



ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

SANDFORD-ON-THAMES

John 21.1-19 Easter 3 2022 Teresa Morgan

We often talk about the differences between gospels, and today, in the year of Luke, we heard a story which John (or one of his followers, because this chapter is probably an add-on to the gospel) – borrowed from Luke, and gave a new twist.

In Luke's gospel (5.1-11), at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was standing one day by the Sea of Galilee, with a crowd of followers, when he saw two boats come back from a night's fishing, and the men get out and start cleaning the nets. Jesus got into a boat and asked one of the men to take him out on the lake so he could speak to the crowd. So he did, and when Jesus had finished speaking, he told the man to let down his nets for a catch. The man, who was called Simon, said, 'We have just come back from fishing all night and we didn't catch a thing.' But Jesus insisted, so to humour him, Simon did what he asked, and caught so many fish that they nearly broke the nets. And when Simon saw it, you might think he would have celebrated, but he didn't. He fell down at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.'

Just now, we heard that story retold, by (someone we'll call) John, with the night fishing trip; the empty nets; the command from Jesus; the nets that come up so full that they nearly break, and, at the end of each story, Jesus saying, 'Follow me.' But John moves the story to the end of the gospel, to say something about the Resurrection.

Back on Easter Day, when the disciples went to Jesus's tomb and found it empty, Matthew, Mark, and John agree that somebody told the disciples to go back to Galilee, where Jesus would meet them. Go back, to where you belong; where it all started. Go home. So here they are. Peter, and Thomas the Twin, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee and a couple of others, by the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake of Tiberias). What now? 'I'm going fishing,' says Peter, and the others say, 'We'll come.' And the next morning, as they are coming back, there is a man they don't know, standing on the beach, saying, You haven't caught anything, have you? Let the nets down on the other side. So they humour him, and the nets come up bulging with fish ... and then they realize who it is.

And, right there, is all the difference the Resurrection makes. It's the difference between being at home, getting on with your life, and being at home, getting on with your life, and knowing that the living God has sent his Son to be with you. And everything you do, you do in the sight and the love of God and Jesus Christ, and absolutely nothing will ever again be able to separate you from God.

But John doesn't only remind us here of Peter's first meeting with Jesus. He goes on to remind us of other moments in the disciples' relationship with Jesus. Because when Peter realizes it's Jesus on the shore, he leaps over the side of the boat. And – then what? They're a hundred yards out! Does he swim – or does he walk on the water, as he once memorably failed to do, and not even notice? John doesn't bother to tell us. This is the Resurrection world – miracles happen.

When Peter gets to land, Jesus has made a fire – and from somewhere he’s already got fish, and some bread – because miracles happen – and he says, bring some more fish and have breakfast. And they do, just like when they fed the 5000 together, and Jesus breaks the bread and gives it to them, like he did on the last night of his life. Everything he does brings back a memory, but in a new light, so the disciples think: all this time, all the things we were doing, God was with us, and God is with us now, and nothing can break us apart.

Then Jesus says to Peter: Simon, son of John, do you love me? And Peter says, You know I do. But he asks again, Simon, do you love me? And Peter says, You know I love you, Lord. But Jesus asks again, Do you love me? And Peter says, Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.

And of course, Peter is right, but the questions aren’t for Jesus’s benefit. They remind Peter of Simon, the fisherman, who met this charismatic stranger and suddenly felt ashamed of his sins, and followed him. Then they take him back to the last night of Jesus’s life, when Peter denied that he knew him. And, very gently, Jesus makes Peter unsay those three denials, and remember his love. More than that, he pushes Peter into saying, ‘Lord, you know I love you.’ So, after today, whenever Peter remembers his denial, he will also remember that he said himself, that Jesus always knew he loved him.

And then Jesus gives Peter a new call: ‘Follow me,’ and a new mission: ‘Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep,’ and a new prophecy, that Peter will follow him and be faithful to the end of his life. And then the story ends, quite abruptly, because there’s nothing else John needs to say.

In these weeks after Easter, after Lent and Holy Week and Easter Day, we have also gone back to our everyday lives. And we may even wonder whether another Easter made much difference, really. But today’s gospel reminds us that life after Easter isn’t necessarily a different life. It is life in a different light. It’s life lived knowing that God and Jesus are with us, and nothing will ever be able to separate us again. And even if our life does look much the same now as it did before Holy Week, the Resurrection has a way of pointing in new directions. The disciples went back to Galilee ... but they didn’t stay. Before long, following Jesus took them back to Jerusalem – and then all over Israel – and then all over the world. Who knows what new directions may be coming to us? When Jesus comes to us in the light of a new morning, and says, ‘Do you love me? Follow me.’

Amen

Lent 2 Luke 13.31-35 Teresa Morgan 13th March 2022 Littlemore

One of the things we do, during Lent, is to follow Jesus on his last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and then to the cross. In Luke, this journey takes longer than in any other gospel. Jesus turns towards Jerusalem for the last time in chapter 9, today’s gospel comes from chapter 13, and Jesus finally reaches Jerusalem in chapter 19. That’s nearly half the gospel.

Luke also puts various events on the way which, in other gospels, take place earlier. Most strikingly, a lot of the teaching which, in Matthew, is in the Sermon on the Mount, back in Galilee, in Luke, happens on this journey. There is probably a good reason for this. Jesus’s journey—through hostile territory in Samaria; through unfamiliar villages where, as he says, ‘The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’—echoes the journey of the People of Israel through the desert, during the Exodus. The new teaching Jesus gives, on the way, echoes the Law which Moses gave the Israelites in the desert.

This is one of the ways in which Luke tells his listeners that Jesus is the new Moses, God's new prophet and lawgiver—and even more than that, because when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he will die, not only as a lawgiver or prophet, but as God's Son and Messiah, Saviour of God's people. So the people who follow him, are on a new journey, with a new leader, towards a new life.

This journey is also dotted with various bits of recent history, which remind us that not only had Israel suffered and cried out to God for help in the past, but she was suffering in Jesus's day. A few verses before today's gospel, we hear about a group of Galileans who apparently rebelled against Rome, and were executed. We also hear about 18 people who were killed when a tower collapsed on them in a part of Jerusalem called Siloam. And, just now, we heard a group of Pharisees (unexpectedly friendly) warning Jesus to get out of the area, because King Herod Agrippa wants to kill him, as he killed John the Baptist. (Herod Agrippa is one of the sons of Herod the Great, who, according to Matthew, tried to kill Jesus as a baby.) Though, as it happens, Jesus is not worried about Herod, because, he says, 'it is impossible that a prophet should die outside Jerusalem'.

