ST ANDREW'S CHURCH
SANDFORD-ON-THAMES

Pentecost 8th June 2025 John 14.8–19, 25–27 Teresa Morgan

Today is the Feast of Pentecost when we celebrate how, according to the Book of Acts, Jesus's disciples received the Holy Spirit and began their new ministry, on what some people call the birthday of the Church. (When I'm talking to students, I sometimes say that, for the disciples, today is graduation day.)

But receiving the Spirit has a long history in the Bible, and it's worth looking back for a moment, to help us reflect on it. In the Old Testament, the Spirit comes to people in two different forms. The Hebrew word for 'Spirit' basically means breath, and, in one form, God, or an agent of God, breathes Spirit into someone (like Adam). And that kind of Spirit gives life, or brings people back to life.

In other cases, the Spirit comes onto people, like prophets and kings (as when Isaiah says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'). That kind of Spirit gives people a particular gift, like prophecy or leadership, which enables them to do something they couldn't do otherwise.

And in some ways this distinction continues in the New Testament. St. Paul, for instance, can say (2 Cor 3.6) that 'the Spirit gives life' – the new life under God and Christ that will culminate in eternal life. But the Spirit can also give specific gifts, as in 1 Cor 12.1–11: wisdom, healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and so on.

But although they recognize two forms of the Spirit, New Testament writings tend to talk about Christians receiving both of them, often together. People who put their trust in God and Jesus receive both new life and gifts to use in that life. We can see it in today's reading from Acts. The Spirit comes upon the disciples, like a tongue of flame resting on each person's head.
But it also comes into them: they are filled with it. And Peter suddenly gains the gift of prophecy, and prophesies to the Jerusalem crowd, and part of what he prophesies is that everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved for eternal life.

We can also find both forms of the Spirit at the climax of John's gospel (though in John, it is the risen Jesus himself who gives the disciples the Spirit; they don't have to wait until Pentecost). As we just heard, on the last night of his earthly life, Jesus promises the disciples that he will send the Spirit to them, and it will enable them, like him, to do great works. But he also says that the Spirit will be in them, and it will bring them to eternal life in God.

In this passage, Jesus also says something else. He calls the Spirit 'another *parakletos*'. 'paraclete'. Which is an interesting word, which literally means someone you can call on – a helper, comforter, encourager, or an advocate in a lawcourt.

And all this, I hope, may help us reflect on the role of the Spirit in our own lives.

At Pentecost, we often think especially of – and hope for – the kind of Spirit that comes upon people, and gives us some special gift, some particular work to do for God. If we have the experience of receiving that kind of Spirit, it's often described as a dramatic and joyful thing. (Though it is worth bearing in mind that the main point of it is not to make us feel joyful, or generally good. The point is to equip us to do some kind of work. It is the work, for God, that is most important, whether, on a given day, we feel especially joyful or not. And most of us have some days when we don't feel spectacularly joyful, or good, but if we are doing what God asks us to do, then the Spirit is on us and working through us.)

Not everybody feels that the Spirit has given them some special gift or particular work to do, but that is absolutely fine, because there is also the form of the Spirit that gives us new and more abundant life, and prepares us for the eternal life of God. That kind of Spirit comes into us and helps us to

recognize that we are part of the divine life that creates and recreates and runs through everything. And when we practise being aware of that Spirit in us, it deepens our sense of unity with everything that is, and empathy for other beings. It is the gift that helps us to love God and love one another as God loves us.

Last but not least, John's gospel also reminds us that both forms of the Spirit are also given to us as a comfort; for encouragement; as our advocate with the world.

It's worth reflecting briefly on what it might mean for the Spirit to be our advocate. It may connect with something Jesus says in Matthew's gospel: if you are persecuted for your faith, and arrested, don't worry about what you're going to say, because God will give you the right words and the Spirit will speak through you. We heard that message in today's gospel too: not to worry, because whatever happens in this world, the Spirit is with us.

But even when we're not being persecuted for our faith, we can understand the Spirit as our comforter and advocate in the sense that it is God with us and for us, always on our side. As John says, the Spirit-advocate is, for us, what Jesus was for the disciples in his earthly life: the pure expression of God's love, which is with us, and for us, and embraces us every moment of our lives, and which asks nothing of us except that we accept and respond to that love.

So Pentecost is the beginning of an extraordinary new life for Jesus's disciples. And every year, it reminds us that if we accept God's Spirit, it may take us in new directions we can hardly imagine. Maybe with new and special gifts. Maybe with new and deeper love for God and creation. But always with renewed assurance of God's love, which embraces us every moment of our lives.

Amen
(Sandford-on-Thames)

Alice in Wonderland Sermon Choral Evensong 1st June 2025 Teresa Morgan

One of the things that make our annual "Alice" sermon enjoyable, is wondering every year what the preacher is going to find in the story to talk about. This year, I'm going to talk about the very beginning of the book, which is a dedication, in verse, to the Liddell sisters and especially to Alice. [See below.] What caught my attention about this was, first, that it tells us that the story began as a series of stories told over time, before the best bits were woven together. Lewis Carroll calls it "a wreath of flowers," and that is a very resonant phrase, because Carroll had a classical education before he became a mathematician.

Alice is what the ancient Greeks called an *anthologia*, which literally means a gathering of flowers: a collection culled from something much larger. Anthologies were hugely popular in the ancient world, and one of the most popular names for an anthology was a "garland" or a "wreath" (there's one called *The Garland of Meleager*, for instance). And one of the most popular ways in which an ancient author introduced an anthology was as a collection of titbits from a party – like the Liddell children's boat trip. (By the way, many books, or parts of books of the Bible are also anthologies.)

Alice also has a lot in common with one particular type of ancient anthology: the episodic satirical novel. (Some of you may have heard of an ancient novel called *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, which has a surprising amount in common with *Alice*.) This kind of novel sometimes involves an often bewildered hero getting into a series of mad situations with strange and sometimes violent characters, and sometimes changing shape in the process. It often has a serious message too: there is something about the story that is meant to make you think.

So *Alice* is a classical-style anthological satirical novel, and Carroll also calls it a souvenir, like the token a pilgrim brings home from a far-off land. But why would all this talk about genre matter? It hints

that *Alice* has a serious aim amid all the mad fun. It's meant to make us think. And it's not overtly religious – but we may wonder what it is meant to make us think about.

Different things will strike different people, but to me one major theme is the way Alice, the heroine, is constantly being pushed out of the centre of the story. For one thing, she keeps changing, so, at one point, she confesses to the caterpillar that she doesn't know who she is any more. Also, none of the strange characters she meets is really at all interested in her. From the White Rabbit to the Mock Turtle to the Queen of Hearts, they are all entirely preoccupied with their own problems. Even when they quiz her, she can't make sense of their questions, and they usually tell her that her answers are nonsense. So throughout the book there is an unsettling tension between the cosy everyday settings – the tea party, the garden, the croquet match – and the bewildering way everybody behaves.

But in all the confusion, Alice, interestingly, accepts her changes of size and shape and identity, even when she's worried about them. She accepts that she is not the centre of attention in most of her encounters. For a literary heroine she has remarkable humility, in some ways, which allows her to take a great and charitable interest in what's happening to her, as it gets "curiouser and curiouser." And perhaps she hangs on to herself – keeps faith with herself, despite everything – because one thing never changes: she has a very strong sense of justice. When she's criticized by the caterpillar; when the Mad Hatter is rude to her; when the Queen of Hearts wants to condemn the Knave for stealing jam tarts, without a fair trial, and, when Alice protests, shouts, "Off with her head," Alice's sense of justice is outraged. In the end, it is that outrage that wakes her up from the dream that the story has been.

In all the changes and chances of this fleeting world, as the Prayerbook would say, Alice is convinced there is always such a thing as right and wrong. In the dedication, Lewis Carroll offers the memory of that conviction like a pilgrim's wreath of flowers, for the real Alice to take throughout her life.

It reminded me of the hymn, "Abide with me," which we've just sung, with its famous lines, "Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me." (Lewis Carroll would have known the hymn, I'm sure, because Henry Lyte was a member of the Oxford Movement, and Carroll grew up in an Oxford Movement household as well as working all his life in Oxford.) *Alice in Wonderland* never mentions God. It doesn't tell anyone to keep religious faith. But we might hear it as asking us a question. In the world we live in, is there something that never changes, for us? Something that we can hold on to when life is uncertain and bewildering and sometimes frightening, and "other helpers fail and comforts flee"? And if there is, is it stable enough to sustain us throughout our story?

For Christians, ideally, it is God – God who is just and loving and faithful and hopeful – who is that stability. And even though *Alice* is not a religious book, it may be significant that the justice that Alice holds on to is one of the qualities of God. But the uncertainties and conflicts and fearfulness of life are exactly the things that for many of us, challenge and sometimes undermine our sense of God, and so our faith. So does Alice the Just offer any encouragement for us?

One answer, which would be a classic Christian answer (and is the answer of Lyte's hymn, and which many ancient anthologists would also agree with, in fact) – one answer would be, that this world, like Alice's dream, is not the real world. The real world is the kingdom of God, and, like Alice, we just have to survive this world with our faith and our righteousness intact, and eventually we will enter the Kingdom of God. But I have to admit that, with some modern theologians, I have reservations about that answer. If we believe that this world is God's creation – or, to put it another way, that everything that is, is part of the life and meaning of everything that is – then surely we have to think that this world is real and it matters how we live in it.

