

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 1 – John 1:1-5 ‘In the beginning’

When does the good news about Jesus begin? I wonder what your first reaction would be to that question... At the manger, when Jesus is born? When Caesar Augustus announces the census which takes the young couple Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? When the angel Gabriel visits Mary 9 months previously, or when the angel visits old Zechariah?

Perhaps your mind turns back to the Old Testament, to the great Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, or Micah, or Ezekiel. Or back further still, to God’s promise to King David that one of his descendents would rule forever.

Many answers, good answers: but they’d all be wrong. St John gives us the real answer, the first 3 words of his gospel: **In the beginning.... (the beginning)**

Begin at the very beginning, that’s a very good place to start, as Maria von Trapp quite sensibly reminded us all those years ago. And for us the beginning of our good news is not Bethlehem, or Nazareth, or Isaiah or even King David. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God’ (v1).

Jesus is not God’s plan B or C or whatever plan God decided on about OBC. *Jesus was always plan A.* God himself, co-existent with the Father and the Spirit, equal in glory and status: God from God, light from light, begotten not made, as the old creed puts it.

As we begin this new series in John, today let’s spend a few moments reflecting on the awesome mystery that Jesus was always God’s plan A. That what we enjoy *now* has been planned from the beginning of time – that *we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves*. That the glorious, beautiful relationship of love which God has within himself is what we’re invited into. That the light which God also has within himself – and which Jesus shines (v5) – is our light as human beings too.

And that God’s plan for us was always life. This is the life which Jesus graciously and joyfully gives to all who seek him (v4). May these awesome truths stir our hearts to praise and thanksgiving; and may God’s abundant, eternal life shine in us and through us today.

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Day 2 – John 1:1-9 ‘A light in the darkness’

‘The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.’ (v9) But why did the light come? To answer that, I’m going to take you back about 10 years to a time when my children were small and we were in a supermarket. My son at the time was obsessed with torches. It seemed like every time we entered a shop which sold any sort of hardware, we would come out with another type of torch. And so one summer’s day, in the middle of the day, when it’s about as bright as it can possibly be, there we were, standing at the tills about to buy another torch with whatever was left of his pocket money. Which we did.

And as we left the shop my son grabbed my arm and shouted: ‘Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!’

It’s great isn’t it, when your kids are young and they think you can do *everything*. You not only look after them and play games and make their food and make them feel safe, but you can make it *dark*, you probably built the house they live in and made the car you drive. Electricity comes out of your fingertips and the planets move at your command. They don’t know that your knees are shot and you can put your back out just bending down to tie your shoelaces and you can barely rewire a plug, let alone build a house. You’re daddy, you can do *everything*: ‘Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!’

The purpose of light is darkness. No point in light otherwise. That was true in the beginning: ‘The earth was formless and empty, and God said “Let there be light.”’ And it’s true now – as St John says: ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’ (v5)

Looking around our world, there’s enough darkness, isn’t there? And if we’re honest, we know the darkness is not just out there, it’s *in here* – in our hearts. Greed, compassion fatigue, anger, pride... whatever it is, it’s a darkness that needs the light.

This is why the light came: to bring us life, to put an end to our darkness – ‘that life was the light of all humankind.’ (v4) And that light still shines in the darkness. It shines today, it shines in the hearts of millions around the world – and the darkness does *not* overcome it. Never has, never will.

Today, let’s give thanks for that light, a light which never fades or blows out, which brings us warmth and peace, guidance and security – as light always does. And perhaps take a few moments too, to pray that this beautiful light draws others to Jesus, people that you love.

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Day 3 – John 1:9-13 ‘Children of God’

In 2015 Cristiano Ronaldo, the world’s most famous footballer, disguised himself and went out to play football in one of Madrid’s central plazas for an hour. He just put on a wig, a beard, some old clothes and some extra padding on his tummy. Then he took a chair, a dog, a football (obviously) and a cardboard box for tips as he tried to coax passers-by to join in a game, or to reward him for doing some trick with the ball.

Almost no-one gave him the time of day. Most walked by quickly, embarrassed at the thought they might be asked for money by someone who looked more or less like a tramp. A few joined in for a bit, and then made their excuses. Eventually one little boy joined in properly, passing the ball around with this stranger and trying to tackle him. After a while, the stranger picked up his ball, asked the boy’s name, signed the ball... and then took off the disguise bit by bit.

As you can imagine, at that point pandemonium broke out. All those who had been rushing to avoid him now stopped and got out their phones. The cafes around the plaza emptied into the square, and the last scene on the video – which had been secretly filmed the whole time – was of Ronaldo walking out the square surrounded by a great entourage of dozens of fans.

In our passage today, St John talks about another quiet entry into human life. Someone much greater, but who was largely neither recognised (v10), nor received (v11). Indeed, unlike Ronaldo, when this great being revealed his true identity he suffered rejection more than adulation. His entourage included opponents as well as followers.

But today I want us to put ourselves in the place of that little boy, suddenly encountering the great man. How would you feel? The glorious news of this passage is that what Jesus offers those who receive him is not just a signed football and an unforgettable moment, but something much deeper: *the right to become children of God* (v12). To be adopted into God’s global family. To be, literally, ‘born of God’ (v13).

The face of the little lad just after he realised that he’d met his hero was an image which has stayed with me: he was overcome with emotion and buried his face in his mum’s coat. I pray for myself – and for you too – that we would experience that same sense of wonder afresh at this wonderful, glorious, incomparable truth: that those who receive Jesus become children of God. How amazing is that!

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Day 4 – John 1:14-18 ‘God in the flesh’

‘The Word became flesh.’ One of the most famous phrases in the bible, and the climax of the church’s Advent readings in December every year, as our waiting for Christmas turns into the real thing. God comes to earth, divinity meets humanity – the Word became flesh.

But what does that really mean? Many people have offered good metaphors over the years for what it must have felt for God to cram all of that divine life and power into a human body. C.S. Lewis observed that if you want to know what it was like for God to become a human, imagine what it would be like for you to become a slug! And that’s not a bad approximation.

But let’s go further. The problem for us when we encounter this great phrase is that we’re so familiar with the sanitised Christmas version of it. We so often turn the nativity into a fairy story, and then add layers of Victorian imagery. We sing carols about snow and Bethlehem sounding remarkably like an English village, and a Jesus who doesn’t cry, but looks adoringly into the eyes of his mother. And it’s all so lovely.... but almost certainly bears no relation to reality! (Please try to forget that last sentence before December begins 😊)

The Word became flesh. A real person. Why does that matter? Because it means *we worship a real God for real people with real lives*. Max Lucado once said that it’s much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. But look at what we lose when we do. We lose a real Saviour for real people – and what a loss that is.

I don’t know about you, but there’s mess and muck in my life as I imagine there is in yours. And like most of us, I want to worship a real God who meets me in my real life – in January’s overdraft, and February’s redundancy, and March’s illness of a loved one, and April’s marital struggles, and May’s child with a drug habit, and June’s celebration of a big birthday, and July’s exam results, and August’s family holiday, and September’s new school, and October’s health scare, and November’s major car bill and December’s annual merry-go-round of the Christmas consumer machine. And everything in-between.