When I was thinking about this sermon, I was talking to my mother, Peggy, and she said, which prophets died in Jerusalem? I can't think of any! So we looked it up, and she was right—very few prophets are remembered as dying in Jerusalem. (Zechariah did.) I suspect, here, that Luke has inherited a saying from Jesus, that a prophet ought to die in Jerusalem, and concluded, wrongly, that a lot of other prophets had died in Jerusalem. Possibly because he was a gentile, which some people think he was, and didn't know the scriptures as well as some. But this is a good reminder that we always have to listen carefully to the gospels. Parts of them are historical. Occasionally, they just make a mistake. But parts are deeply theological, like putting a lot of Jesus's teaching on this journey to make the point that his followers are on a new journey, with new commandments, and a new leader, towards a new life.

Well, all this is a bit bitty, because today's reading is a bit bitty. And Jesus's journey is bitty, as journeys often are. Even when we think we know the route, we always see something new, or meet new people, or just feel differently about travelling.

And sometimes the journey we think we're on turns out to be just an excuse for the journey we're really on—an emotional or spiritual journey, a journey of discovery or growth.

That is also true of our journey through Lent. We may think we know this road, through these weeks. Some years, we may not be all that excited about travelling it again. But every time is a bit different, so we have to stay alert, and be ready to recognize what might be different this year, because, when we follow Jesus, even if we think we know what's round the next corner, we don't really.

One reason for that, is that we don't know exactly what's going to happen when we get to Jerusalem.

That may sound surprising, but it's true.

In today's reading, Jesus says that he expects to die in Jerusalem, but, on the third day he will 'accomplish his purpose'. He's talking about the Resurrection, of course. But what is his purpose?

Traditionally, messiahs do one of two things. They save people from suffering or they ask God to release people from their sins. Those are not quite the same thing, but both are part of our memory of Jesus. He dies as a sacrifice, or our substitute, for the forgiveness of sins. And he dies and is raised to show that, when God is with us, even suffering and death are not the end, but our journey always comes to new, and more abundant life.

Both ideas have been part of our faith for all these centuries, because both seem right, and Christians have always recognized that we need both. We need help to be released from our sins and mistakes, and

bad habits and bad relationships. We also need help to come through suffering, and reach a new and more abundant life. Sometimes we need one more than the other, and sometimes we really need both.

Thinking, and praying, about that, is part of the work we do during Lent.

As we follow Jesus on the road, we ask ourselves, what journey are we really on, this year? Are we crying out for release from our sins and failings? Are we searching for a path through our sufferings, towards a new life? Or something of both?

What do we need most from God, this year?

We still have a long journey ahead, to think about that.

Baptism of Christ: Luke 3.15-17, 21-2 Teresa Morgan 9th January 2022 Littlemore

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of Christ. And when we think about Jesus' baptism, we tend to think of two things. It's the beginning of Jesus' ministry: because after he receives the Holy Spirit, the Spirit leads him into the desert to pray and be tempted by the devil, and then he comes home to Galilee and begins to preach the coming of God's kingdom. And Jesus' baptism is the model for our own, when we are given a new start by God, and the gift of the Spirit.

But for many early Christians, the baptism of Christ meant even more than that. Because, for many, the moment when the dove descends on Jesus, and God says, 'You are my beloved Son', is the moment when Jesus becomes God's son. Before that, he is an ordinary person. After that, he is the Son of God. 'You are my beloved Son' is a quotation from Psalm 2, when God adopts King David (or possibly somebody else) as the Saviour of Israel. You might remember it: 'The Lord says to me, You are my beloved son; this day have I become your father' (2.7).

And that is interesting, I think, because it reminds us that early Christians thought about who Jesus was in several different ways.

Many people believed that Jesus was an ordinary person, who was chosen by God, as an adult, to be a prophet of God's kingdom, a teacher, and eventually the leader and saviour of Israel. That idea is probably behind Mark's gospel.

But other people believed that Jesus was an angel, or an aspect of God, like God's Wisdom or God's Word, which came into the world in the form of a person, or in human flesh, to reveal God's glory and God's love to the world. That idea is probably behind John's gospel. But other people again wanted to say that Jesus was both fully human, and absolutely God, God with us—so they described how the Spirit of God must have come to Mary, so that Jesus was born both human and divine. And that is how the birth stories of Matthew and Luke came about.

In the end, most of the Church went for somewhere between Matthew, Luke, and John, because people wanted to capture that sense that Jesus was both absolutely human, like us, and absolutely God, with us. But the other ways of thinking about Jesus have never gone away, and they are still embedded in the scriptures. Mark's gospel doesn't hint that Jesus was anything other than an ordinary man before his baptism. But John draws on an idea that the Word of God was God from the beginning, and came to live with us in the person of Jesus. But I think it is quite helpful to have different ways of thinking about the relationship between God and Jesus—for several reasons, but I'm just going to mention two. For one thing, all early Christians thought that what may have happened to Jesus at his

baptism, can definitely happen to the rest of us (at baptism or some other time). The Spirit of God can come to any human being. And the Spirit is God, really God. So you can be doing the housework, in the supermarket, in the hospital, with God's self with you and in you, ready to be revealed to the world whenever you let God shine through you.

And we needn't worry if we don't always feel that. One of the most faithful people I know once said to me, rather sadly, that he wished he had, just once, had an experience of the

Spirit. And I didn't know what to say, because I had never met anyone more obviously filled with the Spirit. He didn't feel it. I don't know why. But everyone he ever met felt it, and it changed people's lives.

But the other thing all early Christians thought, was that however Jesus the man came to be the Son of God, or God came to be Jesus the man—after the resurrection Jesus is raised to God and is with God, and is God. And, in the world of the first century, it was quite common for gods who had come to earth, or heroes who were the child of a god and a human being, or just exceptional human beings, to be taken up to heaven. But they don't normally become equal with God, part of Godself. They're normally minor divinities. And they don't take anyone with them.

But Jesus's disciples came to be convinced that everyone who follows Jesus, becomes like him—really like him—and comes to be with him, as his sister or brother, as God's heir, in God's kingdom, for life. As later Christians put it, to follow Jesus is not just to serve God, but to become God.

And this is really the heart of the gospel. At the end of the day, we'll never know for sure how God and Jesus of Nazareth are, or came to be one. But the gospel tells us that everything that Jesus was, and is, with God, is also possible for us. We can hope not only for the love and compassion of God, not only for forgiveness of our faults and failings, not only for salvation, but to be so filled with God that we can no longer tell where we end and God begins.

Perhaps the person who puts that best, is St. Paul. Who says that Jesus is only the first-born of all the (sisters and) brothers who will be glorified. And the God who gave humanity his own Son, will 'give us everything else, with him'. And, on the last day, 'the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed'—to be like Christ himself, from glory to glory.