So the reflection I draw from *Alice*, this evening, is that the things that give us stability and encouragement in this life, are the things that are most important in God's kingdom too. And it is in this world that we find and learn, and teach, and live the things that are the ground of ultimate reality and ultimate meaning: justice, and love, and faithfulness, and hope. And perhaps what Lewis Carroll calls the

"pilgrim's wreath of flowers" that we weave from our lived experience, is also what the Book of Revelation calls the crown of the faithful. The sign, and the celebration, that when we keep faith with justice and love and hope in our lives, then we are keeping faith with the kingdom of God.
Amen
(Sandford-on-Thames)

Alice in Wonderland: Dedication
All in the golden afternoon
Full leisurely we glide;
For both our oars, with little skill,
By little arms are plied,
While little hands make vain pretence
Our wanderings to guide.

Ah, cruel Thee! In such an hour,
Beneath such dreamy weather,
To beg a tale of breath too weak
To stir the tiniest feather!
Yet what can one poor voice avail
Against three tongues together?

Imperious Prima flashes forth
Her edict "to begin it" –
In gentler tone Secunda hopes
"There will be nonsense in it!" –
While Tertia interrupts the tale
Not more than once a minute.

Anon, to sudden silence won,
In fancy they pursue
The dream-child moving through a land
Of wonders wild and new,
In friendly chat with bird or beast –
And half-believe it true.

And ever, as the story drained
The wells of fancy dry,
And faintly strove that weary one
To put the subject by,
"The rest next time." It is next time!"
The happy voices cry.

Thus grew the tale of Wonderland:
Thus slowly, one by one,
Its quaint events were hammered out –
And now the tale is done.
And home we steer, a merry crew,
Beneath the setting sun.

Alice! A childish story take,
And with a gentle hand
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined
In Memory's mystic band,
Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers
Plucked in a far-off land.

Luke 2.41-end: First Sunday after Christmas 2024 Teresa Morgan Sandford-on-Thames

Over Christmas, our gospel readings bounce about a good deal in time. Last Wednesday Jesus was born. Yesterday, on the feast of the Holy Innocents, he was about two years old. Next week, at Epiphany, he'll still be two, but a week after that he'll be an adult, for the feast of the Baptism of Christ. At Candlemas, in a few weeks' time, he'll be a baby again, and today he's twelve. Historically, this is because all these stories are about Jesus' being revealed to the world as the Son of God, and since antiquity they have been remembered in a thematic cluster around Christmas.[1]

Today's story is only in Luke's gospel, and this may be because Luke is culturally a very Greek writer. In ancient Greek biographies of great men (usually men), it is common to have a story about the hero as a child, which reveals his future greatness. Luke's story does this in a rather unusual way.

Mary and Joseph have come up to Jerusalem for Passover, in a group, as many faithful Jews did. When they set out for home, they find at the end of the first day's travel that Jesus is not with them. They dash back to Jerusalem in a panic, and it takes three days to find him.

The mention of 'three days' tells us that this story is a revelation not just of Jesus's greatness in his lifetime, but of his death. It is a pre-echo of the three days that Jesus will be lost to his followers in the grave, and what happens when Mary and Joseph find him again foreshadows Jesus's resurrection encounters with his disciples.[2]

Mary's reaction when they find Jesus, however, is very different from the disciples' reaction to the resurrection. She is not only afraid or overjoyed, or even doubtful: she sounds angry. She says, 'Why have done this to us?' The Greek is very stark: 'Why have you done this to us? Your father and I suffered, looking for you.'

After the resurrection, we never hear that Jesus's followers are angry with him for leaving them abandoned and afraid. The disciples do express fear and doubt as well as joy, but perhaps anger was a step too far. But by telling today's story, we might hear Luke as recognizing something that the disciples also felt when Jesus died – and which many of us would also recognize.

At Christmas, we celebrate the coming of Jesus to us; to be with us in love and walk with us and teach and heal us. But when the warmth and light and celebration of Christmas are over, it is not always easy to go on feeling that Jesus is with us. Even people of great faith often feel that Jesus has abandoned them, and can't feel the presence of God in their lives. And then any of us might find ourselves saying, like Mary, 'Why have you done this to us? Why did you come into the world, and love us, and call us to follow you, and then leave us, in a world that is so often dark and difficult, where we suffer, and feel lost ourselves?'

Jesus's reply to Mary is not straightforwardly reassuring, but it is significant. He says, You didn't need to panic or rush around looking for me. You could have guessed I would be with my Father, in his house. (In this story 'my Father's house' means the Jerusalem temple, but elsewhere in the gospels it means heaven, in the eternal presence of God.[3]) Jesus seems to be saying, Yes, at Christmas, I come to be with you in all the darkness and the mess of this world. But when I call you to follow me, I call you to follow me to my Father's house – to come and make your home and your community on another level,

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[1] In early churches Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ were kept on the same day.

[2] John often reworks pericopes in both Mark and Luke, and the end of Jn 2, with its prophecy of the fall and rise of the temple in three days, may be reworking this story. 2, so also early in gospel, gives foretaste of crucifixion in a completely different way.

[3] Notably in John 14.2–6 where Jesus says 'In my Father's house there are many mansions'

in the presence of God. Even while you are still in this world, you also already belong in the place where the darkness and the mess are resolved and the light and the love of Christmas are forever.

This teaching is one for us to take away as the Christmas season moves on, and the world turns into a new year.

The coming of Jesus into the world does not solve all the world's problems at a stroke, and in the turbulence of our lives it can be hard to feel Jesus's presence with us. But he calls us follow him beyond everyday life into the presence of God, to make our home there, and from there to carry his presence ourselves into and through our lives in this world. We start to do that every time we pray, meet for worship, spend time together as friends and fellow disciples, share food, and imitate God's and Jesus's presence with us by being with each other, in love.

At the end of today's story, Jesus goes home with Mary and Joseph like a good child, and Mary 'treasures all these things in her heart'. As the gospel continues she becomes a model and an inspiration for us. She does follow the adult Jesus: to the cross, the grave, and the resurrection; to Pentecost and beyond, and eventually (as we see in our beautiful mediaeval wall relief, in the chancel), to heaven.

Amen

Christmas Night 2024 (Jn. Prol.) Teresa Morgan Sandford on Thames

There are two gospels we always hear at Christmas: Luke's story of the birth of Jesus and the shepherds, and the Prologue of John, which we heard just now.

Both have a lot to say about darkness and light. At this service, we often focus on the light: the glory of the Lord that shines round the angels and the glory of the Word made flesh that shines in the darkness and is not overcome. But tonight I want to start with the darkness (and if you're thinking that you came out to have a good sing and not think too much about the darkness, I am going to get to singing!).

There isn't much physical darkness in the New Testament, partly because, in the ancient world, there wasn't much artificial light, so sensible people went to bed after dark. In the gospels, the only other night where things happen is the night when Jesus is betrayed and tried. John's gospel makes sure we register it: as Judas leaves the last supper to betray Jesus, John says, 'And it was night.'

The limitations of artificial light in Jesus's world meant that when people were in the dark, they really knew it, and they knew what it was to hope for daylight to return. We, who who live so much in artificial light, can almost forget how important daylight is for everything from growing most of our food to lifting our mood (at least until there's a power cut, and then we remember). But world winking and glowing with artificial light is also quite a good image for our society, in which all the little lights of comfort and convenience we create can almost help us to forget how dark the world can be, with conflict and prejudice and injustice – at least until those comforting little lights go out, where we live. That hasn't happened to most of us this year, but it has happened to our neighbours in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan…. We could go on.

It has been such a turbulent year in many places that it's been hard for anyone to ignore completely the darknesses of the human world. So some of my friends and I have been talking recently about hope, and what we hope for, and I have been surprised by some of my friends – who are people of faith – who say they can't really think of much they hope for, except, perhaps, that things don't get worse.

The teaching of Christmas, and of today's gospel – is above all one of hope.
So it is an urgent question – what hope does the gospel offer our world, today? I would like to offer just one thought.

For whatever reason, darkness – natural or social – is always part of material existence. Decay, disorder, death: entropy. Physicists understand it well and tell us it is always happening everywhere. It's a law of nature. But at the same time – and this is a mystery that fascinates scientists and no-one has ever explained – it is also, always happening everywhere that life develops and things grow and reproduce and create systems, and the world becomes more orderly. And things no-one can explain, but that are incredibly powerful, develop in societies too: love, and peace, and justice, which light and enlighten everyone.

In this mystery, John's gospel finds a sign of the first and greatest mystery of all: the divine power that is in the beginning, and creates the world; the One in whom is life, which is a light for everyone, and which shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The gospel is woven through with images of this power. A grain of wheat dies, and a whole plant grows out of it with dozens of grains. The word of God comes into the world and lives among us, and when he dies, the love he leaves behind, generates (what John calls) more and more abundant life.

So John's hope is that, against all the odds – all the natural entropy of existence – we have life in a world in which new life, love, peace, justice, are always ready to grow among us. And the gospel invites us to put our trust in that hope, and to work with it as children of God to light up the world with a glory that no darkness will ever overcome.

Finally, what about the singing?

In America, there is a popular hymn which captures beautifully the hope of Christmas. It's called 'How can I keep from singing' and it begins,

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation

I catch the sweet, tho' far-off hymn

that hails a new creation;
Thro' all the tumult and the strife

I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul –

How can I keep from singing?