‘The Word became flesh’ means that there is a real God for real people. We can take our muck and our mess to him. He knows, he understands, he cares. And he has the power to change it, to change us – if only we’ll let him.

Today, let’s give thanks that our amazing, real God became flesh – and let’s offer to him in prayer all the real concerns of our lives. After all, he’s been there, too.

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Day 5 – John 1:14-18 (2) ‘Grace upon grace’

Grace. The beating heart of our faith. What Philip Yancey calls the ‘last, best word of the English language.’ The most unique of all the great truths of Christianity. That God gives us what we don’t deserve. That Jesus takes our place, and exchanges his death for our life.

Grace is the beginning and the end – it’s where we first encounter God as He truly is, and what we cling on to as our life nears its end. We never move away from it, swap it or graduate to something better.

And today, St John finds a simple way to describe our lifelong journey of grace – it’s not in all bible translations, but a literal version of v16 is this: *‘From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.’*

Grace upon grace. That is the plumb line of our lives. And in this short reflection today, I can do no better than just encourage you to spend a few minutes thinking about God’s grace in your life. When did you first meet God? How has God met with you since? How has He blessed you? What ‘graces’ can you celebrate? What troubles has God through you through, with sufficient grace? And where do you need ‘grace upon grace’ now?

We can never exhaust the depths of God’s grace. May God sink that beautiful truth deep into our hearts, and fill us again with joy and hope.

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Day 6 – John 1:19-20 ‘Pointing in the right direction’

My old bishop used to joke that every clergy person should have a sign written prominently near their desk saying, ‘I am not the Messiah!’

It’s easy to joke about budding ‘Messiah complexes’ – especially for anyone in the caring professions – but John the Baptist’s clear pronouncement in v20 of today’s reading is worth a second look. It encourages all of us to ask ourselves the searching question – where do we look for salvation, for meaning, even for solutions in our lives?

In our reading, the situation is delicate: the people are looking for a saviour, and in John they think they might just have found the person for the job. Intense, holy, passionate, inspiring – everything a prophet should be. But John knows who he is and what he’s there to do, and more importantly he also knows who the people should be looking to instead... we’ll get to that over the next few days.

But if tomorrow’s reflection is all about the value of knowing who we are, *it’s also pretty crucial to know who we’re not*. So much of human existence is built around the idea of solving things ourselves. As a culture we crave control. We buy products that ‘put you in control’. We sit on the sofa with the remote... you guessed it. For the last 400 or so years Western culture has pursued a vision of life which puts human beings at the centre. We are all mini-messiahs.

But John knows better. Talented as he is, visionary as he is, anointed as he is – he also knows what he is not. He is *not* the Messiah. He is not the answer to all things. He himself needs to look beyond his own existence to Someone greater.

Maybe there’s something in that for us too. Perhaps today is a chance to reflect again as to whether we’ve been subtly caught up in thinking that it’s all on us. That we have to solve all our problems, that this thing or that relationship can’t work unless we are the indispensable cog in the wheel.

But you are not the Messiah, either.

And that’s good. In fact, it’s great! Because there is One who is. And you can take all your pressures and worries, all your problems and even your successes to Him.

So as you start the week, take a moment to remind yourself that it isn’t all on you. And be thankful! ‘Cast all your burdens on God, because He cares for you.’

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Day 7 – John 1:21-23 ‘Knowing who you are’

Who are you? That’s an interesting question to ask, isn’t it? How we answer gives away a lot about how we see life. Do we just think of our name; or maybe our nationality; perhaps our job; or a key relationship which defines us – mother, father, carer; perhaps our main attributes and qualities?

So much of life is about identity. The big crime of the moment is identity theft. I don’t know about you but I get endless emails telling me how to recognise it – hopefully most of the emails themselves are genuine! Who knows?

But it seems to me that a lot of us struggle with identity theft at a much deeper level than offshore criminals trying to get our passwords and credit card details. Our culture gives far too much meaning to money and possessions, to success and image – and those of us who find ourselves lacking in any of these areas may feel unsure of who we are.

Similarly, we may suddenly find an identity crisis after losing a job, or watching a close relationship turn sour. Who are we, really?

The bible gives us wonderful answers to that question. And it points us ultimately to Christ, in whom we can find all the security in our identity that this world affords. As James Bryan Smith says, when asked the question who are you?, every follower of Jesus can say: *‘I am [your name] in whom Christ dwells, and I live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God.’*

Just let that sink in for a moment. *You* are a precious child of God, uniquely loved and valuable – so precious, in fact, that the Son of God Himself dwells in you. And you live in the strongest and most secure location there is – the realm of the Almighty Lord of the Universe.

Your income, your status, your image – none of that matters to God. It doesn’t affect your position in the kingdom, your forgiveness, salvation, eternal future or your access to God. To paraphrase L’Oreal: *You are worth it.*

In our reading today, John the Baptist has a similar clarity. As we saw yesterday, he knows very well who he *isn’t*. But he also knows who he *is*: his identity as God’s voice, and his role as God’s herald of the in-breaking kingdom (v23). His identity directed his life and gave him great confidence to live in obedience to his calling. May that be ours, too!

Today, spend a few moments letting your identity in Christ sink in again. You are ___ in whom Christ dwells, and you live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. Repeat. Repeat again (!). And let the indwelling Christ give you strength to live out your identity today.

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Day 8 – John 1:24-28 ‘The unknown One among us’

Many of you will know the famous story of the work of Bletchley Park during the Second World War. Their remarkable work shortened the conflict by an estimated 2 years and saved up to 2 million lives. Somehow 10,000 people worked there – round the clock, every day of the year – and their work was kept a secret... I’ve always thought there was something deeply providential in that.

Less well known is the fact that Bletchley Park had several outstations doing some of the work. One of those was Wavendon House in our parish – a large home which used to be owned by the Hoare family and whose outbuildings were converted into a de-coding unit, working with messages sent via Enigma machines. What was fascinating about this was that – unlike the heavy security surrounding Bletchley Park – there was no security at all protecting this unit. There was at least one Enigma machine on-site, but the place just looked like a non-descript barn. Those who worked there and their incredibly important work were simply hiding in plain sight.

John the Baptist alluded to a similar situation in today’s reading. Someone much greater than him was already among them – but was, like Outstation X, currently hiding in plain sight. His time would soon come, of course – but, as yet, he remained ‘one you do not know’ (v26).

It reminds us that *God’s work must be done in God’s way* – and the way of God is not always ours. The leaders of the day expected God’s appointed rescuer to come with a fanfare, or at least with physical power and prowess. They wanted shock and awe, unmistakable proof. But *God comes to them – and us – in humility*. Where we look for thunder and lightning, instead we get a gentle whisper. Where we want glory and majesty, instead Jesus wraps a towel around his waist and washes our feet.

