy Spirit will come and He will continue to speak (testify) just as Jesus has done (v.26). Jesus then adds, *“You also are to testify”* (v.27), and He will go on to explain how it is that the Holy Spirit will make this courage possible.

Do not be silent. I well remember the mockery I received as a new Christian at school. And it did make me silent, which I regret. So now I ask myself: when opposition, or hatred, or even gentle mockery comes, will I remember *“these things”*, or will I be caught out and surprised? And will I be silent, or will I continue to testify?

The Revd Philip Venables, Vicar of St John the Evangelist, Whittle-le-Woods.

Palm Sunday

Read: John 12:12-19

'Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it.' **John 12:14**

Jesus is always bigger than we think. What He offers us is always greater than our imaginations can begin to conceive.

This famous passage of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem centres on a misunderstanding. As the crowds rush out to meet Jesus, they think they are welcoming a political king, one whose action in raising Lazarus from the dead is a sign for them that He will raise up Israel from the death of Roman occupation. So they wave palm branches, a symbol of nationalism. And they shout, "*Hosanna*" (v.13) – this man will rescue us! Their hope is that Jesus has come to launch a political coup.

But they have got it all wrong. Jesus is not here for some tawdry power-grab. He is going to do something infinitely more wonderful and life-transforming than that, because He is bigger than they think.

So how does Jesus put them right? Very simply by sitting on a donkey. The crowds, richly versed in the Hebrew Scripture, would have known that through this action, Jesus was taking them to Zechariah 9:9. And the king described there is not a nationalist leader who uses violence to give Israel power over others. He is a universalist king who invites the whole world into a new and peaceful kingdom.

When I was a chorister, we used the Palm Crosses we were given on Palm Sunday for sword fights. Our choirmaster was livid with us, and he was quite right. The crowds wanted swords to seize power. But Jesus gave them a cross which unlocked for them a whole new life of peace. They wanted a new government. Jesus offered them eternity. Because He is always bigger than we think.

It's all too easy for us to limit what we think Jesus can achieve in our lives. We barely expect our prayers to be answered, we play down the impact our churches can have in their communities, we believe the gloom narratives that people tell about us.

But all the time Jesus is doing far more for us than our earthbound, mundane human minds can begin to conceive. He is transforming all creation by the power of His cross. So this Palm Sunday, shout "*Hosanna*" and join in.

The Rt Revd Philip North, Bishop of Burnley.

Read: John 16:5-15

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." **John 16:7**

"I can't be in two places at one time!" is a familiar cry in our house. It's just not possible to help one of our daughters brush her teeth in the bathroom whilst at the same time helping the other do homework in the kitchen. When on the earth in human form, Jesus too could only be in one place at one time. His disciples, and those living in Galilee during Jesus' ministry, had the special privilege of seeing Him and knowing Him in person. In today's passage, Jesus encourages His sorrow-filled disciples that whilst He will be leaving them physically, He will send the Holy Spirit ("the Advocate") to be with them and moreover, with the whole world.

So what will the Holy Spirit do? The Bible highlights many roles of the Holy Spirit and different translations refer to Him as the Advocate (as we see here), Counsellor, Comforter, or Helper. This passage highlights that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to shine a light on those areas of our lives which fall short of God's plans, convicting us of sin. In parallel, the Holy Spirit will also convince us of the righteousness of Jesus showing us how we want to live.

These aspects of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives are particularly pertinent during this Lenten season when we focus our minds on repentance, drawing closer to Jesus and reflecting on His death on a cross for us.

Yet this leaves us with a challenge. Convicted of our sin, knowing how we want to live but with a seemingly impossible journey ahead of us to be the person we want to be before God. The good news is that the Holy Spirit can work in our lives to help us and "...*guide us into all the truth*" (v.12). The power of the Holy Spirit is at work and helps us to become more like Jesus, to hear from Him and to grow spiritually.

The Holy Spirit can be in all places at all times and is at work in all believers right now. Would you have the courage to ask Him to reveal Jesus to you afresh today?

Carolyn Barton, Director of Vision Delivery.

Read: John 16:16-33

“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly.” John 16:25

“I went to a really interesting lecture on kleptomania - I took a lot from it!” What are we taking from these devotionals so far?

Understanding God is not always easy. Chapters 13 - 17 of John’s Gospel contain the so called ‘upper room discourse’. It was full of bombshells! Jesus washes their feet, speaks of His forthcoming death, tells them how the world will hate them but how God will send the Holy Spirit, and it ends with Him praying for them and for us! The discourse was long, intense and full of riddles, not least of all in our text for today. In 16:25 Jesus even admits to speaking in “*figures of speech*” using lots of dualities or contrasts: e.g. sorrow/joy, now you see me/then you won’t, weeping/rejoicing, pain/joy, comings/goings etc. You have to sympathise with His bemused disciples when in verse 29 they say, with evident relief, “*now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech*” – and then confess their faith in Him.