So we are very much here to sing tonight, and to celebrate in music and words the coming of Christ into the world, which heralds the hope of new life, new love and peace and justice in our world – the whole glory of a new creation. Amen

Job 38.1-7, Mk. 4.35-end Teresa Morgan 30th June 2024

In our Old Testament reading this morning we heard the awe-inspiring words of God, speaking to Job.

The story of Job is notoriously one of bad things happening to a good person. It begins with a dispute between God and one of his heavenly courtiers, the Satan. (The Satan, by the way – or 'Satan' – seems to have begun, in early Israelite religion, as God's executioner. By the time Job was written, in around the

fourth century BCE, had become God's licensed tester of people, but it is only quite late, around the beginnings of Christianity, that he morphs into a fallen angel who tries to tempt people away from God.)

At the start of this story, God is delighted with Job. Have you seen Job, he says – what a good, God-fearing man he is? The Satan retorts, of course he is! You've given him family, health, and wealth. Take away everything he has and see how much he loves you then.

God determines to prove the Satan wrong. In a great storm, he destroys all Job's property and kills his children. But Job simply says, 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.' That is not the worst you can do, says the Satan. Hurt him in himself, and see what he says then. So God gives the Satan permission to hurt Job, and Satan covers Job with boils from head to foot. But Job remains faithful.

Three friends come to sit with Job in his grief. As he cries for his children and his troubles, one of them says, you must have sinned somehow. Confess your guilt, and appeal to God for mercy. But Job insists he has not sinned. The second friend says, never mind, sooner or later things are bound to get better, but Job won't be consoled. The third says piously that nobody understands God, and Job retorts that if nobody understands God, then perhaps his friend should shut up.

The remarkable thing is that throughout his bitter grief and complaints about his situation, Job still has faith. At several points, he wishes he could take God to court. 'I have prepared my case – I know I am in the right!' But he also says, 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand at last upon the earth … and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh shall I see God. My heart is consumed with longing.'

Eventually, God himself speaks to Job, out of a storm. 'Who is this who obscures divine plans with words of ignorance? … Where were you when I founded the earth? Have you commanded the morning?… Have you plumbed the sources of the sea?… Will the wild ox consent to serve you?… Do you give the horse its strength?…'

God's speech goes on for four chapters (and one might think that God might give Job a bit more credit at this point for his faithfulness, even if he has complained a good deal). But at the end, Job says, 'I have dealt with great things that I don't understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.'

God's speech is usually heard as a rebuke, but it is only partly a rebuke. God tells Job that Job cannot understand God – but Job already knew that. At the same time, God does not tell Job that he was wrong to think he did not deserve his suffering, because he didn't – so God's speech is also a vindication of Job's faith. More than that: God appears to Job in the storm, a privilege so rare that in the whole of the Old Testament the only other people who see God are Adam and Eve, Moses, and perhaps Abraham.

At the end of God's speech, when Job says, 'I had heard about you, but now my eye has seen you', his words are more than a statement of recognition; they are an exclamation of wonder. When he says, 'Now I have seen you, I repent in dust and ashes', there is awe and even joy in his humility, because what Job has seen is that God is as he always believed, but even greater and even more wonderful. The only lesson Job has to learn from God is that because God made him, God knows and understands him even better than he understands himself. As part of creation, God may deal with him in ways he doesn't understand, but even that is part of God's care for everything that is. And in the end, Job accepts God's word.

The Book of Job is almost always read now as a debate about the justice of God. It is undeniable that there are terrible things in it which we cannot overlook: above all, that God destroys Job's presumably innocent family to test him, and, at the end of the story, gives him another family as if wives and children can be replaced as easily as wealth and possessions. But there is another strand in the book, which was more obvious to early Christians than it tends to be to us, and which also offers food for thought.

In some ways, this is a love story. God so loves Job that he enrols him to prove to the Satan that love is stronger than suffering and death. Job so loves God that in even in his suffering he never rejects God, though he does challenge God to explain himself. And God so loves Job that he gives him the explanation he demands, face to face.

Early Christians tended to see the book this way, as a story about love and faithfulness even in suffering, and they therefore saw Job as a type – a forerunner – of Jesus Christ. Like Jesus, Job loved God and God worked through him against the sceptical power of the Satan. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great wrote a book about Job as a type of Christ which was one of the most popular books in late antiquity.

Job, it is true, complains a great deal more than Jesus does, but even Jesus can occasionally speak like Job in his suffering. On the cross he cries, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' It is worth noticing what we often do not notice in that terrible cry. Jesus does not say, 'God has forsaken me!' His cry is not a failure of faith; it is a demand for an explanation which Job would have understood.

Both Job and Jesus remind us that even people of unbreakable faith do not necessarily – and perhaps should not – accept suffering without calling God to account. They grieve and are angry; they demand an explanation. But they are also open to seeing or hearing God's response, and they challenge us to follow their example – whether God's response comes thundering from the clouds, or whether it comes in the experience of Jesus risen and exalted on a new day. And both Job and Jesus also affirm what we practise affirming before God every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: not my will but yours be done, on earth as in heaven.

Amen

The Feast of St Peter and St Paul (29th June) Teresa Morgan

One of my favourite books is *The English Year,* by Steve Roud, which is an encyclopaedia of folk customs, arranged day by day. Not surprisingly, many customs are attached to saints days, because, for centuries they were some of the most important days in the calendar, and you could set the annual clock by them.

St Peter and St Paul doesn't have as many special customs as some, apparently because it got wrapped up with Midsummer, which used to be celebrated for about a fortnight. But in many parts of the country today is linked with the apple crop. In Herefordshire, for instance, apple trees are traditionally baptized, today, to help them bear well. While across Cumbria, today was the day when new rushes were cut and strewn on the floors of houses and churches.

And I mention this because it illustrates the deep connection between Christianity in this country and the land. You may have heard a saying from the academic world about the difference between Christianity and Judaism. Judaism is about God – people – land. Christianity is about God – sin – salvation. But Christianity is often about the land too, and in many countries, all kinds of folk and agricultural activities are braided into the church year. The Anglican psyche (if there is such a thing, and I suspect there is) is

moulded by the memory of George Herbert, writing poetry in Bemerton, and Gilbert White, observing swallows in Selbourne, and Thomas Grey, watching the 'lowing herd' from a country churchyard – not to mention Miss Marple, solving murders before evensong. And at Petertide, Anglican clergy are ordained, mostly to serve in the vast patchwork of parishes that between them divide up the country.

I love this connection. But today also reminds us that faith can take us on long journeys: geographical or spiritual, or both.

Simon, whom Jesus called 'the rock', probably grew up with a faith deeply rooted in the land of Galilee. He would have tithed his income to the local priests and Levites, and he probably didn't work on the Sabbath. But when he answered the call of Jesus, he started to travel, first around Galilee, then into Samaria, the Decapolis, south to Jerusalem – and, after Pentecost, much further, to Antioch and eventually to Rome. Preaching the gospel took him away from his home, his family, language, culture, place, and he must have had to learn to make a home in his relationship with God, and in his new Christian communities. While he became the rock on which those communities built their new home, while they waited to be called home to God.

Paul had a rather different start in life. He was from the diaspora: Tarsus, in modern Turkey.
He probably was invested in the land of Israel (which not all diaspora Jews were), because we hear that he studied as a Pharisee in Jerusalem, but Israel may not have been as important to him as it probably was to Peter. As a Pharisee, he founded his faith above all on the law of Moses, which taught people how to make a home in any land. (Many ancient Jewish communities literally created a patch of holy land, wherever they lived. So, in Paul's day, many cities had Jewish quarters, and these would often be physically marked out with symbols on street corners – a practice which survived into the modern world.)

But Paul also had to leave home when he was called to serve Jesus Christ, and he too ended up travelling all round the Greek east, founding new communities, and also ending up in Rome. And his letters show how important it was to him, not just to create communities, but to give them a sense of being grounded. To do that, he often talks about himself, and other people, as builders. He talks about 'laying the foundation' of communities – 'building them up'. He encourages Christians to 'build each other up' (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.10-15, 1 Thess. 5.11). And he uses this building language in a metaphorical way that is completely new in Greek – as if he is creating a symbolic landscape, a spiritual city for Christians to live in while they wait for the kingdom of God.

So both Peter and Paul, who began life rooted in one landscape, travelled and built new communities that took root in new places but were built on the gospel, for those waiting in hope for God's kingdom.

And here we are, celebrating their feast day, in a country far beyond anywhere they travelled, but which for more than 1500 years has been deeply entwined with Christianity. Here we are in a place, and a community, that embraces and works for stability, but also as people who travel, physically and spiritually, and people whose faith constantly helps to found and build new Christian lives and new communities.

We celebrate Peter the rock and Paul the builder, travellers in faith. We pray for their firmness, and stability – and also for their openness to being called to new places and new understandings of God and God's action in our world. We pray for the deacons and priests who are being ordained this Petertide, to

root themselves in communities all over the land and help to build them up and travel in faith. And we ask for the grace to remain faithful, wherever we are called to travel in the coming year.

And, if you have an apple tree (or an orchard), you may not have been planning to baptize it today, as they may be doing in Herefordshire – but, at least, this is a good day to go and give any trees you have a friendly word, to encourage them to bear well this year!