So as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, we remember not only God's being in Christ, and God with us in Christ, but the promise that God is in us, and with the world through us, and that everything that Jesus is, is also what is possible, and promised to us.

Amen

Christmas Day 2021 Teresa Morgan Sandford

Some people here may know Maureen Tweney, who went to church at Littlemore for many years. Now and again, she used to send me a weblink to a funny story or a good quote. This week, I remembered one which seemed appropriate tonight.

There was a little boy, who wanted to meet God. He suspected that God lived some way away, so he packed a rucksack with biscuits and a drink, and set off.

(If you think this is an unlikely beginning to a story, remind me to tell you what St Teresa of Avila did when she was seven years old.) The boy got about half a mile and reached his local park, where he saw an elderly man, sitting on a bench, feeding pigeons. So he sat down and got out his drink. Then he thought

the old man might be thirsty, so he offered him some. The man accepted, with such a lovely smile that the boy offered him a biscuit as well.

They sat there all afternoon, neither saying a word. Eventually, the boy realized it was getting late and got up, but when he'd gone a few steps, he turned round, ran back to the old man, and gave him a hug.

When he got home, his mother was surprised by his radiant expression. 'Where have you been?' she said. 'I had lunch with God,' he said. 'He's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen.' The old man also went home. His son was surprised by the look of peace on his face, and said, 'What did you do today that made you so happy?' 'I ate biscuits in the park with God,' he said. 'He's a lot younger than I expected.'

I remembered this story this week because, this Advent, everything has been reminding me of the power of presence. 'Being with.' God with us. Mary with Elizabeth. Jesus with Mary and Joseph, and our being with them, in spirit. And all the carols have been telling me what Christmas means to us: 'Unto us is born a son.' 'Oh come, all ye faithful ... come ye to Bethlehem.' 'Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray.' 'Who could not love thee, loving us so dearly?'

Today we celebrate the deep mystery of the Incarnation—the gift from God, through which our sins and failures are forgiven; and we can hope to stand right with God and each other, again; and we can hope for new and more abundant life—but what we come here for, today, more than anything, is just to be with Jesus and Mary and Joseph, in that stable. Because just 'being with' makes all the difference in the world.

And the earliest Christians knew it as well as we do. They insist that when Jesus left his disciples, God sent God's Holy Spirit, so that God would always be with them, and they would be with God, in one another. Which is why we still affirm, in George Fox's beautiful phrase, that as we go about this world, we look, all the time, to meet 'that of God' in everyone.

There are basically two ways we go about meeting God in each other, which are probably more a matter of temperament than anything else. Some people, like the little boy in the story, go looking—go on pilgrimage, and search for God in distant places and communities. Some people, like the old man, sit and wait, and see what comes along.

And when they meet, the meeting is so simple; but it makes all the difference in the world.

Well: this year, like every year, we are called to join the first disciples in proclaiming this good news of the Incarnation, to a world which sometimes seems to have forgotten the fundamental importance of 'being with'—people with each other and people with God. But today, we are just invited to be here, with Jesus and his little family, with each other, with God. Now, in the time of this mortal life, in which God's Son Jesus Christ came to be with us, in great humility.

So that, one day, when he comes again, we may come to be with him in the kingdom of Heaven.

A very happy Christmas to you.

Amen

At this time of year, I think a lot about wrapping paper. When I'm queuing to buy it, or two days before Christmas, I think of it as the curse of wrapping paper. But when I'm looking at a little pile of presents under a tree, I think of it as the thrill and gift of wrapping paper.

I look at all those strange and colourful shapes, and they could be anything! They shimmer with possibility and promise; they open up my imagination, which fizzes with the thought of all the things they could be. And then, if what's inside turns out to be something like a good book, or—what I got for Christmas 1978—a *huge* Meccano set, then it's even more exciting, because I know I'm going to have a relationship with this present that will take me to places I have never been.

The thing about a really good present is, first you open it up, and then it opens you up.

Maybe the only other thing that tantalizes us quite like wrapping paper, is very small children and babies. Because they are a bit like wrapped gifts—a whole human life, with all its possibilities, bound up in that little package, just waiting to break out and change your life. And something like that, I think, is also the way we think about the baby Jesus at Christmas. Even though we know something about his future—and we don't know it all, because it's still happening—but when we think about the child in the manger, we see all that promise, 'veiled in flesh', as the carol says, and we are filled with awe at the thought of his future, and our future with him.

But this week, thinking about the incarnation also made me think about other ancient gods. Because in the Roman world, gods communicated with people quite often, and they did it in one of two ways. Either they revealed themselves—speaking out of the heavens, or appearing in a dream, or a vision—or they came to earth in disguise, to help someone, or to test them. For instance, there are lots of stories of the Greek god Hermes coming to earth to find out if people are worshipping him properly.

The story of Jesus' earthly life, in the gospels, has elements of both those traditions. When Jesus walks on water, he reveals himself like a god. When he tells someone he has healed not to tell anyone, he seems to be hiding his identity. But the story of Jesus is also different, in way that is very special. Jesus comes into the world, a gift from God, wrapped in humanity—and nobody, in Roman Israel, knows what this gift is.

But a few people see him, and feel their imaginations, their minds and hearts, opening up and fizzing with excitement. He makes them wonder, What is this person who speaks for God, and acts with power?—who is he? What might happen, if we receive him?

It is several years before anyone even guesses the answer to that question—after Jesus' death and resurrection, when, for the first time, his followers see God, shining through his pierced and torn human body. Only then do they begin to understand what God has given them, and they realize that their relationship with him will take them to places they have never been.

And that experience is also ours. As we reflect on the child in the manger this Christmas, he invites us accept him, and begin a relationship with him that will open up our hearts and minds and imagination. A relationship that may take us far beyond the people we have become, and the world we have inherited, towards the people we have the potential to be, and a world transformed by God's grace and truth.

So, I always end up, every year, with a good feeling about wrapping paper, because it turns out the wrapping is an essential part of the gift. It's the part that opens up our imagination, and makes us want to reach out to the mystery and receive whatever it offers, and take it to our hearts. And those presents, shimmering with potential under the tree, are our symbols of God's gift to us. The Word veiled in flesh, but full of grace and truth. The one who first invites us to receive him, and then opens us to receive God, and then opens the heavens to receive us.

Amen
(Sandford)

Advent 3: Luke 3.7-18 (John the Baptist) Teresa Morgan Littlemore 12th December 2022

In recent years, there has been a lot of debate about what kind of writings the gospels are. Are they biographies of Jesus, or histories, or handbooks for teaching, or what?

Most people currently think they're biographies. I suspect they are wrong— for several reasons, but the one I have been thinking about this week is, how do you write the biography of God's Son from heaven? How do you write a biography of God?