It raises the question; why on earth does Jesus seemingly keep His disciples under a ‘cloud of unknowing’, existing in a state of tension as they have to resolve parables, riddles, and figures of speech? Well, maybe because He used such forms of teaching as a way of sifting the wheat from the chaff? In the absence of quick answers, easy solutions, and speedy gains, some people will blow-up in frustration. But others will grow-up in transformation as they ask questions, seek knowledge and knock until the door opens, and light floods in (cf Matthew 7:7). In this Lenten period it is good to ask – which kind am I?

Jesus welcomes us into an upper room, to sit at His feet, listen to His Word, contemplate the motions of His Spirit and emerge changed. I wonder - is there a kind of spiritual law here whereby the tension of comprehension yields extension and dimension to the soul?

Waiting on the Lord isn’t easy, but it is worth it, after all, He promised that sorrow will turn to joy. Therefore, let us “*take courage*” for He has “*overcome the world!*” (16:33). If that isn’t grounds for hope, trust and patient enquiry, what is? We walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

The Revd Chris Casey, St John the Divine, Cliviger & St John Evangelist, Worsthorne.

Read: John 17:1-26

“that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:21

Frank Sinatra’s song ‘My Way’ celebrates the idea of coming to the end of life and being able to say, “I did what I wanted and I did it on my own terms”. I did it my way! What a contrast we see in John 17!

As Jesus approached His final hours on earth He was able to say, “I glorified You on earth by finishing the work You gave me to do”. Jesus’ prayer reflects His desire to glorify His Father by completing the task of bringing eternal life to those whom His Father had given Him - most perfectly fulfilled at the cross. Now He prays to return to His Father and be glorified in His presence.

Yet Jesus knows His disciples, who had accepted the truths He had given them from God, were weak, and without Him would be unprotected. Therefore He prays three things for them; protection from the evil one by the power of His name, unity that reflects the one nature of the Godhead, and sanctification that they may become more like Him through obedience to His word.

Jesus then prays for all believers down the ages (including us!). As the disciples are sent into the world and the community of believers grows Jesus prays for their unity. Unity/oneness is a theme throughout this prayer. The unity of believers stems from our being in Christ. Our relationship with Christ thus reflects the Godhead relationship. Through it an unbelieving world will see the love and grace God has for His people.

Ultimately Jesus prays that His glory will be revealed - firstly in the cross, then as His disciples believe, and finally in all who will believe through their message. How do we display this glory? As we obey His word we are sanctified. As we are sanctified we each become more like Jesus. As we each become more like Jesus we grow in unity. And this unity displays God’s glory to the world.

Do you take pride in the fact you can say, “I did it my way”, or do you take great joy in praying, “Lord make me one with You and Your people that I might bring You glory in this world?”

Janet Thorp, Lay-member of St Andrew’s, Leyland.

Maundy Thursday

Read: John 18:1-40

‘Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”’ **John 18:38**

So here we are, after what can have only been a long and emotional day for Jesus, Pilate gets to meet the man. Two men representing two very different worlds come face to face. One man with the mighty burden of Rome upon his shoulders, the other who willingly bears the burden of the world on His shoulders. Jesus, in this moment of anxiety, pain and torture, calls upon the power of God to resist the temptation to acquiesce to the demands of tyrannical secular authority or the ungodly demands of religious zealots.

Here is a scene so familiar, Jesus standing defiantly before Pilate. I often think of those occasions when I too have been challenged to stand firm, when I have had to summon up the courage and to speak ‘truth’ to ‘power.’ These moments have been costly, even painful, and have more often occurred when I have been most vulnerable. You too may have found yourself in similar situations when called upon to stand out, to speak up for the lowly, the dispossessed, and the broken.

In May 2014, the whole of our town here in Fleetwood was filled with excitement at the prospect of our local football team playing at Wembley. Fleetwood Town were to play Burton Albion in the League Two play offs, it seemed as though the whole town was Wembley bound. I found myself caught up in the buzz and my daughter and I booked our tickets. “If you cannot beat it, you might as well join it”, someone said to me as I dithered about buying the tickets.

Jesus is as powerful today as He was when He stood before Pilate. Many have claimed to have silenced His voice and His claims upon our life. Despite the best efforts of this post-modern culture, through you and me Jesus still speaks ‘truth’ to ‘power’, His truth prevails. The power then of our Lord’s truth resonates throughout this week and yet again we are called upon to make His claims our own; sure in the knowledge that as His truth cannot be overcome, His truth has the power to save, so better, then, that we ‘join it’.

The Revd Canon John Hall, Vicar of St Peter & St David, Fleetwood.