Amen

Trinity 1 1 Sam. 3.1-10 (11-20), 2 Cor. 4.5-12, Mk 2.23-3.6 Teresa Morgan

Today is the first Sunday after Trinity, which to me always means the beginning of summer. And our Trinity season readings come from Jesus's early ministry in Galilee, where it always seems to be summer too – with birds on the wing, flowers on the mountainsides, grain ripening in the fields, occasional summer storms; and Jesus walking from village to village and often teaching in the open air.

Today we meet him walking through the fields around Capernaum – where his disciples pick some grain and get into trouble. Then they go to the synagogue, and Jesus heals a man with a withered hand and gets into trouble again.

But the first thing I want to say about these disputes Jesus has with the local Pharisees, is that they are typical of the kind of arguments Pharisees love to have with each other and with other Jews. One of the things that made Pharisees, Pharisees, was that they were interested in debating the law – and we're talking about the Law of Moses, in the Bible, which also acted as the law of the land of Israel. Pharisees saw debate as something that God wanted, and they had ideas about the law beyond what was written down in the scriptures – they saw it as a live, evolving system.

So when God says, don't work on the Sabbath, a Pharisee would ask, but what does God really mean? Can you feed your animals, so they don't starve? Because that's work. Can you help someone who needs you? Can you help someone even if it could wait until tomorrow? If you don't do anything at all, can you get extra credit with God? Or if you just nip out to get a pint of milk, will God turn a blind eye? How much wiggle room is there, in the law? What exactly is the relationship between what scripture commands, and what is good or right?

These are serious debates, but they're also a way of celebrating human and social diversity and ingenuity – which, after all, are also gifts from God. And when the Pharisees disappeared from history, only a couple of generations after Jesus's time, their way of debating the law was inherited by the rabbis, and it goes on to this day.

So in today's gospel, the Pharisees tell Jesus, your friends cannot pick grain on the Sabbath, because God made it a day of rest. (It's interesting that they don't say, you can't pick that grain because it doesn't belong to you! Perhaps that's because they're clergy, not farmers!) But Jesus says, What about King David? The scriptures say he ate bread from the Temple when he was hungry, so does God care more about people keeping the law, or more about people not being hungry? Exactly the kind of argument the Pharisees themselves might have made. Challenging scripture from scripture is a classic technique.

Then, in the synagogue, they have another, very similar debate. The Pharisees wait to see if Jesus will break the law by working on the Sabbath and healing someone. And Jesus says, doesn't scripture say, it's more important to do good on the Sabbath than to do harm? Again, a classic type of argument.

The reason I'm emphasizing this, is to say that even though the gospel writers are very hostile to the Jewish authorities, they show them, in many ways, as very like Jesus. They are religious leaders. They are trying to administer the law, and look after their people, in very difficult times, under an occupying power, and they are doing it as they believe God commanded them. And the reason they don't like Jesus is not because he is completely different from them. It is partly because his way of talking is bold and charismatic and getting a lot of attention, and they are afraid that he will attract the wrong kind of attention from the Romans, and get them all into trouble.

So we can have some sympathy with the Pharisees here, even though Mark doesn't.
But that takes us to what it is about Jesus that truly is different.

Because the law of Moses is law for a structured society. It starts by accepting the conventions and institutions and power-relations of everyday life and then tries to regulate them. The Pharisees accept that – but Jesus doesn't. Jesus is only really interested in the two big commandments: love God and love your neighbour. He wants people to do what fulfils those commandments, and the rest is not important.

That radical simplicity is the heart of Jesus's own life and work, and the heart of the teaching he has left us. And it was taken up by his first followers, not least because they expected the coming of God's kingdom – the end of the world as we know it – any day, and in that situation, only the big things matter.

But, of course, 2000 years later, we are beginning to suspect that the end may not be as 'nigh' as the first Christians thought, and that makes this teaching a challenge for us. Because nearly all of us accept a structured society, and conventions and institutions, and when we think that a society is going to go on for some time, that makes sense. (Also, most of us are not as brave as Jesus or the disciples were.) So, in a way, our world view is more like the Pharisees', and with reason.

But we also want to follow Jesus and his teaching. And I think there are real and important ways we can do that, even without being quite as radical as Jesus himself.

The double commandment, love God and love your neighbour, still stands at the heart of Jesus's teaching, and our discipleship. And in everything we do, we can ask ourselves, and our society, are we fulfilling those commands as well as we possibly can? If we're not, what could we – what could our society – do, to fulfil them better?

And if that sounds like a rather familiar agenda, it is, because a huge amount of all the social change and progress there has been in our part of the world in the past two millennia has been because Christians asked themselves those questions, and acted on them. And our society here and now is very far from perfect, but in enormous ways it is better than first century Israel. No mass slavery. No mass starvation. No 30% death in childbirth. No 40% deaths of infants. No crucifixion.

When we ask ourselves, are we loving God and loving our neighbours, and we really act on the answer, then we can and do change the world, and keep letting a bit more of the kingdom of God into our lives.

But because working out how to change the world can also be very complex, we could also do worse than learn a bit from both Jesus and the Pharisees about how to debate what God wants of us. Keeping the practical details in mind, even as we try to follow Jesus's radical simplicity.

Amen

Homecoming Sunday 2023 Romans 13.8-end, Matthew 18.15-20 Teresa Morgan

In Black churches in America, across all Christian denominations, 'Homecoming' is an important Sunday of the year. It takes place in September and celebrates everyone returning from their summer holidays – which often, for Black Americans, include visits to family in places where their ancestors were enslaved. Homecoming is therefore also a celebration of freedom: the freedom to make a home of one's own. It is also the Sunday when churches encourage people to come 'home' to church if they have not been attending much! This sermon was preached at St. Luke's, New Haven, a historic Black church which was founded in 1840 and which, among much else, provided the first Black bishop in the worldwide Anglican communion.

When I went home to England at the end of May, I had a wonderful experience. The sun was shining. The blossom was on the chestnut trees. The hawthorn was in flower, and I even found one or two cowslips lingering in the fields. Swallows and swifts zoomed over the village. It was a perfect spring, on the cusp of summer. Everywhere I looked I seemed to glimpse more colour, hear more distant birdsong. I was looking at my home with new eyes after being away for a year, and I was so happy!

This is one way we love to imagine home and homecoming, I think: as returning to a happy place, the place where we belong. Maybe it's the place where we were young, or where the people are whom we love. For many of us, home is where can be most ourselves. We often love leaving – travelling and adventuring – but we are always happy to be back.

At least, that's one ideal. Of course, it is not always that simple. Some of us grow up, and live, in homes that are not sunlit and happy. Some families are abusive. Some communities are abusive. Some people here are children or grandchildren of people who came to New Haven from the southern states, or the Caribbean, because those formerly slave-owning states were still not happy, or safe homes for the descendants of enslaved people.

Sometimes the home we come from is a place of very mixed experiences. And then, home becomes somewhere we have to make – to create – from scratch. And sometimes that home is something we can see only with the eyes of faith. We may be the only one who can see it.
But we build and mould it out of faith, with our labour and love. Making a place. Making family. Day by day, making a home.

This means that one of the things we do at Homecoming, is to celebrate the homes where we have been, and are happy. But we also celebrate the homes we have created and built. The homes built by people we know and love: our grandparents and parents, and siblings and friends, and children. We honour all those people today, and we celebrate them for the homes they have made for all the people they loved. They are all not only home-makers, but makers of community.

Our gospel today is also about making a home. Jesus is building a new community. A community of people who follow him, who love God, and are waiting for the coming of God's kingdom, where they hope and trust that God will give them a home for eternal life.

Early Christians saw their community in two ways, I think. On the one hand, it was a kind of tent. A provisional home, where we live together in hope while we are waiting to be taken into heaven. St. Paul says something like that in 2 Corinthians (5.1). (He's talking about the physical bodies which are are home on earth, but also our communities.) 'For we know that the earthly tent we live in will be destroyed, but we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.'

But because early Christians were living together in hope, they were also making a real home in the present. Because they were following Christ, they were already living under God's rule. So, in a sense, they were already in God's kingdom; they were already home.

Matthew highlights that in our gospel, when Jesus says to the disciples, 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven … and where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' When we are with Christ, then the walls between our earthly tent and our eternal home melt away and we are always already home.

But, as we all know, when we are making a home or a community, there have to be rules, and ways of dealing with it when people break them. And that's the other thing today's gospel is about. If one person does something wrong, says Jesus, put it to them one-to-one. If that doesn't work, take it to a small group. If that doesn't work, take it to the whole community. And if that person just refuses to get along with everyone else, eventually you can treat them 'like a gentile or a tax collector', which apparently means, you can throw them out.

It is quite practical advice. It's probably what Matthew's own community did. But it's not quite the whole story. Because Jesus says, if someone does wrong and you can't get them back on board, treat them like a gentile or a tax collector. And, for Jews, in Jesus's day, gentiles and tax collectors are the ultimate outsiders. But it is also true that one of Jesus' own disciples, in Matthew's gospel, is a tax collector. And more than once he praises the faith of gentiles and says they too will go to heaven.

So gentiles and tax collectors are not really outsiders at all: more like community members in waiting. And that suggests that even if a person has to be expelled for bad behaviour, they door is always open for them to come back.
Even the worst offender can always come home.

Home, if it is a strong, loving home, is the place where we are forgiven for our many mistakes and wrongdoings, and given another chance to become more fully ourselves; more fully the people God made us to be.