You can write a history of God's people, and their response to God, which is one thing the OT does, and one thing Luke does. But nobody knows why God does what God does. God only reveals of Godself what God chooses. And we may hope, and believe, that God loves us and acts for us, but we don't usually envisage that people, or circumstances, make God do anything, or change God, who is always powerful, wise, and good.

The gospels say something very similar about Jesus, too. Famously, the only person in all four gospels who changes Jesus' mind about anything is the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman (Mk 7.24-9, Mt. 15.21-8). She wants him to help her daughter, and when he hesitates, reminds him that even the dogs under the dinner table are allowed to pick up the crumbs dropped by the diners.

So it's hard to see how we could write the biography of God, or God's Son. And we can see the gospel writers themselves grappling with this problem. Until Jesus' arrest, there are many stories about his ministry, but not exactly a narrative, in the sense that one thing causes another, and that causes something else.... We don't see Jesus being shaped by the world around him, as we might expect in a biography. He says what he has come to say, and does what he has come to do, and, like Godself, reveals what he chooses to reveal.

Even today's story about John the Baptist doesn't make as much sense as part of a biography as we might expect. Historically, Jesus probably began his religious life as one of John's disciples, so the historical John probably influenced the historical Jesus. But the gospels don't tell us that, because they focus on Jesus as God's Son. Instead, they show Jesus wandering down to the Jordan one day, and getting baptized—for no obvious reason, because, unlike everyone else John is preaching to, Jesus is not a sinner, so he doesn't need to repent and be washed. John's other role in the gospels is to foretell the coming of the Messiah, but although the gospels say that he recognizes Jesus, nobody else does, so his prophecies don't seem to make anything happen in the story.

So the gospels tell us a lot about people's experience that God is with us, in Jesus, and affirm what they believe about the Son of God whom we love and follow and worship. But as a biography of the Son of God, they don't entirely work.

However ... you may be thinking, why would any of this matter, in Advent? Well, I think it might. We often think of Christmas as the story of God responding, with wonderful generosity and grace, to our need, our sins, and our longing for salvation. It's 'the greatest story ever told'! But I'm not sure we can tell the story of God. I suspect we can only tell the story of ourselves. And in that story, God is the great disrupter of stories— especially when they go wrong.

So many human stories involve things going wrong (not all, of course—but many). One person hurts another, and they hit back. Or they stay hurt, and the damage stops them growing and flourishing as they could have done. Or one group of people gets ahead by oppressing another. Or we all try to make our lives better and end up abusing our planet.

But when we get things wrong, God is the one who interrupts our stories. As we heard Zephaniah say just now, God says, 'I will take away disaster from you'. As other prophets say, speaking for God, 'I will make a new covenant with you, and give you a new heart'. 'Behold, I make all things new.'

But God doesn't interrupt our stories at random. He's highly strategic—as all the prophets knew, including Zephaniah, and John the Baptist. He makes the crooked path straight, and the rough places smooth. He brings down the mighty, but raises the humble. He shines a great light on those who walk in darkness. He gathers the outcast, and brings his people home.

We may not be expecting any of it, or not in the way it happens. In the first century, many people in Israel were hoping for a Messiah who would raise an army, throw out the Romans and rule over a free Israel. What they got was Jesus of Nazareth, who preached peace, and love, and told people to render to Caesar what was due to Caesar, and to God what was due to God. Today, we are looking forward to coming of Jesus at Christmas. But what we've got is John the Baptist saying, look forward—not to Christmas—but to the unknown time when you will be judged by God for how you responded to God's Son.

But Advent is the season of preparation, which raises the question, if we can't tell the story of God, and we can never know when or how God may decide to interrupt our stories, how do we prepare? But within the great good news of Jesus Christ, John offers some more specific good news today. We may not know the time or the season that God has set for the coming of his kingdom, but we can prepare to be surprised, by doing some very simple things.

Share what you have, says John. Don't exploit other people. Don't be selfish. Think of each other. Nothing complicated, but good advice ahead of Christmas. As it turns out, that is enough to prepare us to welcome God's Son, whenever and however he comes.

Michaelmas (Genesis 28.10-17, John 1.47-end) Teresa Morgan 26th September 2021

One of those stories we find all over the world is that, somewhere in the world, there is a meeting place between earth and heaven. It might be a mountain, or a tree ... but in today's Old Testament lesson, it's a ladder (or staircase) which appears to Jacob in a dream.

Places like this are always special. And when Jacob wakes up, he realizes that the place where he has been sleeping is holy ground. It's the land which the Lord God promised to his grandfather Abraham. And despite the fact that Jacob is not a very impressive grandson of Abraham – at this point, he is on the run after cheating his brother out of his inheritance – in his dream, he heard God say that God would fulfil God's promise by giving him, Jacob, this land.

The land, of course, was, and is, Israel, and for Jacob and his family, living in it is part of being God's people. But in our gospel reading, we heard another descendent of Abraham giving this story a radical twist.

John's gospel is describing how Jesus first met his disciple Nathanael. Nathanael is very impressed because Jesus saw and knew him before they met, but Jesus says, you will see greater things than that. 'You will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'

John was pretty certainly Jewish, so this is a remarkable thing for him to say.

And it is easy to miss, because, at first sight, it looks as if Jesus is saying, you will see visions of heaven – which is inspiring, but not unusual. But what Jesus actually says is that Jacob’s ladder, which used to rest on the holy land of Israel, is now resting on Jesus himself. The relationship between God and his people, which used to rest on the land and the law of the land, now rests on Christ, and it is people’s relationship with Christ that defines their relationship with God.

That idea rewrites the story of Israel. God’s promise to Abraham is now fulfilled, not when people live and flourish in the land, but when they follow Christ. And everyone who follows Christ, Jewish or gentile, counts as Abraham’s family and God’s people. (It is no wonder, thinking this, that John’s community found themselves at odds with other Jews.)

Well: this rewriting of the story of Israel helped to shape early Christianity. But today, most Christians don’t think all that much about the land of Israel, nor about who is descended from Abraham, so for us the story probably has other meanings. And for me, this week, it is a way of saying how blessed Jesus is.

Wherever Jesus is, is the meeting place between heaven and earth, and angels are always descending to bless him and carrying his blessings up from earth to God. And whenever we are with Jesus – in imagination, in spirit, in Israel or in Sandford-on-Thames – then we are also at the meeting place of heaven and earth. And when we are with Christ or following him, then we are as connected to God as one end of a ladder to the other.

John was not the only early Christian to find Jacob’s ladder an inspiring image. For some writers, the ladder is not just the connection between Jesus and God: it is Jesus himself, because Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth. For others, the ladder is the Church, because the Church carries us from earth to heaven. For others, the ladder is every person’s individual faith.