Recognising the gentle, humble work of God in us and among us can sometimes be tricky. Part of the journey of the spiritual life is to attune ourselves to listen well, to reflect deeply, that *we might hear the gentle whisper, and see what God is up to*. So many of those around us sadly miss it – Jesus is ever-present, but remains ‘one they do not know’. But by the grace of God, He is so patient, and slowly but surely we can discern and truly know ‘the One we did not know’.

Take a few moments today to listen, and reflect – Jesus stands among us as surely as He did in the days of John. Can you see him? Where is He at work in you? What is He whispering to you? And pray for more grace to see Him and all that He is doing, in you and through you.

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Day 9 – John 1:29-30 ‘The Lamb of God’

A few years ago, when our children were still in primary school, we took the chance while on holiday in Devon to visit a sheep auction. It was very exciting watching herds being led into the small arena and then seeing the various bidders in action, as the auctioneer kept up a furious pace with the vocals. However, our kids found it upsetting. Once they realised that many of the bidders worked for food processing companies, the outcome of what was happening – and what awaited the sheep – slowly dawned on them. In particular they became distressed watching a solitary sheep who formed one lot and was sold for just £2. We haven't eaten lamb as a family since. (Though I must confess that my wife and I really miss it!)

Of all farm animals, many of us have a particular fascination with sheep. Their fluffy coats and air of vulnerability draw out an emotional response greater than with, say, pigs or cows. So perhaps we find it especially poignant that when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he utters the famous phrase of today's reading: *'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'* (v29)

Nowadays we are so familiar with the idea of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb that it's easy to lose the dramatic impact of what John is saying. Here is the Messiah, God's chosen one, the one John has just borne witness to as someone so great that he's not fit to tie up his sandals. The one he goes on to say pre-existed humanity, who has been promised from long ago. This is a great human being, surely? Someone we would expect to be strong, powerful, maybe even slightly intimidating...

Instead, John turns all our instincts upside-down and uses an image which speaks of *Jesus'* vulnerability, his lowliness, the price he would have to pay for our freedom. The blood of the Lamb saved the people at Passover. And the blood of the Lamb, John says, still saves today.

Normally I like to suggest practical ways to apply what we read – but today, the best, perhaps the only, thing we should do is give thanks for our Saviour. The One who surpasses all. The One who takes away our sin. All hail the Lamb!

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Day 10 – John 1:29-34 ‘Deeply dipped’

Every so often an innovation comes along which changes the game. The product remains the same, but once this innovation is launched, what was once perfectly acceptable is no longer adequate. Think graphite tennis rackets replacing wooden ones at the end of the 70s/early 80s. Think the iPhone being launched in 2007. It's still the same thing, but at the same time entirely different.

In the journey of faith, the coming of Christ produces the same effect. It's still the same God we worship – yesterday, today and forever – but the New Covenant gives us direct access to this God in a new way. And the sign and seal of this deeper, more intimate relationship with God is baptism. The word means 'dipped', but as the passage makes clear we need two 'dippings'. John baptism was with water (v26, v31, v33) – a baptism of cleansing and repentance. An external sign of an inward attitude – profound, yes; important, certainly; but with no power in itself to change the heart. It relied on human effort to achieve the intention.

Jesus comes, though, with a game-changer. Jesus will baptise – 'dip' – us with the Spirit (v33). In other words, *the presence of God coming into our hearts, the power of His love transforming us from the inside out*. It's a game-changer.

And what held true then still holds true today. We all need *both* baptisms – of water and Spirit – but it is the latter which empowers us day by day. Water baptism is about initiation. Spirit baptism is about intimacy. And the great news is that this intimacy is available to all believers, everywhere, every day. It's not a one-off, but a continuous flow of the water of life into our hearts.

It also casts us back to God's grace. It's so easy for us to try and rely solely on our efforts and good intentions. But even one of the great holy people – John the Baptist – knew that it wasn't enough. We need to be deeply dipped in God's Spirit.

So today, give thanks that you are not alone, your walk with God does not depend all on your own efforts. What a relief! And pray to be filled – dipped – again in the love, presence and power of God by the Holy Spirit.

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Day 11 – John 1:35-42 ‘One simple act’

Andrew is one of the ‘forgotten’ disciples. He may be the patron saint of Scotland, but in the gospels he gets very little airtime. Second fiddle to his brother Simon, who becomes Peter, the leader of the disciples and the early church. Likewise, of the four fishermen called by Jesus at the lake, the other three – Simon, James and John – become Jesus’ inner circle.

Other disciples too loom larger in our consciousness. We all know about Matthew – the tax collector turned gospel writer – Doubting Thomas and of course Judas Iscariot. Even later disciples like Jesus’ brother James and Philip (not the one in John 1) have a bigger role in the Book of Acts and the leadership of the early church.

But Andrew does one earth-changing thing. One simple act that alters the course of history. And we find it here. *He brought his brother Simon to Jesus* (v42). In Andrew’s one recorded piece of speech in the gospels, just five words in English – ‘We have found the Messiah’ (v41) – he reveals himself to be the first of the twelve disciples to understand who Jesus was.

And more than that, he acted on what he found. He told his brother, and introduced him to the Messiah.

One simple act. And John records it for us, I think, to show the power of simple acts. We may not have great gifts of oratory – Andrew, it appears, certainly didn’t. We may be quiet people, not particularly brave or keen to share the limelight. But this passage reminds the Andrews of this world – and that is probably most of us – that everyone matters in the kingdom, *everyone has a part to play*. We can all do one simple thing. We can point the people we love to Jesus. Perhaps by a simple word, perhaps by a Christlike act, perhaps by what we don’t do in their company – gossip, swear, badmouth people.

Those of us who have family and friends who don’t believe know that what Andrew did is much harder than it looks. Often we hit an impasse and run out of words. We’ve rehearsed the same conversations so many times that we feel we can’t say anything more. But let’s be inspired by Andrew’s example and seize faith to believe that no-one is beyond God’s love; that opportunities to point people whom we love to Jesus will come round again; and that there is great power in one simple act.

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Day 12 – John 1:35-42 (ii) ‘Seeing beyond’

One of our largest pub chains in the UK is JD Wetherspoon. Personally I’ve always liked them – reliable food, no loud music you have to shout over, and fine ale. The name, too, is important. Wetherspoon, apparently, is the name of a certain teacher who taught Tim Martin – the founder and owner of the business – and told the young lad that he would never amount to anything. A multi-million pound business was Tim Martin’s riposte. I have occasionally wondered whether Mr Wetherspoon drives past the hundreds of buildings that bear his name, and what that must feel like. Or indeed whether Tim Martin has found peace in his spectacular success, or if the harsh word of his teacher remains a painful wound in his life.

So often what is spoken over us when we are young sticks to our souls. Even people who know us well can, either wittingly or unwittingly, reinforce a sense of our flaws and limitations as human beings.