So today we celebrate Homecoming, and the homes we come home to. Family homes, and our church home. If we are fortunate, they are places where we can be ourselves, and flourish. Where we can be forgiven for our wrongdoings, and become a bit more the people God made us to be. They are places which many of us give to, without counting the cost, in work and love, but which also give so much to us. They are the places where we share life – food – love – hope.

But there is one thing that no home ever is, whether it is a family home, or a church, or any other community, and that is, finished. All homes are a work in progress, because life changes. We grow up, move around, make new friends. Our tastes or our income change; children and grandchildren come and grow up, and go, and return. And, as Christians, we know that our earthly home is just a tent, and we are looking forward to the day when we come into our eternal home.

And Paul tells us to be alert, because that day may come any time. 'Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep, because salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone; the day is near….'
The day when we will hear God say, Your sins are forgiven. Your journey is ended. Welcome home.

Amen
(St Luke's, New Haven, Connecticut)

Convocation sermon: Yale 2023 Teresa Morgan

Rejoicing in God's world and delighting in humankind
Proverbs 8.1-11, 22-23, 30-35 NIV

I want to tell you three stories: about the best education I ever had; the most fun I ever had teaching; and the most unexpected lesson I ever learned.

The best education I ever had was in Germany, at the Cologne Academy of Music and Dance, with the great violinist, Igor Ozim.
Ozim was a perfectionist. He was notorious for taking elite students, and making them play nothing but open strings for months, and rebuilding their technique from the bottom up. Imagine being an elite athlete, and going to a coach who makes you relearn how to walk.

Mercifully, I escaped that, but for the first few weeks I was there, I practised one dotted rhythm in a Brahms sonata for hours, until my arms were like the inside of a Swiss watch.
Every lesson was a masterclass. Ozim taught in a huge high studio overlooking the city, with tables all round the walls and a grand piano in the middle, with a fearsome accompanist. Students would drop in and out all day, listen to each other, criticize each other, translate the jokes.

Our aim was to develop the highest technical perfection in the service of the deepest interpretation of the music – focalized through the unique personality of the performer (because a musician, like any artist, plays the person they are as well as the instrument and the music). But to do that, Ozim was also teaching us to hold ourselves open to that mysterious inspiration that comes from beyond the music or the performer, but sometimes strikes the performance and ignites the air between performer and audience, and puts us in touch with something which we cannot reach out and capture if we try, but which can capture us.

It was terrifically hard work. But it was also a joyous dance of craft and creativity, muscle and brain and soul. And it was, essentially, the same exercise as we perform, as academics, when when we hone our skills to interpret the world around us, but also hold ourselves open to revealing, sometimes, something beyond what we can reach for ourselves, but which reveals itself through us. But for some reason, I think we are less good, or maybe just less brave, than musicians and other artists, at expressing what we are trying to do in academic work.

Well: that was learning. The most fun I ever had teaching was in a very different space.

For many years, when I taught at Oxford University, my favourite teaching engagement of the year was the day I spent teaching MBA students at the Business School the elements of ancient Greek rhetoric.

Now: as in all business schools, these students were paying a lot of money for a course which they hoped would equip them to earn a lot more. So they were really focused.

My course centred on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* – still the best book ever written in the West on how to use language to get people to do what you want. Everything he says – about choosing your words, constructing a sentence and a point and a speech; how to use rhythm and imagery; how to pitch and pace your voice – still works as well today as it did in the fourth century BCE. But the most interesting sections are where he talks about the mechanics of argument. And not coincidentally, those are also the sections which highlight the tricky ethics of persuasion.

Aristotle shows how to make a formally logical argument, which, if your premises are defensible (your facts are right, and so on) will lead to a sound conclusion. But he also knows that the most persuasive arguments are rarely about facts or logic. Much more often they are about probabilities and the assumptions of the audience.

So: you might start a speech by saying a few things we all know (or think we know) about human nature or the world we live in. Then, applying those assumptions to your topic, you speculate about what is likely to be true, or likely to be the best thing to do.

Aristotle called this type of argument an enthymeme. We call it probabilistic, and it is very familiar, because it is the stuff of much contemporary public discourse – not to mention computer algorithms, data analytics, and AI. And it's attractive because it appeals to the accumulation of our lived experience: the mosaic of observation and impression, and inference, and report that we build up over our lifetimes. We rely on that all the time, and it often works quite well.

Where it works less well is when the facts we are dealing with are novel, or not typical, or we're going to have something different from usual, because the enthymeme doesn't encourage us to look at the specific, the actual, the new. But we (like Aristotle) live in a fast-changing world, where it sometimes feels as if the facts, and our good or realistic options, are changing all the time. Then enthymemes become risky. And that, I think, is one of the major challenges our public discourse faces today.

But describing the enthymene was not Aristotle's only major contribution to rhetoric. He also saw that a crucial part of persuading anyone about anything is making them believe not just your words, but yourself. And credibility can be engineered. You do it by projecting a character which will resonate with your audience (which Aristotle called *ēthos*) and appealing to their emotions (which he called *pathos*).

To construct the character that will appeal to your audience, you find out as much as possible about them: what they want, and what they're frightened of. Then you present yourself as the person they need: wise; energetic; forward-looking – whatever they're going to like. And in that character, you play on their emotions. Maybe you rile them up by telling them your opponent is trying to take something away from them. Or calm them down by assuring them that whatever they want is what you want. The more precisely you can play on people's emotions, the more power you have.

Along with the enthymeme, *ēthos* and *pathos* are still the most powerful tools in all kinds of discourse today. And Aristotle could see as well as we can that this is a big risk – especially to the quality of public life and relationships, and it worried him. He tried to find a way to tie rhetoric to morality, and make it not just effective, but good. He did it (roughly) by arguing that the aim of human life is *eudaimonia* – happiness or human flourishing – and we flourish when we do what we are designed to do best. Which, he thought, involves exercising reason in accordance with virtue: because, he argued, being good is part of being human. So someone who speaks in public could, in theory, be a self-interested, manipulative charlatan who only cares about wealth and power, but who would want to be such a person?

The problem with that argument seems to be that, in practice, quite a lot of people are very happy to be that person!

When I was teaching my MBA students, I worried about this a lot. I could teach them the elements of rhetoric in a day, and they were drinking it in. But I could not teach them to love goodness in a day. And if they didn't love goodness already, wasn't I just teaching them how to exploit people?

I never solved that problem, and I don't think we have solved it in education in general, or in public life. It is one of the big questions we face, not least when we study or teach in a university: can we find ways to tie discourse and persuasion to goodness and truth more effectively than Aristotle?

My last story is about the most unexpected lesson I ever learned, which happened soon after I was ordained, over twenty years ago.

At the time, I was a professor at Oxford. And as I started serving in a parish, it struck me that there were useful parallels between my university teaching, and preaching and teaching in the parish. And also between my pastoral responsibilities for my students, and my work with my congregation.

And it seemed likely to me (enthymeme!) that my experience of university teaching would inform my teaching in the parish, but my pastoral training for ministry might inform my pastoral work with students, for which I hadn't had any training.

What happened was exactly the opposite.
As a teacher, I would often play with ideas – spinning a line to see where it went, playing devil's advocate to make students think. It was fun, and it did make them think, and I didn't necessarily worry about whether it made for the best interpretation of the material. Getting them to think was enough.

But you can't stand up in a pulpit and spin a line – or if you do, you are making a fool of your faith and your congregation's. In a pulpit you can only talk as honestly and carefully as you can about what you believe to be truth. So my congregation taught me that if something is worth teaching, it's worth teaching seriously, and it changed the way I taught.

On the other hand – and some of you will know this – when you are ordained, and put on any kind of clerical uniform, your congregation instantly concludes that you are much wiser and more pastorally gifted than you actually are. They often entrust you with their needs, fears, and doubts, in a way not many 30-year-olds are really equipped to deal with. And it is so tempting to go with it, and pretend you are much wiser and more spiritual than you are. But that way lies self-deception and hypocrisy, and potentially real harm to other people.

I was saved from that (I think!) by my students.
They knew I had no training in pastoral care for them. They certainly didn't assume I had the gifts of the Spirit. If they came to me it was just on the basis of my lived experience, however limited. They wanted my honest opinion, and no more. And I realized that, essentially, that was what I had to offer my congregation, too. It was not nothing – on a good day, it was not without the Spirit – but I had better not imagine it was more than it was. So my students taught me a humility in pastoral encounters which I hope I've never forgotten.

So: three stories, and three reflections on education.
When we learn – and teach and practise what we learn – we are trying to develop our human – physical, intellectual – capabilities to the utmost. But we also have to learn to hold ourselves open to inspiration

that comes from far beyond us, and is the thing that ignites what we say and do and reveals mysteries beyond our grasp.

And we all want to communicate effectively – to reach out to people, and change hearts and minds. But if we do it purely for our own benefit, without caring about goodness or truth, then what we say is liable to damage, even destroy the very fabric of relationships and societies that we depend on.

And sometimes, however accomplished we are, the most important lessons come from the most unexpected places.

Which brings us to the Book of Proverbs, and the passage we've just heard.[4]

The fascinating thing about ancient ethical or wisdom writing is that it is so rooted in, and committed to the everyday; the world we live in. And at the same time it is so idealistic. Perhaps more than any other genre of writing, it wants to do the fullest justice both to the material, and to the metaphysical domain.