All these images use the ladder in a way which is very intuitive, but also new. They seem to be thinking, what is a ladder for? Climbing up! And if the angels can climb up it, why not us? If we put our trust in Jesus, if we keep his commandments, then not just the angels, but we will eventually be climbing to heaven! Like in that great gospel song, ‘We are climbing Jacob’s ladder – brothers, sisters, all over the world.’

So the ladder has stood for different things over the centuries: God’s promise of the land of Israel to Abraham; God’s new plan of bringing all humanity into God’s people through Christ; and human beings’ ability, through Christ, to climb up to heaven and be with God.

But today, we are reading it in honour of the feast of St Michael and all angels, so it’s also important to celebrate the angels. Angels who, in their endless movement between heaven and earth, express so vividly our sense of how God reaches out to us, every day of our lives. Who bring blessings and guidance, and carry our hopes and fears and prayers back to the ears and heart of God.

The angels come down that ladder as both the messengers and the message of God’s love. And they are role models too. They follow God as closely as we are called to follow Christ. They obey God as faithfully as we are called to obey Christ. And God sends them out, as Christ sends us out, to be his hands and feet and voice on earth.

Angels are both an image of God’s love for us, and a model of how we can hope to love God. But one of the most beautiful of all visions of angels, is one we find in one of the ancient prayers for the dying.¹ This is a modern version of it:

¹

*May saints and angels lead you on
Escorting you where Christ has gone;
Now he has called you, come to him
Who sits amid the cherubim.*

It is a vision of the soul rising to heaven, as if up a ladder whose every rung is crowded with angels, cheering and singing and praising God, and flocking around the soul as it passes through the pearly gates, to arrive in glory before the throne of God.

Amen

Gospel reading: Mark 5.21-43, and Silver wedding celebration after the 10.0 a.m. service.

Jesus healed people. Made them better. Made them whole, so they could enjoy life as God wants us to enjoy life. And still does. It was often in the gospels people with mental health issues – which in those days they called ‘having a demon’ which needs driving out – to make room for God in our lives, and find fulfilment in our love for one another, in human flourishing – that’s what God our maker and healer and life giver is about. In today’s reading it was that poor woman – 12 years ill and the medics couldn’t help – and Jairus’ 12 year old daughter, so ill they thought she was dead. (I guess she was in a coma). And Jesus brought the breath of God back into both their lives.

So healers and carers have a special place in Christian prayer and action. It’s not only the sick we pray for but those who care for them, and in the past 15 months we’ve learned to appreciate them even more than (I hope) we did already.

Most of us here today have on the whole (I guess) been quite lucky in our lives – so far. But we all know people who aren’t so lucky, and some who are seriously ill. Among them our prayers today are for Julian’s friend Catherine and our own Jayne Moore. We pray for God’s healing power, that Jesus involves us in, by his Spirit. In that Gospel reading we don’t even know the old lady’s name – or the name of Jairus’ daughter – only her father. Women were less visible in first century Palestine than now. But Jesus didn’t distinguish between any of us on grounds of gender – or wealth or class. And still doesn’t – we are all equally God’s children. Mostly God’s grown up children, and if we realize our dependence on God we meet together to thank God for all God’s blessings and loving kindness. Not everyone recognises that, so gathering to praise God and be thankful has become rarer in Europe. But millions worldwide *do* gather each Sunday to praise God and receive something invisible in the tokens God gives us in Holy Communion.

This week is a bit special for one family here today – Carol and John and their family, who have joined us as they celebrate their silver wedding. First things first, then the party. A lot has happened in all our lives and in this village and church in 25 or so years. We are all a bit older and maybe some a bit wiser – certainly more knowledgeable about being human after all those years of experience, and we have a lot to be thankful for (and a few things to regret as well as we reflect on the state of the world, including our own country). We could make a list of what’s not to like, but we’ll take the positives and thank God for them and for each other.

I think we can learn from the old lady in the gospel and from Jairus. They turned to Jesus when they needed help, and they *got* help. All they did was to trust. Turn to God in their trouble and trust God in Jesus to help them, which he did, giving healing and wholeness. Others turn to God and still die – as all of us will, sooner or later. But if we too trust God, and come to know God by knowing Jesus – we will know that, either way, God wants the best for us. God loves us and will never leave us, in life or in

death. I don't know what God has in store for any of us, but I do trust God knows best and wants the best for us.

So the message for Carol and John today – and for everyone else who is listening – is the prayer we repeat at funerals, though it is even more appropriate at weddings and anniversaries. It's the prayer for all of us: God give us the wisdom and grace to use aright the time that is left for us here on earth, to turn to Christ and follow in his steps in the way that leads to life in all its fullness. I guess most of us here today have tried to do that in our faltering ways – stumbling occasionally but picking ourselves up, or being picked up, and continuing on our life's journey – thankful for all we have to be thankful for, accepting what can't be changed, trusting that God knows best and loves us and wants the best for us all, and wanting us to recognize that invisible source and goal of life because that way we'll be helped in the months or years that lie ahead.

God bless us all. Amen.

27th June 2021

John 15.9-17 Easter 7 16th May 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

'When Did you Last See the Son?'

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, which means we've come to the end of our annual journey following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which began last Advent Sunday. On Advent Sunday I'm often struck by the different places in which the gospels begin this story: Mark at Jesus' baptism, when he receives the Holy Spirit, Matthew and Luke at his conception, when his mother receives the Spirit, and John before the beginning of creation.

This week it struck me how differently the gospels end (and we've heard all four endings since Easter). Do you remember that Victorian painting about the English Civil War, called 'When Did you Last See Your Father'? This sermon could be called, 'When did you last see the Son?'

It is a sobering thought that, in Mark's gospel, the last time we are told that most of his followers saw Jesus, was in that short, ugly struggle in the dark, in Gethsemane, when Jesus was betrayed and arrested. Except that Peter follows at a distance to the High Priest's house, and some of the women follow at a distance all the way to Golgotha.

There are no resurrection appearances in Mark's gospel, but he does give us one thing. The young man whom the women meet at the tomb, gives them a promise. Go home, he says. Go back to Galilee, and you'll see him there.

In today's gospel reading, Matthew fleshes that promise out. Matthew has two resurrection appearances: one on Easter Day, and one later. The disciples do go back to Galilee, and there, Jesus meets them – and gives them a job to do and another promise. 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to do everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you, to the end of time.'

John goes further again. His Jesus appears three times to different people. But interestingly, John ends with the story of doubting Thomas, to whom Jesus says, 'Have you come to trust because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have trusted'. Jesus has appeared to the disciples, but, he says, he shouldn't need to – it's enough to have faith.

And Luke goes furthest of all, saying that Jesus not only appears and proves his identity to the disciples, but they even see him being taken up into heaven.