But Jesus sees beyond. Jesus sees what we are capable of, our God-given potential. He created us, so he knows – it’s as simple as that. Andrew’s brother Simon was a young fisherman. Already married, settled to a quiet life by the shores of Galilee. His name is related to the Hebrew word for ‘reed’. Nothing unusual in that – but Jesus sees something greater, a future of enormous possibility. ‘You will be called Cephas’ (v42), meaning ‘Rock’ – i.e. Reedy, you’re going to be Rocky.

There were times, of course, in the future when Peter’s fragility (‘reed-iness’?) came to the surface – when Jesus was arrested and he denied knowing his friend; or when as leader of the church he came under pressure to water down the gospel and Paul had to put him straight. But Jesus saw a different future for this young man; and, taught by the Master and empowered by the Spirit, that future came to pass. What began as a simple encounter here at the start of the gospel led to a world-changing life.

Jesus sees our potential, too – the people we were made to be, the people by God’s grace that we are becoming. He is no hard taskmaster, but the constant encourager of our souls. Patient, kind, generous and ever-hopeful. Once Jesus enters our world, the task of our lives is simply to become what we already are, the person that Jesus sees and loves.

Today, take time to reflect on how Jesus sees you. What name might he have for you? What gifts is he growing? What grace is he offering you? Resolve to live as Jesus sees you, the precious, talented person that you are.

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Day 13 – John 1:43-46 ‘Anything good?’

We are used in our culture to fame and success being connected to where we were born and brought up, the privileges (or otherwise) that we enjoyed. We hear the phrases even now in our supposedly meritocratic society: ‘the old boys’ network’, ‘not what you know but who you know’, the Bullingdon Club, the Chipping Norton set, etc etc.

Some places are in and some places are, well, you know, out. Sometimes when a certain well-known person achieves great fame, their hometown is mentioned with the sort of surprise that such success could possibly have started there. We might like to think that this sort of snobbery started a couple of hundred years ago: but this attitude is not new. It’s right here in our passage. It’s always been there – snobbery and prejudice is as old as the hills.

When Jesus starts making waves, it becomes known that his home town is Nazareth. This is something of a surprise to many, not least Nathanael: ‘Nazareth!’ he sniggers contemptuously. ‘Can anything good come from there?’ (v46) Perhaps those of us who’ve made our home in Milton Keynes will immediately resonate with this kind of attitude. As someone who lived in Bristol for five years – a city that almost everyone purrs over – before moving to MK seven years ago, the contrast was quite marked.

Personally I like the negativity – those of us who live here in MK know that it’s a great place to live, and don’t mind at all that most people who’ve never been here think it’s dull or soulless or whatever. It’s our secret! And we’re happy to keep it that way.

And today we remind ourselves that *we worship a Saviour who came from a similar background*. This area of northern Israel was known as the Decapolis, an area of 10 relatively new settlements colonised and invested in by the Romans. In other words, an ancient version of MK, and equally treated with various forms of contempt by the posher places down south.

If Jesus had been born in 21st century Britain would he have been born in MK? I don’t know and there’s little point in speculating. But today we can take heart knowing that we follow a Saviour like us, who knows what prejudice and snobbery were like, and who overcame everything for our sake. Can anything good come from there? Absolutely. And praise God that it did.

Perhaps today give thanks for our city, and for your home town. It’s the sort of place God loves. And God is at work in it still.

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Day 14 – John 1:45-49 ‘What’s in a name?’

I learnt something new today while preparing this daily thought. I learnt that Nathanael – the subject of today’s reading – is an alternative Hebrew version of my own name ‘Matthew’ (which comes from the Greek *Matthaios*): they both mean ‘gift of God’. I could have been Nat, not Matt, and it would have been the same thing, really – there’s a thought.

In ancient Hebrew culture names really mattered. They weren’t usually given at birth but a bit later on, when the name could denote something of their personality or destiny. Jesus himself seems to pick up on this when he chats with Nathanael – he would have known what the name meant, and he light-heartedly draws a contrast to Jacob, who became ‘Israel’ and therefore the father of the nation, but who was known for deception. Nathanael, on the other hand, is ‘a true Israelite (i.e. a descendant of Jacob/Israel), in whom there is no deceit’ (v47).

It’s funny how Jesus begins a conversation with an observation about whether Nathanael matches up to his name and his people of origin. That would be very unusual for us today, but *John 1 is all about names* – particularly the names of Jesus. John the author starts by naming Jesus as the Word (v1) and the Light (v5,7,9) and then the Son (v14,18). John the Baptist then goes on to call Jesus the Lamb of God (v29) and the Chosen One (v34). Andrew recognises Jesus as the Messiah/Christ, or Anointed One (v41); Philip, as the one prophesied in the Old Testament (v45); and then Nathanael, in this passage, as the Son of God (v49). Jesus rounds off the chapter by referring to himself as the Son of Man (v51).

John’s gospel is unique in stacking all of Jesus’ names upfront in chapter 1, leaving the rest of the Gospel to focus on what that means – the other gospel writers describe more of an unfolding revelation through the narrative. But the point is that all of these names mean something. They tell us who Jesus is, his unique status in all of history and cosmology, and what he came to do.

And your name means something, too. Not just your birth name, but *who you are in Christ*. Thanks to Jesus, you too are chosen, you too are God’s child, you too inherit the blessings promised in God’s word. If you’re a follower of Jesus, this is who you are.

You may like your actual name; you may not. But today spend a moment thinking about your eternal names – *chosen child of God, inheritor of God’s blessings* – that they might go deep in your soul, and that you might live out of this immensely precious identity.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 15 – John 1:45-51 ‘Greater things’

A friend of mine once told the story of taking his nephew and family to a fairground. The child would have been about 2 or 3 years old and soon after they went through the entrance they came to a small play park – you know the sort of thing, roundabouts, swings, small climbing frames. The child was very happy but eventually the rest of the party got itchy feet. There was a massive set of attractions and all kinds of exciting rides to explore round the corner.

Getting the toddler to move, though, proved tricky. ‘I won’t.’ Cue full-on tantrum. The small play park was just fine for him, and no amount of cajoling with the offer of better rides – including a train ride, his favourite – would work. He just stamped his feet and threw himself theatrically on the ground. Eventually, his dad just had to pick up the by-now-screaming toddler, rugby ball style, and carry him round the corner.

Suddenly a host of glittering lights and new sounds attracted his attention. He opened the eyes in his puffy, tear-streaked face and saw.... well, his eyes lit up, and 5 seconds later he was running full pelt ahead of the family towards the first of many electronic rides, joy and surprise written all over his young face.

We may laugh at the scene, and many of us will have had similar experiences with children. But sometimes we adults aren’t so different, especially when it comes to the spiritual life. We begin by experiencing something, and we settle into a pattern which works for us, but little by little we lose a sense of expectation. What we have is enough – but we can’t imagine that things could be different or better than they are. I want to stress that I’m not talking here about the very important gift of contentment with our circumstances, or the equally important encouragement that God’s grace is always enough for us in every situation – but rather that *sense of expectation of what God might be able to do, in us or in others.*

Nathanael had received a word of divine knowledge, and he was very impressed by that – so impressed that he immediately worships Jesus as divine (v49). But Jesus is quick to let him know that he can expect a lot more than that – he will see ‘greater things’ (v50). Indeed, picking up the reference to Jacob we noted yesterday, he refers to Jacob’s famous dream of open heaven, and heaven and earth connecting with each other, such that God’s family goes global (v51).