Wisdom walks the walls of its city. It stands in the marketplace, and looks around. It observes people – and donkeys and swallows and ants. It knows the value of a cellar full of wine; and a business partner who keeps their word; and a tradesman who doesn't lean on his scales. It celebrates love and physical pleasure, and worries about prostitution and gender relations. It celebrates community, and worries when people fall out and abuse the law.

At the same time, it is constantly tantalized, and it tries to infiltrate its listeners, with the sense of a God whose thoughts, and ways, are as far above everyday life as the heavens are above the earth. Who precedes and exceeds everything that is. Who commands existence, and to whom everything belongs and is answerable. And whom we can never reach out and grasp – but whom we can encounter. And be shown that we are wonderfully made. And know that we are known. And feel that we are loved. And to whom we can respond with love and awe – and learning.

Because wisdom celebrates not least that God made humanity to learn, about the world and about God. And God, like any teacher, is delighted when humanity wants to learn. So, in today's reading, Wisdom says, Listen to my instruction … and find – not only knowledge, and expertise, but life itself, as the favour of the Lord falls on your learning and ignites it. Wait in my doorway and watch at my doors, because wisdom may come into your life from directions you never expected.

And, when you listen, you will hear Wisdom speak both persuasively and trustworthily, a truth that touches those that hear it and turns their hearts and minds towards God.
This is Proverbs' way of squaring the circle that Aristotle struggled with, between persuasion and goodness. The writer does it essentially by seeing the source of persuasion and goodness as a personal divinity who actively creates humanity and determines its default state as good in relation to its creator.

That brings some challenges of its own (which we won't get into now). But it does offer a vision of how what we learn and how we communicate are connected with why we learn and when learning is good.

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[4] The majority of scholars believe that the bulk of the sayings of Proverbs are preexilic or exilic (= "Biblical Hebrew") and that most of the instructions and speeches (chaps. 1-9) as well as the final editing are postexilic (= "Late Biblical Hebrew"). There are no Graecisms, which suggests it's pre-Hellenistic.

To shape this vision the writer looks back to the first creation narrative in the Book of Genesis.[5] He makes Wisdom say, The very first of God's works, was me. And I was there – the Word – when everything else was spoken into being.[6] So I can tell you that **before you ever spoke a word, you were spoken.** You are made of words.
And if you speak in the ways – some later commentators would say, in the image – of the word which spoke everything into being – then your speech will be good, as the one who created you is good and saw that you were made good. But if your speech is self-serving, manipulative, untruthful, then you are no longer in touch with its source, and what you say can only end badly.

Well: here we are at the beginning of a new academic year. Ready to learn, ready to teach, ready to enjoy our surroundings and our shared life here.

Wisdom celebrates all those things, and also points beyond them. She says, while you are working to learn, and think, and communicate the best you can, be open to the inspiration that ignites your learning beyond any human power. While you are studying wisdom in the places you have chosen, don't forget that sometimes it comes from quite unexpected places. And remember that before you ever spoke – or listened or read – you were spoken. And the words that do good in the world are the words that speak in the ways of Wisdom and the word that brought all of us into being.

Last but not least, as you pursue wisdom, be as joyful as she is, as she rejoices in the presence of God, and delights in humankind.

Thank you.

Genesis 28.10-19, Romans 8.18-25, Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43 Teresa Morgan

The parable of the wheat and the tares is one of the most familiar in the gospels. But when I read it this week, it made me think not so much about this story, as about this kind of story. What does it mean to say that the kingdom of heaven, or the Son of God (who is also the Son of Man), or Godself is like someone or something we know? 'The kingdom of heaven can be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.' Why would that make sense?

The people who feel most confident that they have an answer to this are anthropologists and psychologists of religion, both of whom argue that we see God as a father, or judge, or farmer because human beings make gods in their own image. (Except when the gods are animals, or rivers, or something else, but we can leave that aside for now.) If gods are made in our image, that would be why, for example, in our Old Testament reading, God is described as standing beside Jacob and talking to him in his sleep.

It is a popular theory, but I don't think it's the whole story: not least because, in the world of the New Testament, the more anthropomorphic gods were, the more they could be criticized for being too

[5] this is one of the earliest elaborations of that story. Dina Stein, Reading Genesis (CUP, 2010), ch. On rabbinic interpretation, 119-135 says Proverbs 8 one of earliest elaborations of Gen. 1.

[6] Inv. 30, Wisdom declares "I was beside him [as] an 'iimon." The Hebrew word has been interpreted in three principal ways: (1) artisan, (2) trustworthy (friend), and (3) ward, nursling. The translation "artisan" is first attested in the second-century B.C.E. Septuagint (later followed by the Peshitta and Vulgate), which rendered the Hebrew consonants 'mn by the feminine participle hannozousa, literally, "in harmony with, suitable to; arranger, joiner." One objection to this interpretation is that Wisdom cannot be an artisan because Proverbs 8 does not give her an active role in creating.13 The objection is not valid, however, for Wisdom is not an artisan here but a sage or culture bringer (see Introduction §5). Unfortunately, the Mesopotamian mythological context that would have preserved the meaning "sage" for 'mn fell into oblivion and scholars resorted to etymological speculation in order to discover the meaning of the now-unknown word.

human – violent or unreliable or unjust. Anthropomorphic gods were often problematic and sometimes controversial. On the other hand, when gods were loved and worshipped, it was at least as often for being unlike human beings: eternal, immaterial, unchanging, unknowable, all-wise, all-good. So it is, at least, an over-simplification to say that people make gods in their own image.

Another possibility is that we talk about God, or God's kingdom, as like something we know as a way of expressing our sense of relationship with God. In our New Testament reading, Paul talks about Christians as children of God, sisters and brothers of Christ – born from God – and reborn through the spirit of God – and waiting in hope with the whole of creation to be finally freed from the powers of death to live in the eternal life of God. Paul is not trying to describe, here, what God is like, in Godself. He's trying to describe what being in relationship with God means for us – for who we are, how we can live in our world, and who we can hope to become.

When Paul, or other writers, call God Father, or Jesus friend or brother, or the Spirit our advocate or guide, that want to affirm that to be in a relationship with God is to be part of something much more than ourselves, in which we are welcome and loved – valued and empowered – and wonderfully changed.

That theme runs throughout the New Testament. But there's more to the idea of 'likeness'. We know from experience that human intelligence is very good at understanding the material world around us, and fairly good at understanding other people, but less secure on non-material things – from the reality of goodness, to the existence of the soul, or the meaning of it all. But we also have this persistent sense that there is something beyond the material – a realm of creativity or meaning – that gives some – or all – of the deepest meaning to our lives. We struggle to understand it, but we feel it: when we wonder at the beauty of creation; when we fall in love; when we have a transformative meeting with someone like Jesus Christ. And this experience lights up the parts of us which are also beyond the material – imagination; faith; our ability to love and be loved; our capacity to hope and change this world by our hope.

And this testifies to us that there is, in us, a spark of something more than material, which responds to something beyond our understanding, but not beyond our reach, which we call God. So when we say that God, or God's kingdom, or God's Son, is like something we know, it can be a way of saying that we are like something or someone we don't know – but we do connect with. And when we do, we are certain that some part of us is part of it, and all the meaning of it all.

But it is surely also significant that we feel this connection with God here, in this world, in our human lives.

To experience God we don't have to despise our material body, as gnostics did in Jesus's world, or suppress our emotions, as Stoics did, or reject the world entirely, as some ascetics did. The opposite: because it is here and now that we connect with the meaning of it all. And that is another reason why the kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing seed in a field. The place where we experience the kingdom, and Godself, is the field – the body, the home, the community, and every material part of our world.

God is with us: to breathe new life into these bodies, these spirits, these communities, this place. Which is another way of saying that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him should not perish but have eternal – abundant, unquenchable – life. And that another way of saying that the seed that is sown in the world is God's own, God's son incarnate, and the harvest will be a gathering of humanity so transformed by God that, as Matthew says, it will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.

Genesis 21.8–21, Matthew 10.24–39 Teresa Morgan

When I came home from America at the end of May, I had a wonderful experience. The sun was shining. The Roman candles were still on the trees. The hawthorn was out, and I even found one or two cowslips lingering in the fields. Swallows and swifts zoomed over the village. It was a perfect spring, on the cusp of summer. Everywhere I looked I seemed to glimpse more blossom, catch more distant birdsong – as Edward Thomas says in his poem, 'Addlestrop',

'Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.'

I was looking at my world with new eyes after being away, and it was miraculous.

Seeing the world in new ways is one of the things faith invites us to do all the time. Traditionally, people use the 'eyes of faith' to see what is below the surface of an act or a text. When we take part in the Eucharist, for instance, we see the bread and wine, but we also see Christ with us at the table. Alternatively the 'eyes of faith' may see the future with hope and confidence even when hope seems hard to come by. Or sometimes it's by the 'eye of faith' that we recognize that now we see the meaning of our lives as if through a glass darkly, and we will only see the full picture when we come face to face with God.

I was thinking about this while I was reading today's gospel, which is an eclectic collection of teachings, and full of paradoxes. You are so precious that God counts the very hairs on your head, but it doesn't matter if you lose your life. Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose it for Jesus' sake will find it. I come to bring not peace but a sword. Not to mention the paradox of the Old Testament lesson, when God tells Abraham not to worry about sending his concubine Hagar and their son into the desert, because God will make a great nation out of Ishmael. Ishmael became the father of the Arab nations, and, to this day, we might feel that relations between the people of Israel and the Arabs offer a good deal to worry about….