One thing that is certain is that the gospels didn't invent the tradition of the resurrection appearances. At least twenty years before the earliest gospel, Paul tells the Corinthians that the risen Christ appeared several times to the disciples and also to himself. What's interesting is what the gospels do with the tradition.

Mark seems to be telling us: go home. You've been on a rollercoaster journey with Jesus. Go back to your roots. See your family. Rest for a while. Wait. At some point, God will give you a new beginning.

For Matthew, it's important that the new beginning is also new work: a new way for the disciples to serve God, and with it, a new responsibility to serve other people.

For Luke, it's important that the disciples understand what has happened and feel reassured. Luke's is the gospel in which the risen Christ explains why the Messiah had to suffer and die, and blesses his followers. He also gives them a new job to do, as witnesses to everything that has happened. But Luke's Jesus knows that going on following him is not going to be easy, so he promises them the power of the spirit to help them.

John is the one who recognizes that, although the disciples saw the risen Christ, many, many future followers of Jesus will never see him. And he speaks directly to us, saying, that doesn't matter. When you have heard everything that happened – and when you have turned your life to following Jesus, following his example, keeping his teachings, loving God and each other as Jesus loved you – then you are doing, and being, everything that God could hope for, and you already have one foot in eternal life.

This year, we have not only followed Jesus on the rollercoaster of his life and death and resurrection; we have also been on the rollercoaster of covid. And, like the disciples', our following of Jesus has been disrupted: by illness, lockdowns, closed churches, fear of infection, self-isolation. If Christians asked each other today, 'When did you last see the Son?' – at least in worship – in the bread and wine of the Eucharist – in the gathered congregation of the faithful – we would have as many different answers between us as the gospels.

But, as we come to the end (we hope) of months of lockdown, and hope that a new stage of life is beginning, and as we pause in these quiet ten days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, the endings of all four gospels have something to say to us.

Go home, they say. See your family. Let yourself rest for a while. And wait, because God will find a new beginning and new life for us. Maybe we will find a new role and new work for Christ. And we may never see the risen Christ, as the disciples did, but that doesn't matter at all. When we have heard everything that happened, and turned our lives to following Jesus, following his example, keeping his teachings, loving God and each other as Jesus loved us, then we are doing and being everything that God could hope for.

The weeks and months to come may not be easy. But the Spirit of God will be with us, working in us. And Christ himself will be with us always, to the end of time. Amen

John 15.9-17 Easter 6 9th May 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

Our gospel this morning is one we normally hear on Remembrance Sunday, when we are always moved by the words, 'No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' But today, it's another side of the reading that strikes me: its vision of God as the master, who says, through Jesus, 'If

you love me, keep my commandments ... You are my friends if you do what I command you...' 'I no longer call you slaves,' Jesus says. We might wonder, were we *slaves*? *Are* we slaves?

It's a worrying question because, for most of us nowadays, slavery and love are a worrying combination. If one side in a relationship has all the power, then it's not truly love. And the idea that God is both loving and all-powerful raises some famously difficult questions. Why doesn't such a God stop bad things happening to good people? Why would he let people make bad choices and then punish them?

Just as worryingly, in John's gospel, love and power combine in an image of God as the Father who has total power over his family. As Jesus says earlier, 'The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.' (5.19) That model of family was quite normal in John's world, but it's much more problematic in ours.

But we do generally believe in families. And our own idea of family love may help us to negotiate with John's.

For us, I think, it's normal to think of love in a family as something that grows and changes as we grow. When we're babies, we depend completely on our parents, and they are in charge. But, gradually, we learn to be independent. We develop a sense of our individuality. A friend of mine once said to me, 'I've just decided that I'm not a hobbies person.' Her mother was a big hobbies person, but in her 30s, my friend just realized it wasn't her, and she said, 'It's such a relief. I threw out all my sewing!' (It sounds silly, but it's not always easy to be yourself!)

Later still, we learn to see our parents not just as the power we grow out of to become ourselves, but as people like ourselves. Who are on their own journey, still growing and changing. And if we're lucky, we come to love them not just as parents but as people, and recognize how much we have in common. We are part of each other's lives. We depend on each other. Our lives mean more together than apart.

So love takes us from dependence, through independence, to interdependence. And that might remind us of another way of thinking about ourselves and God, which is also part of our tradition.

It begins with a rumour, which runs among us in every generation, saying, surely there's more to life than meets the eye... Behind and throughout the world something is moving – a spirit, a power? – which holds everything together, and gives it meaning. It tantalizes us with the feeling that, just beyond our sight, the world makes sense – and the sense it makes is good.

Once we've heard that rumour, we never really escape it. As the psalmist says, 'If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there shall your hand lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.' (139.8-10)

For many of us, that rumour is the beginning of our sense of God, and it tells us that God is everywhere, around us and in us; we're part of God, and God is part of us. Which also means that we are part of each other – like the parts of a body, which make more sense in relation to each other than they could ever make on their own – and the sense we make is part of the meaning of the whole.

In that vision, we belong to God, not as slaves, or even children, but as part of the expression of Godself which is the whole of creation. And that vision, like our sense of family, takes us beyond dependence on God, beyond independence from God, to interdependence with God.

Something like that interdependence is, I think, what John's Jesus is talking about, when he says, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It's the love that says, we are one creation, one body. Our lives have more meaning together than they will ever have apart. And if we forget that, then we tear ourselves apart.

That's not to say that recognizing our interdependence, and practising love, are always easy. Everyone who's been part of a family knows that. We can probably all think of people, frankly, we'd rather not be interdependent with. And, in our very imperfect world, sometimes practising love bears fruit – fruit that lasts, as Jesus says, and changes the world – and sometimes it doesn't seem to change anything much.

To choose to love anyway is a leap of faith: the fundamental leap of faith, which says, if God is God, then we are all part of God, and accepting that is the only way to be fully human.

For me, this is a way of thinking about John's imagery of God as all-powerful parent, which gets us away from the outdated first-century model of the family. It's no less demanding than the idea of being God's slave or obedient child. But it's also worth bearing in mind, that John didn't think that being part of God's family takes anything away from that hard-won individuality that we value so much in the modern world. When we look at any person of great faith – think of Martin Luther King, or St. Teresa of Calcutta – it's obvious that they don't lack individuality. What they lack is a sense that who and what they are is separable from God and God's creation.

Whoever we are, God's spirit blows through the shape of us. It doesn't blow us away: it makes us more full of life. As John said of Jesus himself, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of humankind, and the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' Amen

Mark 8.31-8 Second Sunday of Lent: 28th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I have to admit that when I turned to today's gospel, a couple of days ago, and read, *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'*, my first thought was, 'Oh, don't we have enough problems this year?' I felt a bit like St. Teresa of Avila, who, in a time of suffering, complained bitterly to God. God said, 'But this is how I treat all my friends!' and Teresa retorted, 'Then no wonder you have so few of them!'