It’s a clear reference to what Jesus would achieve through his life and ministry on earth. But it also reminds us that *there’s always more with God.* However long we’ve followed Jesus, we can all continue to pray for, and wait expectantly for, ‘greater things’ – God’s kingdom growing, heaven touching earth in new ways, and God’s presence continuing to draw us closer to Him.

Today, let’s pray for contentment in our circumstances, and grace sufficient for this season – but let’s also pray expectantly for greater things to be revealed to us and to others, flowing from God’s inexhaustible riches.

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Day 16 – John 2:1-11 (i) ‘Not yet’

There are often three answers to a direct question: yes, no and not yet. It's a situation we've all had to get used to more often in the last few months. As so much of our lives has been put on hold or restricted, many of the things we used to do have been re-graded from a 'yes' to a 'not yet'. Some of you in particular will currently be facing the pain of a 'not yet': perhaps with what should have been a routine hospital appointment. Or a cancelled birthday party. Or a much longed-for trip away.

'Not yet' is often the hardest of all answers to accept. We like a 'yes'; we don't like a 'no', but at least it's a clear outcome. Not yet is effectively a 'yes, but... wait'. In other words, the issue is timing, not the request or activity itself.

The same is true of prayer. We know that God listens and loves to answer – but sometimes his answer is 'not yet' too. It tests our faith, and patience. When Jesus attends the wedding party at Cana he receives a direct request from his mother. His answer, too, is 'not yet'. Or as he puts it: 'My hour has not yet come' (v4). He was referring primarily to his revelation as God's Messiah, and what that would demand of him. But knowing that part of this revelation was to demonstrate signs of his authority, the effect is much the same. 'Am I to reveal my authority publicly?perhaps not yet.'

This is a famous story, and we know how it ends. Jesus *does* do something remarkable, which we'll explore a bit more over the next couple of days. But today I want us to dwell for a moment at this point of the story – *the 'not yet' moment*. It seems particularly appropriate for this season.

There may be things for each of us where we feel God's answer has been 'not yet', and this causes us discomfort – perhaps literally. Let's seize faith today to believe that *God keeps on listening*. Human plans may fail, but God has not forgotten us. Jesus encourages us to keep praying in faith. Not yet can become a yes, in God's good time.

The wedding at Cana reminds us that Jesus is the one who provides. Jesus is the One who can do things others can't. Take your 'not yet's' to him today and pray for more grace for the journey, and new hope.

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Day 17 – John 2:1-11 (ii) ‘Do whatever he tells you’

Over the last 10 or 15 years, Youtube has become a constant companion for many of our lives. Some of that is questionable – there’s only so many videos you can watch of cats who look like Winston Churchill, or people falling over in comical fashion.

However, Youtube is also chock-full of fantastic ‘how to’ videos. If you want to learn a skill, for many of us Youtube has become the place to learn it. My son learnt how to play Pachelbel’s Canon on the piano by watching Youtube. My wife makes all kinds of amazing crafts, having watched the ‘how to’ on Youtube. When I wanted to work out how we might go about livestreaming a service in church a couple of months ago, my first port of call was – you guessed it – Youtube. I found a fantastically helpful 15 minute video which told me exactly how to do it, step by step.

For all that we like to see ourselves as authors of our own destiny, most of the time for life to work we need to do what somebody tells us. The trick is to follow the right lead, the right set of instructions.

In the wedding at Cana, Mary gives us a profound insight into one of the deepest truths of all human existence. It might only be a party, and the problem might only be a shortage of wine, but her advice to the servants is one which all of humanity would do well to listen to: *‘Do whatever Jesus tells you.’* If the key to life is following the right lead, the right instructions, then the Son of God is probably the obvious go-to place. Not even Youtube can beat that!

And yet, whilst it seems so simple in theory, in practice it can be challenging. We face so many voices, so many competing ideas – hearing Jesus’ voice and then choosing to obey it can sometimes be unexpectedly hard. It’s why we need to keep going back to the bible, to the gospels, to hear the authentic voice of Jesus speak. And the more we soak in those truths, the more we also get to make good judgements about things which aren’t directly addressed in Scripture.

Perhaps today you face a decision. This passage gives us the best advice we could ever receive: do whatever Jesus tells you. And if that’s not clear yet, take a few moments to pray for Jesus’ wisdom and guidance. However big or small, it’s his direction we need. And he has the power and authority to help you face the outcome. His water can be our fine wine. May his presence and peace guide you, that you might follow Mary’s advice and see God’s extraordinary activity in your life. Amen, thanks be to God.

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Day 18 – John 2:1-11 (iii) ‘The servants knew’

Most of us quietly like secrets, don't we? That sense of being privileged to some private info, getting the lowdown, the inside scoop. Whole movements are built on secret knowledge, and bizarre conspiracy theories on this kind of 'special secret'.

Generally, wise advice tends to counsel that we steer clear of secrets – and rightly so. They can be a source of power, control or bondage. 'There is nothing hidden that will not be made known,' as Jesus teaches his listeners.

But there is a sort of 'secret' which can be good. Jesus also refers to it: 'treasure hidden in field', is one way he described it, or more generally 'the secret of the kingdom of heaven'. This is shorthand for the idea that the work of God is often hidden from view to those not trying to look for it. Only those set on knowing and living the ways of God can see it.

This kind of 'secret' is often what gives us hope and encouragement in the dark times. People often question where God is, but we have more than just the testimony of Scripture and changed lives to strengthen us, powerful though those are. We also have the small answers to prayer; the word of encouragement when we most needed it; and maybe the occasional miracle which never made the headlines.

In today's story Jesus did an outstanding miracle – but it's equally clear that not everyone knew about it, even at the time. The master was fooled, as I imagine were most of the guests, many of them the worse for wear by that stage.... *...but 'the servants knew'* (v9). And who knows, maybe decades later they could still look back on that day and know that they witnessed the love and power of God in a remarkable way.

We too have those secret encouragements held in our hearts. Perhaps today, take a few moments to remember those special things which God has done for you or for others you know, which not many people know about – perhaps you alone. And give thanks that He is intimately involved in your unique and precious life. He knows – and you know too.

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Day 19 – John 2:1-11 (iv) ‘Saving the best till last’

Many of you who know me well will know that I enjoy cycling. At time of writing, it's been a particular treat for me to see the Tour de France back on our TV screens. Normally this forms the backdrop to my July, but the COVID crisis in 2020 led to it being postponed until September. One of the notable things about these long bike races is how a stage unfolds. It may be 150 or even 200km, and often relatively little happens for the first 90% of it (which is the bit I tend to skip). Then the riders come to the last big climb and suddenly, with 5km to go to the finish, the race explodes. Riders start attacking each other, trying to break away, and eventually the strongest makes it first over the line, gaining a few precious seconds in the overall standings.