So I wondered, do we need the eye of faith to see beyond these paradoxes? To see how in some way they are necessary, or even good? Maybe we do, but if so, I am afraid my eye of faith does not see that far.

I don't know why a just and loving God asks Jesus to bring not peace but a sword. A bit of me wants to say, you're God! if there's a choice, couldn't he just bring peace? I know why early Christians under persecution might have consoled themselves by saying that what they suffered was the will of God. But I don't know why so much human suffering and conflict, over millennia, are tolerable to God. I'm not convinced anybody does.

But I do accept the teaching, because I do trust in God. Because of that, even when my eye of faith fails me, I will keep trying to live and act in the conviction that what God wants for us, is, ultimately, life. Peace, within households and among friends. And that all will be well.

And it occurred to me that maybe that is the answer, or an answer. Sometimes what the eye of faith is called to do is to recognize that faith is at best partially sighted, and keep walking anyway. Not because we can see where we, or God, are going. Not because we are hoping that Jesus doesn't mean it when he says that he is not going to abolish death or conflict from the world. Because we believe it is what God asks of us, and therefore right and good. And we are prepared to answer that asking, even when we are not sure what God has in mind for the world.

Perhaps that is what Jesus means when he says that it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. He did what God asked of him, throughout his life and death and life. He asks us to do the same.

The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis for opposing Hitler, had a theory that human beings should live in the world as if there is no God. He meant

that we should take responsibility for ourselves and each other and do what we believe is right and good, not because we are hoping for some heavenly reward, or trying to escape punishment, but just because it is right and good.

Only then, he thought, will we begin to be the human beings God made it possible for us to be, and really follow Jesus in doing God's work in the world. That is quite a challenge. Today's gospel is a challenge. But perhaps it is enough.

Amen

July 16, 1944 Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge: ...And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur* [translation: "as if there were no God"]. And this is just what we do recognize--before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering

Genesis 37.1-4, 12-28, Romans 10.5-15 Rev. Teresa Morgan

This summer, we have heard a series of Old Testament stories of wrongdoing and suffering. We heard how Abraham and Sarah had no children, but Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by his slave-girl Hagar, and Sarah, in jealousy, made him throw Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert to die. There, in fact, they were rescued, and Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arab nations, with no cause to love the Jewish children of Abraham.

In an even more morally challenging story, we heard how Sarah miraculously had a child, Isaac, but God told Abraham to kill Isaac, and Abraham was about to do it when God gave him a ram to sacrifice instead. Then we heard of Isaac's son Jacob, who cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance and ran away to his uncle Laban, where he married both Laban's daughters, but loved the younger one, Rachel.

Jacob ended up with two wives and two concubines and twelve sons, but he loved best Rachel's child Joseph, to whom he gave a special robe with long sleeves. (This is what we sometimes call the 'coat of many colours': sadly, 'many colours' is a mistranslation!) Joseph's brothers were understandably resentful, and, in today's reading, they plotted to kill him, but then sold him instead to passing slave-traders – who were their own distant relatives, descendants of Ishmael. (The writer says this happens near Shechem, in what is now the Palestinian West Bank, where Palestinians live who identify as descendants of Ishmael and still have no love for Jews.)

It is a long and sorry saga. But these stories also speak to another and more unexpected theme, which runs throughout the Bible. Jews, and Christians, have never come to a firm view about why people do wrong.

Through most of the Old Testament, we find two theories. One is that people choose to do wrong and are morally responsible for their actions. When, for instance, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, they chose to do it and were responsible for what they did. But, as we have seen this summer, wrong is also something that can cascade down generations, when one generation does wrong and another suffers for it and is resentful, and does wrong to someone else in turn, and we end up with an endless tit for tat.

The other Old Testament theory about why people do wrong is that people are just naturally bad. (This raises the question, if God made them bad, is evil God's fault? But we will have to leave that aside for today.) In Genesis chapter 6, for instance, when God decided to wipe out the human race with a great flood, it was because he saw that 'every inclination … of the human heart was evil all the time' (6.5).

Much later – not long before before the beginnings of Christianity – a third idea developed: that there was another power in heaven, working against God; a power known, among other names, as the devil, Satan, Beelzebub, Lucifer, or the Prince of Darkness. He first appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and was usually thought of as some kind of fallen angel who tempted people and led them astray. Those who believed in the devil, for instance, might retell the story of Adam and Eve to suggest that the snake was the devil, and led Adam and Eve astray.

Christians now often take the idea of the devil for granted. But, in fact, very few passages of the New Testament, or other early Christian writings, mention the devil. Interestingly, they do not suggest that people are just naturally bad, either – Christians never seem to have liked that idea. Most early Christians, like most Jews, thought that human beings choose to do good or evil and are morally responsible for their actions.

But early Christians also thought a great deal about the idea that wrongdoing and suffering can cascade down generations. We can get ourselves into situations where wrong and hurt, resentment and retaliation, tit for tat, and everyone thinking everyone else should behave better before we have to – all that can get 'baked into' our relationships and our societies, and it can be very hard to break out of it and take responsibility for doing good towards each other or towards God.

That idea has been a theme of the New Testament readings we have heard this summer. Paul talks about it, for instance, in a famous passage of Romans (7.19–21) which we heard a couple of weeks ago, when he says, 'I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep doing. And if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it … What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this life that is subject to death?'

I suspect this sense that we can get trapped in a cycle of wrongdoing and suffering, and find it hard, or impossible, to break out of it, is something many of us would recognize from our own experience. But this is what Paul believes Jesus came into the world to save us from.

By being the person he is, and living and dying the way he does, Jesus creates a kind of 'firebreak' to evil. He stops the cycle of wrongdoing and suffering. He never does wrong in any circumstances, no matter what happens to him, and when wrong is done to him he meets it with understanding and love, and works to change it.

Just as Jews and Christians have never been really sure where wrongdoing and evil come from, so Christians have never been sure quite how Jesus stops the cycle. It is a profound and mysterious question, and we go on pondering it down the generations. There are many theories: what we call theories of atonement. Perhaps Jesus wiped out our wrongdoing by allowing himself to be sacrificed to

God for our sins. Or perhaps he fought the devil for us, if there is a devil. Or perhaps, by his teaching and love and example, he draws us to himself and gives us a different way of being.

However he does it – and it may be that different people need to experience Jesus as acting in different ways for us, so perhaps all the theories are right in some way – all Christians have always been convinced of two things. For two thousand years, we have found that putting our trust in Jesus, and following him, is our way out of the cycle of wrongdoing and suffering. However he does it, Jesus makes it possible for us to live and love, differently, and well. And everything we need to follow Jesus, is here, with us, in this world, in his life and death, his teaching, and example, and in the community that follows him. The community in which we celebrate his presence with us now, and we try to be that firebreak to wrongdoing that he was, and love God and one another as he loved us.

Amen

<u>'Green' Sermon for Evensong on 16 July 2023</u>: Rev.John Findon

Bob asked me last Wednesday evening – I fancied a bit nervously – if I was all set for the 'Green' sermon. I replied that I hoped I was, but went on to make the obvious point that it is far easier to find a suitable reading for the occasion from the Old Testament than from the New. The Old Testament has many expressions of appreciation of the natural world, from 'God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good', to later descriptions of the beauty and fecundity of the Promised Land such as inspired Isaiah in the passage that was read this morning: 'The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.' All nature will rejoice in the Lord. Not to mention so many places in the Psalms from number 148 which we sang, to the much fuller exultation in the wonderful variety of living creatures in number 104, which unusually I asked to be read as the first lesson. There, as you heard, the psalmist rejoices in God's bountiful provision of varied habitats – for example of high hills which are a refuge for the wild goats and stony rocks for the conies. In verse 25 (p. 479) the writer begins to sing the praise of God's works in 'the great and wide sea also', which in itself is remarkable, for the Jews were not a sea-loving people. But in verse 26 he goes further: 'There go the ships and there is that Leviathan whom thou hast made to take his pastime therein'. That is a still more striking thought, for Leviathan was a chimaera, a legendary sea monster that inhabited Jewish nightmares; not really part of what we should call the 'natural order' at all. But I am told that what the author probably meant there is 'that Leviathan whom thou hast made **<u>to take thy pastime therewith</u>'**. What an image of sovereignty that is! Of God taking his pastime with the terrifying sea monster as you or I might in the bath with a plastic duck!

So, there is masses of 'Green' wisdom in the Old Testament, of full-hearted wonder at the beauty and complexity of the created world, and sometimes of awareness of our duty to treat it responsibly, whether giving the land a regular sabbath rest, or being mindful of the well-being of fellow creatures such as nesting birds. What is more, clearly enough for any green warrior, humanity is presented as a functioning **part** of the whole. The last sentence of the sixth day of the creation – 'God saw everything that he had made and indeed it was very good' – comes *after*, and so *includes*, our duty and privilege as human beings: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion…' The same thought is implicit in Psalm 104 where 'Man goeth forth to his work and to his labour until the evening' comes seamlessly after 'The sun ariseth' when the other creatures 'get them away together and lay them down in their dens'. Animal and human, it is all one system.