But somehow just thinking that made me hear Jesus' saying again. Not as 'take up your cross,' but as 'take up your cross.' Whatever it is that you are already bearing—really take it up, and walk with it.

This was of reading what Jesus says seems to fit quite well into Lent. Last week, we heard how Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert. And we all know, from our own experience, what Jesus also knew, that the real temptations in this life are not things we go out into the desert to look for, in a spirit of heroism. The real temptations are the weaselly little things that are already in our lives, like selfishness and lack of compassion and a taste for power, and Lent is the time when we are challenged to face those things and really grapple with them.

In a similar way, we all already have crosses to bear. Maybe we're not well, or not happy, or in a job that doesn't nurture us. Maybe somebody close to us is making our life difficult—or we're making our own life difficult by being angry, envious, or unkind.

In ordinary times, many of us spend quite a bit of time and energy avoiding facing these burdens. Keeping busy to distract ourselves. Grumbling to let off steam, without changing anything. Self-medicating with chocolate or Netflix, or ... pick your preferred narcotic. But in Lent, Jesus invites us to take a hard look at the things that burden us, and then to take them up, and follow him. Not in a spirit of masochism, but because, as Jesus also knew in the desert, you have to face the evils of this world to know them and not to be ruled by them. And it's only by really facing our crosses and taking them up that we can hope eventually to put them down and save our life.

Taking up our crosses, in this sense, is a very varied exercise, because the things that burden us are very varied, and in general, the evils of the world are very varied.

Maybe our cross is physical suffering, and we're being called to reflect more deeply on our own fragility, and the fragility of everybody—and with that, the incredible power of spirit that runs through us and lightens our lives in spite of our own limitations. Maybe our cross is some aspect of our circumstances, and we are being called to reflect on what we could do to change them—for ourselves, and perhaps for other people too. There are as many crosses as there are things wrong with the world, and as many ways of taking them up as there are ways of working to make the world better.

So this Lent, I encourage you to look at the crosses you are bearing—and there may well be more than one—and pick just one, and really take it up. Look at it; think about it; think about what it is showing you about yourself and the world.

And think about what it would take to make this cross what the physical cross was for Jesus Christ: not, in the end, a burden that led to death, but a power that redeemed the world and brought it to eternal life.

Because the promise of the gospel is that if we follow Christ, then the way of the cross is only one stage on a much longer road, that ends not on Golgotha, but in the glorious life of the kingdom of heaven.

Prologue of John's Gospel 7th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

The Prologue of John is one of the clearest expressions of one of the most mysterious ideas in the New Testament: the pre-existence of Christ, before he was 'made flesh' as a human being.

It's not a topic we think about very often in church, and when we do, many people find it difficult. The idea that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died, was a man of God, a man from God, and even God with us, is a cornerstone of our faith. The idea that God raised Jesus from the dead and received him into heaven is harder for some to believe – but the sense that Christ is with God, and still with us, and that we are in his hands and in his care until the end of the age, is something most Christians live with, in faith, every day.

But, we may wonder, why would we believe that Christ existed before he was born, and took part in creation? To many people, it just doesn't seem necessary.

It may help to bear in mind that, in the world of the first century, people thought of two main types of heavenly being. There were gods and other divinities who at some point visited earth: perhaps to test people's piety, deliver a message, or help them. And there were exceptional human beings who were taken up to heaven after they died, like Abraham, Hercules, or the Roman emperors.

It also helps to remember that when the apostles began preaching, the Christ that they called people to put their faith in was, first of all, the risen Christ, in heaven.

So early preachers had two possible ways of thinking about Christ. Some saw him as a man of God who was taken up to heaven. But there was a difficulty: human beings who were taken up to heaven were not usually envisaged as taking a very high place there. They became demi-gods, or angels, or simply great souls. For his followers, Jesus Christ was much more than that. He was the presence of God with humanity, and humanity with God. He made it possible for imperfect humanity to be reconciled with God, and eventually for all his followers to follow him to heaven. To be as great a heavenly figure as Christians recognized Christ as being, some people thought he must have been with God – been God – from the beginning. And so the idea of pre-existence developed.

People described the pre-existent Christ in various ways. For some, he was God's Word – God's speech-act, which brought the world to life, just as Jesus Christ later brought humanity to new life. Or he was the Wisdom of God, that reaches out to teach human beings how to be as God created and longs for them to be. Or he was the light that enlightens everyone.

Well, you may be thinking, this is all very well, but does it matter to us? I think it does.

Christians have always understood that Christ is not only the Saviour and Lord of his people, but also brings all of us with him, to heaven, to share his glory. And in Jesus's own day – and still today – that is a

rare idea. In many ancient traditions, there are great individuals who go up to heaven (or somewhere similar), but they don't take everyone with them. What makes Jesus unique, paradoxically, is that he represents and embodies us all. As a human being, he makes it possible for us to be like him, and, as God, he brings us all to be with him.

Epiphanytide 24th January 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I've been thinking a lot this week about the sadness of closing churches. Churches are places of so much nurture and nourishment. They feed our hearts and minds – and eyes and ears. They teach and inspire us to care for one another. They hold our prayers, and we entrust our hopes and fears to them. When we come into a church, we come to a place where we know we are known, loved, and valued. In church we can dare to be our best selves. Those are rare and precious things.

And churches remember. They remember our friends and neighbours who are no longer with us. They link us to Christians before us, right back to Jesus' disciples.

But that reminds me that very early Christians didn't have any buildings of their own. Right up to the fourth century, if they did build a church, it was liable to be looted or destroyed. They must have felt their lack of holy places, when there were temples and synagogues all around them, but they made a virtue of it.

St Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and the spirit of God lives in you?' (1 Cor. 3.16). In the second century, Clement of Alexandria says, 'Christ builds his temple in people, so that he can establish the home of God in humanity'. And for Origen of Alexandria, anywhere Christians meet becomes not only a holy place, but a place where the saints and angels gather overhead and join in their worship.

We may yet have to close Sandford church, but if we do, it will still be here, holding our prayers and waiting for us. And we can take encouragement from early Christians, who knew that, wherever they were and wherever they worshipped, God was with them, and, in them, God was in the world. And whenever they said their prayers, angels and saints gathered overhead and worshipped with them.

We can also reflect that if, like Paul's Corinthians, we are God's temple, then all the holiness that lives in a church also lives in us, as we go about our daily lives. We make the holiness of holy places portable, and, if we are faithful, then the people we meet – in person or via technology – may even meet God in us.

That does not seem a bad aspiration for the Epiphany season, the season of showing Christ to the world.

Holy Innocents' Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I hope you are having a very happy week, with plenty of celebration – as well, probably, as some frustration and worry. It's Christmas 2020-style....