Good Friday

Read: John 19:1-30

‘the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”’

John 19:2-3

The irony is huge, isn’t it? The soldiers, the chief priests and officials all think Jesus can’t be the King of the Jews because He is weak and suffering. But Jesus is the King of the Jews, God’s long-promised Messiah, precisely because He is weak and suffering. The soldiers call Jesus ‘King’ in cruel mockery. The chief priests and officials are offended by the mere suggestion of Jesus as King. Pilate writes his famous notice proclaiming Jesus to be ‘King of the Jews’, but this seems more out of desire to wind up the chief priests than out of genuine belief. But to those who know the Scriptures, the actions of the soldiers, chief priests, and Pilate confirm Jesus’ identity.

When I was younger, I was told that the Old Testament foretold a Conquering King and a Suffering Servant as if they were two separate characters, and Jesus, in the New Testament, combines those two figures. That’s broadly true, except for the bit about them being separate. In the Old Testament, David is the archetypal Conquering King, yet he spends much of his life being persecuted, especially by those close to him – his father-in-law, King Saul, and his son, Absalom. (You will know this if you journeyed with us in our Advent devotional. If not, you can read it in 1 and 2 Samuel). David was both Conquering King and Suffering Servant. How much more so great David’s greater Son?

Most of the Psalms that express the deepest suffering and lamentation, especially in the first two books (Psalms 1-72), are attributed to David. John 19 has many echoes of David’s Psalms of suffering. In particular, John quotes Psalm 22 and echoes Psalm 69 when Jesus is given sour wine to drink. Jesus’ suffering doesn’t make Him less like God’s king; it proves He is God’s king. Let us not despise the weakness and suffering at the heart of God’s plan. Jesus’ death finishes – completes, fulfils – God’s plan. It is Jesus’ death that gives us life, life in abundance. Let us renew and deepen our trust in Jesus. And let us not despise what seems small and weak in God’s Church today.

Good Friday is good. It is a day of triumph, a day of victory. Jesus’ victory doesn’t come in spite of His death. It comes because of His death.

The Revd Matt Hornby, Vicar of Coppull, and St John the Divine, Coppull.

Holy Saturday

Read: John 19:31-42

‘The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.’ John 19:35

My own testimony of how I came to Christ as a Year 7 pupil from a non-Christian family, due to the witness of an RE teacher at one of our Diocesan secondary schools, has everything to do with John’s account of the crucifixion. After a graphic explanation of the gruesome nature of execution by Crucifixion, I distinctly remember being told at one Thursday lunchtime Christian Union meeting, that Jesus, the Son of God, chose to go through what He did for me as an individual. I learned as an 11 year-old, the meaning of what we’re told here: that the legs of victims were broken to bring about death by asphyxiation more swiftly. The victim was no longer able to push down (with his bare bone) on the spike above his ankle bone, and the ribcage would crush the lungs and the result was an excruciating death. (Of course, in fulfilment of prophecy, Jesus’ legs were not broken. Instead, a spear pierced His side and out came blood and water.) The early Church Fathers always saw the blood and water here as representing the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. All those years ago, I remember praying a heart-felt prayer that went something like this: “God, if you are real, and what this guy is saying is true, then please make yourself real to me. I commit the rest of my life to you.” He did, and I did, and the rest, as they say, is history. I now teach RE at one of our Diocesan secondary schools.

In this passage, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus can be helpful ‘types’ for all of us: We want to aspire to be like Joseph in giving to Jesus all that we have. No longer controlled by fear, he didn’t even hold back his own tomb! Nicodemus, now ‘born of water and spirit’ as we learned in chapter 3, following his night-time encounter with Jesus, is walking in the light, in true relationship with Jesus.

As we read this today may John the author of the Fourth Gospel’s true testimony fulfil its stated purpose in us. May we too be reminded of our own baptisms as we died to self to rise again to new life in Christ; our own rebirth of water and spirit. May we partake of the Eucharist this Eastertide with a renewed gratitude for all that our Lord Jesus accomplished for us on the Cross.

Christian Pountain, Head of R.E., St Christopher’s C.E. High School.

Easter Sunday

Read: John 20:1-31

‘These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through Him you may have life in His name.’ John 20:31

Near the end of his Gospel John explains why he has written. His purpose is to persuade his readers that the man Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified as a condemned criminal, is in fact the Saviour of the world and that faith in Him is the way to life in all its fullness. But he is very aware from his own experience, and that of other eyewitnesses, of how difficult that step of faith will prove to be.

The disciples had struggled enough to believe that the One they thought to be the Messiah had been condemned and crucified as a criminal, despite all His warnings. Then to get their heads around a resurrection from the dead was equally baffling. We shouldn’t blame them for their slowness to believe.