It's not how you start, it's how you finish.

That's certainly true in cycling, but it's also true in the spiritual life. *Faith is the journey of a lifetime*, and ultimately it's about staying the course. We all love to see the enthusiasm of youth, and this energy should be celebrated in our churches. But it's even better to see that enthusiasm and energy develop into mature, experienced, enduring faith.

Gordon MacDonald, the great American pastor, who is now well into his 80s, still meets regularly with groups aged in their 40s and encourages them to expect that the second half of their lives will be more fruitful than the first. In a youth-obsessed culture, it's a healthy reminder that wisdom and experience matters, that a life walked faithfully before God will keep yielding fruit, that we can all finish well.

In the last of our reflections on this lovely story of the wedding at Cana, we focus on the astonished words of the master of the banquet, calling his servants together and praising them because they had saved the best wine till last. This was part of the joy of this miracle. It reminds us that God does not skimp on his blessings. It is also a clear pointer towards the later ministry of Jesus, whose 'last' saving act on the cross was the greatest of all.

But it also encourages us to remember that *our lives too can save the best till last*. That God's activity in our lives is not all downhill from a certain point, but can actually flourish and grow. That the deep wisdom of a life lived before God can bless others in remarkable ways, whatever our age.

Today, take a moment to give thanks for the ways God has been at work in your life, for the ways He remains at work – but let's also seize faith to believe that He can still be at work in you and through you, saving the best till now.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 20 – John 2:12-25 ‘The new temple’

Many years ago, I used to visit prisoners weekly in the local jail. The chapel where we met had an extraordinary picture, which I’ve never seen in quite the same way anywhere else. It showed Jesus stood on top of one of the moneylenders’ tables, muscles taut, whip in hand, while people cowered around him. It was a very masculine image, far more imposing than the way Jesus is usually presented – and it struck me how important it was for the men in that place to see a Messiah they could respect.

The story of Jesus confronting the market stall holders and money-changers in the temple has often troubled people. Brought up on the idea of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’, many struggle with this more confrontational Jesus. But perhaps the problem is more with our enthusiasm to emphasise one aspect of Jesus’ character, and not his courage or his absolute determination to see the will of God done.

Jesus is always bigger than our view of him, there are always new things to discover. And St John reminds us today why the corruption of the temple so exasperated Jesus. It was the place where the Almighty God met with people in a unique way – and so, of all places, should be kept pure. Zeal for the glory of God consumed Jesus, as the text says (v17), and so he acted decisively. It was probably the act which was most influential in getting him killed, as he went beyond being a spiritual reformer to being a direct threat to civil power.

Similarly, Jesus takes the conversation well past corrupt religious practices. ‘Destroy this temple,’ he says, ‘and I will rebuild it in 3 days’ (v19). In other words, a revolution is coming. God will soon meet with humanity in a new way – through Jesus himself. The cross is the perfect meeting place of God’s justice and mercy, his power and his love. Jesus’ death wins our salvation, and also God’s victory over death and evil. A new, eternal temple – a new meeting place between God and humanity – is ‘built’.

Today, let’s give thanks that, because of this great work of God in Christ, we too have free access to God’s love and grace, we too can walk with him, we too can experience the presence of God with us, we too can meet with God directly through Jesus.

And may that same zeal, that same enthusiasm for God’s glory fill our hearts, too.

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Day 21 – John 2:12-25 (ii) ‘His disciples recalled’

I wonder what your earliest childhood memory is? Mine is a bit scary – I was 2 years old and playing in a sand pit in the back garden, when one of my parents’ friends zoomed right past on a motorbike. I was absolutely terrified!

Memories are funny things – but incredibly important too. In the days before photos and social media, or indeed before widespread access to paper, memories were all people had. And throughout the bible, we are frequently encouraged to *remember*. Remember who God is. Remember how much he loves you. Remember all the great things he’s done.

God remembers, too – in fact there are more references in the psalms to God remembering than us! Perhaps we need to remember because we are made in the image of God.... but I digress.

You might say that *you are what you remember*. And in today’s passage, we see the disciples remembering something that struck them as odd at the time, but proved later to be very important. Jesus had spoken of rebuilding the temple in 3 days, and at the time it just sounded like gobbledygook. But after he rose from the dead.... *‘the disciples recalled what he had said.’*

Suddenly it made sense – and it grew their understanding of Jesus, perhaps even their worship of Jesus, even more. Memories matter.

Today, take some time to remember. Remember what God has done for you, how much he loves you, perhaps specific special memories you have of his presence in your life. Maybe recall a scripture or a famous word of Jesus that means a lot to you, just like it did to the disciples. What does it say to you today? And do that, giving thanks that God also remembers you!

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Day 22 – John 2:12-25 (iii) ‘He knows all people’

There’s nothing like being known, is there? Whether it’s a relationship, a club, a job – the idea that we are *known* matters. It brings security, confidence, joy and occasionally challenge, since our faults are known as well as our strengths!

Running as a golden thread through all the gospels is the million-dollar question: who is Jesus? Is he a rabbi, a prophet, a troublemaker, the Messiah, even divine? Everything he says and does is to make himself known. Not always overtly – the parables are often riddles which aren’t obvious at first. But the miracles are much more direct: John calls them ‘signs’ (v23) – they point to a message about who Jesus was, and is.

What people began to know about Jesus led many to ‘believe in his name’ (v23). But then John says this strange thing: ‘Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people’ (v24). This is more unsettling – the implication is that Jesus knew what was in their hearts and it wasn’t all good. Eventually he was proved right – many protestations of love and loyalty proved fickle. People misunderstood what sort of Messiah he was going to be.

Jesus too knows our hearts – and this can be challenging. There are times when what is in our hearts is not good, and we need to bring that before him. Maybe there is something today that we need help to change – take it to Jesus now...

But it is also an encouragement, because the big difference for us is that *Jesus has chosen to dwell here, with us, in our hearts*. The cross has made us clean, and Jesus’ knowledge of us is bathed in love and grace. He knows us – and still loves us! He is *for* us, and wants us to become all that we can be.

There is nothing like being known. And may that truth bring us security, confidence and joy today.

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Day 23 – John 3:1-8 ‘Meeting Jesus at night’

I wonder when you find it easiest to meet with God? Perhaps with other Christians – say at church on Sundays, or maybe as part of a group during the week. Perhaps first thing in the morning, if you’re naturally an early riser. Perhaps it’s last thing in the evening, as you get ready for bed and say your prayers.

Or maybe it’s at night. The hours of darkness are often an ambiguous time for us. We may feel more anxious or stressed, as small problems seem to grow in the night hours. I’m sure we’ve all experienced that! And yet we can often feel a closeness to God, a desire to turn things to prayer, to feel his presence with us.

King David talks openly in one of his greatest psalms: ‘I think of you through the watches of the night’ (Psalm 63:6). Our walk with God is 24/7, day and night. Knowing that God is with us always is a great comfort. And the great comfort of our faith is that we can meet Jesus at any time.