And part of Christmas, is that tomorrow is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which nearly always falls on a day when most of us aren't in church, and which tends to get a bit overlooked, in the middle of the festive season.

Even Matthew's gospel doesn't make much of it. The story of King Herod killing all the male children around Bethlehem two years old and under, to try to get rid of the newborn King of the Jews – it's three verses, tucked in between the much more famous stories of the Coming of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt.

And there is something bitterly appropriate about that. In every crisis in history – every war, every moment of change – children are always the most vulnerable, and when they suffer, it is always under-reported.

But this year is one to remember the Holy Innocents. Because there have been many tragic stories of the suffering brought by the pandemic, but nothing has been more shocking than the reports of how child abuse has increased – physical, emotional, sexual abuse; murder. Stressed parents and carers, volatile and violent people locked down together, disruption in social services, children out of school, people spending hours a day online – they’ve all contributed. And this terrible story has hardly ever hit the headlines.

And that, among much else, raises a question about Matthew. Because we usually assume that the only good thing about this story is that, historically, it probably didn’t happen. We think this partly because we know a lot about King Herod, but there is no other record of this massacre, and partly because we think that Matthew created the whole of this birth narrative to show how Jesus is part of the whole history of Israel.

The story of the Innocents looks back to the destruction of Jerusalem in war in the 6th century BC, and before that, to the Book of Exodus, where the Egyptian Pharaoh tried to kill all the male children of the Israelites, because he thought they were doing too well in his country. But the mother of Moses hid her son in a basket in the reeds on the edge of the Nile, where he was found and brought up by the Pharaoh’s daughter. Echoing that story is one way in which Matthew says that Jesus is going to be like Moses, but even greater.

The story also pre-echoes some of Jesus’s prophecies, as an adult. ‘I have come not to bring peace, but a sword’ (Mt. 10.34). And, before salvation comes, ‘you will hear of wars and rumours of wars ... there will be famines and earthquakes ... woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days’ (24.6, 19).

Matthew knows well what we have been reminded of, this year: that in times of crisis, children are always among the most vulnerable.

But in light of our experience this year, I think we should pause, and consider the possibility that the story of the Holy Innocents is not just a way of saying that Jesus is greater than Moses, and not just a pre-echo of Jesus’ prophecies of the end time. Because we do know enough about Herod to know he was more than capable of doing something like this. He saw threats to his power everywhere, and he ordered the murder of scores, if not hundreds of people, including one of his wives, three of his sons, and forty-five members of the religious council in Jerusalem.

So Matthew’s story may not have happened when and where he describes, but it is not unbelievable that it happened somewhere, at some point, when Herod saw some threat to his power. And if it did, nothing is more likely than that historians didn’t record it, because the suffering of children hardly ever hits the headlines.

So I would like to suggest, this Christmas, after the year we have had, and bearing in mind that the next few months may also be very difficult, that we take this story of the Holy Innocents especially to heart.

And three thoughts emerge from it, for me.

One, is that, even though this is a tragedy, there is also ray of hope in it – and in the Exodus story that it looks back to. Because in each story, one child was saved by the courage and resourcefulness of his parents. That reminds us that – although there are children in our country whose lives are horribly vulnerable – there are also many whose lives are saved and made safer by the courage and resourcefulness of their parents, grandparents, foster parents, teachers, or social workers. So this day is also a day to remember and honour all of them.

And it’s also a day for the rest of us, who don’t have direct responsibility for vulnerable children, to think about whether we can do more to support the people who do. Whether personally, or through local initiatives like foodbanks, or by holding to account the services that work with children and the politicians who fund their work.

Last, but not least, when we are thinking about our charitable giving – as individuals or as a church – this year might be a really good year to support some children’s charities.

Because Jesus Christ was a baby, and a child, in a world in crisis. And if people had not saved him, he wouldn't have grown up to save his people. And when you get right down to it, that's really why Matthew tells this story.

He understands that the God who calls us, in Christ, is calling us not just to put our trust in God and be saved, but to join with God in saving ourselves by saving each other. Because, Matthew understands, it is in giving that we receive; and in forgiving that we find ourselves forgiven; and it is in giving life to others that we become part of eternal life.

Christmas Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

Well, we made it! We have sent cards and wrapped presents and decorated and shopped and cooked – and we've made it to Christmas Day. Possibly a bit tired – but I hope happy. Though most of us are also probably a bit worried, or sad about family and friends we can't spend Christmas with. And most of us are looking back at a difficult year, and some of us have lost people we loved.

So, many of us greet Christmas morning, this year, with slightly mixed feelings. But however we feel, and whatever else is going on – we are here. And we have many reasons for being here: faith; hope; tradition; community. Christmas carols! But one reason I am certain we all share: the feeling that we are welcome here, in this house of God.

We welcome each other, and framing and empowering our welcome, is a much bigger one. Which says to every one of us, however you are feeling, and whatever is going on in your life, you are at home here. Here you are known, inside and out, and loved, and treasured. By your neighbours, and, above all, by God and Jesus Christ.

Because one way to describe what we celebrate today is to say that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to make it home. To make this world, which for Adam and Eve and their descendants was a place of exile, of hard graft and a steep learning curve, into the place where God and humanity are reunited: where, as the Book of Revelation says, God makes his home with his people, and we are at home with God.

It's pure gift.

And it's the irony of the season, that we prepare for it for weeks, and when it comes, we're so busy giving and receiving our own presents we're rarely completely ready to receive God's.

But, as it happens, I don't think that matters too much. For one thing, all the gifts we give and receive are Christmas are practice – practice in love, and practice in grace – *charis* – that beautiful word in Greek which means both generosity and gratitude. We are all practising grace on one another!

And, anyway, I'm not sure we could ever be completely ready for a gift from God. Any more than new parents like Mary and Joseph can be completely ready for their first child. Love, and grace, and bringing up a baby, are three things we grow into as we practise them.

And we can and do practise them, and hope to get better at them, not least because the grace of God in Christ is the one present we get every year that we don't open.

This is the present that opens us.

Because the Word of God, as John calls him, who comes into the world, full of grace and truth, is the Jesus who will grow up to say, Don't be afraid.

Come to me, when you are tired and burdened, with all the damage you've received, and the damage you've done, and put it all down here.

Come to me, and let yourself be known, inside and out, and treasured, and loved.

And in the warmth of that love, let your heart open like a flower, and feel yourself growing and flourishing.

Because, as John's gospel says, Jesus Christ came that you should have life, and have it more abundantly – life in you, and working with you, until your heart and mind and arms are as wide open as God's and

Christ's own, and wherever you are in your own life, you know you are also, always, at home in the house of God.

A very happy Christmas to you. Amen