To accept the crucifixion of the Son of God and the resurrection of a human being from the dead is a big ask, but in the plan of God these two events are central for the salvation of the world. Both are a victory over sin, death, and the devil, and rightly cause a burst of praise and thanksgiving in our hearts on Easter Day. Jesus did something that no one had done or could do.

The ‘it is finished’ of chapter 19 provides the assurance that nothing more needed to be done to provide full and free forgiveness for all who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. The ‘it continues’ of resurrection in chapter 20 provides the assurance of the presence of the risen Jesus with His people to the end of the age to build His church and grow His Kingdom.

But many in our culture will respond this Easter, if they bother at all, by saying, “how can you be so sure?” Our answer lies in the accounts of those there at the time and we do well to encourage the reading of the Gospel of John with an open mind. The other answer lies in our own personal testimony, that like John all those years ago we have found that knowing Jesus as our Saviour and Lord and living as one of His followers is indeed life in all its fullness. Happy Easter!

The Rt Revd Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn.

Read: John 21*'After this he said to him, "Follow me."'* **John 21:25**

I love the portrayal of Peter in this final chapter of John's Gospel. His brokenness, honesty, fallibility, and raw love for Jesus is painted for us so beautifully, and gives us such encouragement as we look to what follows the glorious news of the resurrection of Jesus.

Despite the disciples witnessing the risen Christ, the disciples seem to return to 'life as usual' by going fishing, led by Peter. The story of them fishing all night but catching nothing echoes the account we find in Luke 5 at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and His call of the disciples. It seems like the disciples are back at the beginning. Once again, Jesus tells them to cast their nets, and once again their haul of fish is extraordinary. Peter's response to his recognition of Jesus is one of utter devotion. Instead of helping his fellow fishermen haul the catch ashore, he throws himself into the sea, so eager to reach his Lord and Saviour.

When he and the others are ashore, they are met by Jesus cooking breakfast for them on a charcoal fire. That little charcoal detail may seem insignificant, but the only other time this is mentioned in this Gospel is John 19:18, right in the middle of Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. Is it a coincidence that this kind of fire is also present when Jesus restores and commissions Peter? Although Peter has witnessed the resurrected Christ and has thrown himself into the sea to reach Him, there must still have been residue of shame and guilt over his denial of Jesus only a short while earlier. When he saw that fire, was he reminded of his failure? It is at this moment that Jesus chooses to restore Peter and reaffirm his call. Instead of three denials, the question "do you love me?" is asked three times. When Peter affirms his love each time, Jesus commissions him to shepherd His sheep. Peter's failure was not the end of the story.

The resurrection of Jesus means that death and failure do not have the final word. Jesus has the final word. He restored Peter not only to relationship to Him, but also to leadership in His church, entrusting him with the care of His flock. Peter was not permanently disqualified, but permanently changed. The final words of Jesus to Peter as recorded in this Gospel are "follow me." These are the words with which Jesus called him at the beginning of his ministry (see Mark 1:17). Peter was back at the beginning, but it was a new beginning. So too with us. Whatever the mistakes of our past, the resurrection of Jesus means that we have a new beginning, and it is marked by His words: "follow me."

Amy White, Lay Training Officer.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We really hope you've enjoyed walking through Lent with this booklet. If you're wondering how you can continue with this pattern of daily reading there are a whole host of resources available to you. For ease of access, many resources are now available either online or as apps. A few suggestions are:

Daily Prayer

www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer

Daily Prayer is available free as an app or on the Church of England Website and gives complete services for Morning, Evening and Night Prayer in both contemporary (Common Worship) and traditional (Book of Common Prayer) forms.

Lectio 365

www.24-7prayer.com/dailydevotional

Lectio 365 is a devotional resource that helps you pray the Bible every day, and is inspired by Lectio Divina – a method of Bible meditation that's been used by Christians for centuries. Written by leaders from the 24-7 Prayer movement, and produced in partnership with CWR, this resource helps you engage with Scripture to inspire prayer.

BIOY

www.bibleinoneyear.org

With BIOY each day you receive a Psalm or Proverbs reading, a New Testament and an Old Testament reading. It also provides daily audio and written commentary to walk you through each day's reading, to provide fresh understanding of the texts.

The Vine

The Vine will be launched in early spring 2022 at a number of different events aimed at different age groups.

Bible Podlets

www.bdeducation.org.uk/podcasts/bible-podlets

Bible Podlets is a Bible study and discussion podcast for primary aged children to do with adults. Each episode has fun games/activities, an engaging Bible reading in the form of a news story, and discussion, with places to pause and talk together about the topic. You can download discussion notes from the resources area of the site. If you prefer a hard copy resource, Christian bookshops carry a large range of Bible reading material, from daily reading notes to study books on particular themes or books of the Bible.

In addition to these resources there will be regular Quiet Days and Retreats offered by Whalley Abbey:
www.whalleyabbey.org



All texts in this booklet are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Designed by Morse-Brown Design