In today’s reading, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night (v2). For him that was for reasons of fear – he was a respectable, orthodox leader and was worried what people would think if he was seen meeting this troublesome rabbi. But it leads to one of the greatest of all human encounters with Jesus – and a lifechanging one, if Nicodemus’ presence at the cross is anything to go by (John 19:39).

Jesus often meets with us at night. If you’re struggling with sleep or with peace during the dark hours, let that thought be an encouragement to you. Invite him to be close to you, turn your fears and worries to him in prayer. And let his presence fill you with his peace.

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Day 24 – John 3:1-8 (ii) ‘Born again’

Being present for the birth of my children remains one of the great experiences of my life. To witness new life coming into the world is something incredibly special. To know that, nine months previously, this amazing human being was just a single egg invisible to the naked eye is nothing short of miraculous. And not only that, this tiny bundle of flesh has a unique personality and set of gifts. It's mind-boggling.

The phrase ‘born again’, which famously traces back to this passage, remains one of the foundational principles of faith. It has been damaged by misuse and corrupted by parodies, but at its heart it speaks of *something no less miraculous than original birth – that our souls are made new, re-created*. ‘If anyone is in Christ – new creation!’ St Paul echoes three decades after Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. (2 Cor 5:21)

The idea that our spiritual lives can be re-created seems too good to be true. Nicodemus was plainly confused – ‘surely we can’t re-enter our mother’s womb’?! We too may reflect on the events that have scarred our souls: the hidden thoughts and prejudices that shame us, the good things we didn’t do, the love that seems to run out so quickly – and wonder how such a fresh start could be possible.

But, as Jesus reminded his disciples elsewhere, what is impossible for human beings is possible for God – with God, all things are possible (Mark 10:27). *Jesus came to give us all the miracle of new birth*. A slate wiped clean, scarred souls healed, the abiding presence of God to revive our life’s journey. We may not have the dramatic ‘darkness to light’ testimony that some have, but our new birth is no less true or real.

Jesus is in the re-recreation business. And what Jesus starts, Jesus finishes. That re-creation is something he offers to us day-by-day. You may have received new life in Christ many years ago; or it may have been recently – but today, thanks be to God, you are a new creation. Jesus dwells in you, and he is able to keep you, whatever the day may bring. And as Jesus does that, in you and through you, may you ‘see the kingdom of God’. Amen.

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Day 25 – John 3:1-8 (iii) ‘Where the wind blows’

I first wrote this reflection in mid-September, just before the Autumnal Equinox – a season of unsettled weather, and often particularly notable for strong winds. The sight of a fresh westerly breeze blowing the golden autumnal leaves off the trees is one of the great joys of creation. It's not so good for our green bins, as over the next few weeks My wife and I will clear tens of thousands of leaves from our lawn. But the spectacle of swaying branches and showers of leaves is both wonderfully dramatic and thoroughly life affirming.

We need the wind. We don't often like it – whether for what it does to our hair or our leaf blowers – but for our trees to survive, those dead leaves need to be detached. And if we are brave (or lazy) enough to let the leaves mulch they will help fertilise the ground over winter. At its heart, the autumnal wind brings life.

Jesus talks about wind in much the same way. In trying to explain the activity of God's Spirit bringing new life, he uses this beautiful and challenging metaphor of wind. Just like the wind, God's Spirit blows in unpredictable ways. 'The wind blows where it pleases' (v8). You may not be able to see it – but you can always see its effects.

And its purpose is to bring life. It's no accident that Jesus uses this image when talking about the new life being offered by God through Christ. To be born 'of the Spirit' is to encounter new life – and the wind of the Spirit is both powerful and unpredictable.

This thought can be unsettling. It prompts us to ask: 'how do we know where God's wind is blowing?' And that's a very good question to ask – a question Jesus loves us to ask! A key part of the journey of the spiritual life is *developing the capacity to see what God is up to, and then to give our energies to that.* A great Christian leader, when asked in a seminar I attended about how he chooses to invest his time, wisely answered: 'I just try to bless what God is doing.' In other words, I try to discern where God is *already* at work, and fall in with that. You can't go far wrong.

And Jesus gives us a clue as to how to discern better what God is up to – *look for the effects.* The wind leaves ripples on the surface. Where are the ripples in your life? Or the lives of others around you – the sure sign that God is up to something? Pray for wisdom to see the ripples today. And give thanks that the wind of God's Spirit still blows in your life, and mine.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 26 – John 3:9-15 ‘Lifted up’

‘Whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.’ (Matthew 23:12) It’s not often that proves true in life. Most advice nowadays tend to focus on how to promote ourselves – at work, on social media, wherever. Occasionally we get heart-warming examples when humility really does get exalted. The England footballer Marcus Rashford’s openness this year about his own experience of childhood poverty – and campaigning for others in similar circumstances – has proved wonderfully effective, and improved the lives of over a million people. Every year, hundreds of unsung heroes are awarded Honours for a lifetime of unstinting service, largely done unnoticed and unrecognised.

In the kingdom of God, humility is exalted. And what Jesus teaches, Jesus himself models. Living as a practically homeless itinerant, with no money or resources – save the inexhaustible resources of the kingdom of God – Jesus consistently refuses power and prestige.

And the greatest sacrifice of all – his death on the cross – is, in human terms, the ultimate humiliation. Jesus is wrongfully accused, deserted by his friends and followers, and dies the death of a criminal and a cursed man (Deuteronomy 21:33).

But this is not how Jesus describes it. In today’s passage, Jesus says this to Nicodemus: ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’ (v14). Lifted up on a cross, *the ultimate act of humility also becoming the act of greatest glory and exaltation*. The snake he refers to was given to God’s people in a time of judgement to save them from death – you can read the story in Numbers 21. Jesus is drawing a similar parallel. He has come, he implies, to save us from death. And to do that, he must be ‘lifted up.’

It remains an incredible thing that Jesus’ great act of humility becomes our salvation. In the world’s eyes, it was disgrace – in God’s eyes, it was glory, ‘lifted up’ for the healing of the world. Give thanks today that Jesus was lifted up for you, that you might live and be free. And pray for grace that you too might live in humility, that God might exalt that humility to bless others.

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Day 27 – John 3:16-21 ‘Not to condemn’

We live in turbulent times. Brexit, Covid, climate change – these are all words which cause us to shudder, perhaps to fear. And the underlying thread of much of our public debate over the last few years concerns the role of human selfishness. Of people putting their own interests first, at the expense of others.

It is a story as old as human society. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ Cain says to God way back in the fourth chapter of the bible, and we have questioned the limit of our responsibility for others ever since. It’s hard for any of us to accept short-term pain for long-term gain, personal sacrifice for community wellbeing.

And one thing we are rarely short of in our media-driven world are condemning voices. Vitriol makes good headlines. And don’t get me wrong, it’s right to challenge selfishness. But so often our vision is one-eyed. We see what others do, and not our own culpability. It is the human condition.