But there is very little of this sort in the New Testament. Almost shockingly, very few 'green' words from Jesus himself. 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin, yet

I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these'. That, I think, with the neighbouring comment on 'the birds of the air which toil not neither do they spin' is the only place where he obviously expresses appreciation of the wonder of the natural world, and it seems he does it only in passing, as he drives home teaching about anxiety for food or clothing. We are used to being challenged by Jesus's words, but there is no challenge here; anybody who has opened their eyes for five minutes has arrived at the same thought. Almost any poet would offer a fuller celebration of natural things. Spoilt for choice. Let me offer you one of my favourites, these lines by the wonderful W. H. Davies, which Michael Head set in a lovely song?

> Sweet Chance, that led my steps abroad
> Beyond the town, where wild flow'rs grow!
> A rainbow and a cuckoo!
> Lord, how rich and great the times are now!
> Know, all ye sheep and cows, that keep on staring
> That I stand so long in grass that's wet from heavy rain,
> A rainbow and a cuckoo's song
> May never come together again!
> May never come this side the tomb!

Jesus may not have used comparable words, but we know that he shared cheerfully in human enjoyment of the gifts of his Father in heaven. The Scribes and Pharisees said that he went to too many parties. To appreciate nature is part of the humanity he came to share. We can take it for granted.

With all this in mind I chose from the New Testament the parable of the unjust steward in St Luke, which you may think was eccentricity run mad. So let me try to explain why it seems to me to offer us wisdom for this Green Evensong.

When we read in the Old Testament of the Jews' excitement about their promised homeland, they regularly speak of it as a 'land flowing with milk and honey'. That is not an expression to do with its natural beauty, but with its bountifulness as land to be cultivated. All of the joy in creation in Psalm 104 is joy in *provision*, above all provision of food, for the various creatures. Everybody knows that the Eskimos have a large number of different words for 'snow'. My Concordance tells me that the Hebrew Bible has thirteen different words for 'thorns'. I don't think that that is because the Holy Land was uniquely thorny, but because the Old Testament was written by people who had first hand experience of how hard it is to clear land for agriculture. They knew all about the difficulty of thorns. Their first duty in the Promised Land was to see that God's people were fed, and in that task thorns were the ever-present enemy. When Adam and Eve in the story are cast out of Eden, Adam is warned about the thorns and thistles that lie ahead. There are no sumptuary laws in the Old Testament – no regulations, that is, saying that 'enough is enough; you may consume this much and no more' – but plenty about obligations to care for the needy.

The New Testament is very different. It is clear of course on our need for daily bread, but it has far more to say about the *danger* of wealth. One of the most striking explorations of that is the passage you heard from St Luke chapter 16. The steward knows that he is about to lose his job; he takes urgent steps to provide for his future by fiddling accounts. He thus creates a body of those who, as people say, 'owe him one'. Friends secured by mammon of unrighteousness. All lucre is probably filthy if you scrutinize it closely enough, but this use of it has given him security when he cannot dig and would be ashamed to beg. We are told that the rich man who employed him, surely himself an expert in filthy lucre, *commended* him for being wise enough to secure his future in the emergency. I dare say he recognized a kindred spirit. Jesus also asks us to learn from him: wisdom to take urgent action when required, and wisdom to understand that, for all its dirt, wicked mammon, filthy lucre, can have a good use – to make for

ourselves friends in the heavenly homes; so to do good to our neighbours that they carry with them there the comfort that we could give them. It should burn holes in our pockets until we find such uses.

I pointed out earlier that there are – perhaps surprisingly – no laws in the Old Testament to limit how much we should consume. Occasionally, one of the prophets will comment on the arrogance of those who 'add house to house' say, or who deck themselves with expensive clothes and jewellery, and who carouse with strong drink late into the night. But there are no specific laws to enforce better lifestyles. By New Testament times, the economy had changed in ways that we easily recognize. Think of Jesus's parables: the merchant so familiar with the market that he sells all he has in order to secure the pearl of great price; the owner of a vineyard so large that numbers of labourers need to be hired every day; men who deal in many talents, each one worth thousands of days' wages for a working man; and many more. This was a society where there was prodigious wealth that did not derive immediately from agriculture. Remember that the servant in the parable of the talents who buried his single one in the ground was told that he should at least have invested it with the bankers and earnt interest. Wealth has become detached from food.

Again and again Jesus warns us of the dangers of such wealth: think of the rich man and Lazarus, or the man who thought he could carry on building bigger barns to store bumper crops for the foreseeable future, or the rich young man who went away sadly because the Lord had told him to give away all that he had, or the sheep and goats, identified by the way they use their resources. 'How hard it is', he says,' for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven'. And before we sigh in relief that we are not Elon Musk or Richard Branson we should do well to remember that all of us probably throw away in our bins every week food that millions of God's children would gladly walk miles to collect for their families.

When Jesus spoke of 'the birds of the air that do not gather into barns' he reminded his disciples that 'Your heavenly Father feeds them', and added a sentence which does not sound especially green: 'you are of more value than the birds'. I mentioned this to a parishioner yesterday who simply said that Jesus was wrong. I don't think so. If we believe that he was truly God's Son living a human life, we can surely see that he could only have been a man of his own time: just as he spoke Aramaic and not American. For all the economic changes since Old Testament times, feeding the human population for him remained the primary task of human endeavour. And surely it remains so for us. We **are** more important than the birds; it is part of a responsibility that we dare not shirk. We may rightly have come to see that we need to care for birds and all other creatures too, but that has been a lesson not so much in kindness as in self-preservation. If we know what is good for us, we shall protect bio-diversity. But the need to feed the human population must always, surely, be paramount. And if the world is to do it without destroying our planet, it will only be by a change of heart in the prosperous West to surrender our Godless belief in the need for endless growth.

Some of the choristers told me on Wednesday that they didn't fully understand the hymn that I have chosen to come next, and that the tune was gloomy. Well, I'm not going to be dissuaded from loving Gibbons tunes, but I want to end with a final thought which is there in that hymn (544) and follows from what I have tried to say. Our faith makes a claim for the ultimate value that God sets on human lives. We can know nothing more precious – our own and others'. He shows his love for us, the value he sets on us, in the gifts with which he showers us: in Christ, in each other, and in the wonders of creation. They are his gifts of love. I was lucky to have known Bill Vanstone, who wrote the poem: he was one of the selectors who agreed that I should train for ordination, and Vicar of a parish very near to the one where I first served. All his writing and preaching was directed at urging his fellow Christians to see God's gifts for what they are. Not largesse easily doled out, but loving and costly gifts offered in the hope of a loving response. Once see the creation in that way and how should our lives not be ones to satisfy the most fervent green warrior?

Open are the gifts of God,
Gifts of love to mind and sense;
Hidden is love's agony,
Love's endeavour, love's expense.
Therefore he who shows us God
Helpless hangs upon the tree;
And the nails and crown of thorns
Tell of what God's love must be.

Loving appreciation of and care for creation will follow necessarily from what he has shown us of himself in Christ.

Prologue of John Christmas Night 2022 Teresa Morgan

I was going to talk about the Word of God tonight. But the thing that's really been bothering me all week is, why don't I feel the same about Christmas as I did as a child?

I know the obvious answer to this is that for children – if they are fortunate – Christmas is all magic and excitement and holidays, while the adults are working furiously to make the magic happen, so they don't have time to get excited. But I do much less work for Christmas than many people, so I don't think that is the whole story. And, looking back, I think my excitement as a child had three strands.

One was that I might receive gifts I could never have bought for myself – I could never have earned – but which were pure generosity, from people saying, we love you, you are loved. Another thing was the wrapping paper – I love wrapping paper! Anything wrapped immediately becomes a thrilling mystery. It could be anything! Beyond your wildest dreams! When you open it, anything could happen! Also, we often spent Christmas on my aunt and uncle's Leicestershire farm, and that farm was a magical place: another world; a different life. I loved going to church, too: the flowers, and carols, and going out at midnight. (Now, the religious side is my favourite part of Christmas.)

But thinking about all this has made me reflect how profoundly right children are in their instincts about Christmas. In the midst of all that sugar-fuelled anticipation they grasp something fundamental! Because children recognize mystery when they see it, and embrace it. And children are brilliant at two things: they know how to hope, and they know how to receive. And there is the heart of the matter.

The Christmas story tells us that, here and now, in the middle of our mortal lives – our mostly slightly dull, often hard, sometimes painful, worrying, imperfect lives – we are given a gift. One we could never have bought or earned. One which most of us would probably not dare hope for. A gift that says: You are a child of God, and you are so loved.

And the gift is the ultimate gift – life itself. A baby, Jesus of Nazareth, who changes everything around him. The first thing he does, the moment he is conceived, is to create a family, where there was no family. When he grows up, he makes friends, and makes community where there was no community. He shows the people around him how to be human – lovingly, generously, transformatively, fully human. He shows us a world more filled with light, a life more abundant than our wildest dreams.

Of all the gospels, John perhaps captures this the best. In John more than any other gospel, Jesus is a mystery package: the Word made flesh, but shrouded in the limitations of our vision. So we don't know quite what we are being given, or what will happen if we unwrap it.

But John says to us tonight, will you accept this mystery? Will you let yourself hope for something more than you could ever buy or earn? Will you follow Jesus, the Son of God, into a world more filled with light and a life more abundant than your wildest dreams? Because you are so loved by God.

A very happy Christmas to you. Amen

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 <u>knowing</u> 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 Jersualem'.

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 <u>us</u> 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

John 1.14-18 Teresa Morgan Sandford

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 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.[7] This is a modern version of it:

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 resourcefuless 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 <u>could</u> 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