God sees it differently. God is the only being with perfect vision, and the only one with the moral authority to challenge all wrongdoing. He knows that all of us deserve condemnation; we’ve all played our part, however big or small. And yet... and yet – his heart is always to forgive, to show mercy. God seeks positive solutions. There may be blame, but God never leaves it there, never gives up on the possibilities of hope, of new life. ‘For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him’ (v17).

In this great statement, Jesus sets out God’s fundamental orientation towards the world. His judgement is just, but his heart is always mercy. *His desire is to save, not to destroy.* And in Christ he offers us that hope, that future, that salvation. ‘For God so loved the world...’

When you close this page, there will still be Covid, there will still be arguments over Brexit, there will still be fears for the planet’s future. And there will be many condemning voices, each trying hard to shout louder than the other. But let us cling ever more firmly to the mercy of God. God is the God of hope, of forgiveness, of salvation. He is still healing the world, with all its faults. He is still healing *us*, with all our faults.

And may God grant us grace to be those who show mercy, as He has shown mercy to us.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 28 – John 3:16-21 (ii) ‘Come into the light’

A few years ago, some friends and I were out walking in the woods and got lost. It was approaching winter and by 4.30pm it was dark. All of our phones had run out of charge, apart from mine, which had a pathetic tiny little torchlight, only offering a few feet of watery beam. For an hour or so, we picked our way slowly through the undergrowth, frequently stepping into muddy puddles and hoping that we were vaguely heading towards our accommodation.

Eventually we came to a road, which we thought it best to follow, even though we had no idea what road it was. And finally, twenty or so minutes later we rounded a bend and the drive to the house hove into view. We opened the front door, dirty and weary, but immensely happy to find ourselves bathed in light. It was only a bulb in the hallway, but after two hours of almost total darkness, it might have been the glory of heaven.

There’s nothing like coming into the light, is there? After hours of darkness every night, the approaching dawn causes the birds to burst into song every day – first the robin, then the blackbird. We can’t translate birdsong – I wish we could – but I like to imagine that what they’re all singing is: ‘The light is coming! The light is coming!’

And Jesus describes the experience of meeting God in the exact same way – it’s like *coming into the light* (v21). Jesus himself is that light – as he declares in v19 – and coming to Jesus is like being bathed in his light.

It’s not an entirely comfortable image, as Jesus also admits that not everyone wants to be bathed in this light (v20). Just as light attracts moths but repels cockroaches, so Jesus’ light draws some, while others choose to hide from it. The reason is that such people prefer to retain the choice to keep doing evil things, even though in Christ such things can be forgiven and left in the past. But for those who want to live in the light of God’s love, healing and blessing, the response can only be one of joyful and thankful coming into that light.

Take a moment to give thanks today that God’s light has found you. Choose again to be bathed in that light. Declare that light over all parts of your life. And if there is any darkness ‘attached’ to you at present – ask for God’s light to shine there too. All things can be healed in the precious name of Christ. Thanks be to God!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 29 – John 3:22-30 ‘Waiting and listening’

Many things have changed in the modern wedding, and perhaps not for the better. The expense, the planning time required (usually years not months), the highly orchestrated sequence of happenings. Sadly many weddings today feel less like a community celebration and more like a choreographed ‘event’, obscuring the true and profound meaning of these great occasions.

Ironically, one thing the current social restrictions have restored this year is the joy of a simple wedding. Many couples who have married this summer have experienced to their surprise a profound relief at the removal of crippling expectations, financial or otherwise. But I digress.

One thing that has definitely changed over recent years is the role of the ushers – the male friends of the bridegroom. At the risk of sounding like an old fogey (and nostalgia isn’t what it used to be), ‘in my day’ the job of an usher was quite demanding. Before wedding planners, ushers were expected to manage the practical jobs on the day. I remember one of the weddings where I was an usher removing litter under the church bushes two hours before the wedding started, and carrying all the couples’ presents back to the car after the reception had finished. Now, the role is largely seen as a ceremonial one. It’s more rare than you might think for ushers even to show guests to their seats as the ceremony begins.

In today’s passage, John the Baptist paints himself as an usher for Jesus, and in some ways restores the role to its former glory. Being a friend of the bridegroom is a special privilege, he insists, and above all the role requires ‘waiting and listening’ (v29). And when the bridegroom arrives (i.e. so that his voice is heard), his friends are ‘full of joy’.

We too are friends of Jesus. And today, John gives us some very simple but profound advice. *Our job is to wait, and listen.* To listen for his voice, and when we hear it, to receive what he says with joy.

I love the fact that knowing Jesus is described in celebratory terms. Yes, it’s challenging, and there are dark days when we swim against the tide. But it’s also a path of joy, because we know that the groom is coming! We will be united with Jesus forever, and until that day comes, we wait and listen for his voice with joyful expectation.

Jesus still speaks. And may God grant us grace to hear his voice today. Take a few moments, to wait, and listen. What encouragements is he speaking to you?

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 30 – John 3:31-36 ‘As one from the earth’

‘If only God would come to this earth again, then I would believe!’ You may have heard this (or something like it) from people you know, or perhaps from interviews you’ve read. I certainly have. It is one of the great objections to faith – how can we believe unless we see it for ourselves? In particular, it’d be great if God would come again and show everyone that He’s absolutely real? If that were to happen, the argument goes, then more people would believe.

Or maybe not. Maybe God’s own testimony about himself is the one thing people *won’t* believe.... Now there’s a thought.

Today’s passage is a difficult part of John, and says a number of challenging things. The theme of witnesses and testimony is a big part of John’s gospel – it’s why he wrote (20:31), but throughout there are references to the things that ‘testify’ to the truth and reality of Jesus.

The strange thing about today’s reading is that John the Baptist makes it clear that the one testimony about Jesus that people don’t believe is the testimony of Jesus himself – or, as John puts it in v32: ‘No-one accepts his (Jesus’) testimony.’ The reason seems to be that Jesus is ‘of heaven’ while we are ‘of the earth’. So it turns out that John the Baptist is a more effective witness to the truth of the good news about Jesus because he ‘belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth’ (v31).

This might seem counter-intuitive, but time and again Jesus refers to being rejected personally. *He relies on others to testify about him.* In chapter 5 he presents several such witnesses, including John the Baptist, and we’ll look at that in time. But today, let’s reflect for a moment that Jesus doesn’t just use human beings as ‘second best options’ when it comes to sharing faith. Rather, he relies on them; it turns out they are the best possible witnesses, because they are ‘of the earth’. They get it, they speak the right language.

Which is a roundabout way of saying that *you are not God’s plan B. Or C, or D, or Z for that matter.* God needs you! Your faith matters, your witness matters, because we humans are the best people to share the good news of God’s love with others. We can make the love of God real, by our words and actions.

That’s quite a thought, isn’t it? It’s both a privilege and a responsibility, and many of us feel nervous about the responsibility part of that. We’ll come onto some good news in that regard tomorrow. But today, let’s rejoice in the thought that God intends to do most of his great work on earth through us. *We matter.* Our faith matters. The little ways we can point to God matter. God is in them – and you (yes, you!) are His witness.

Take a moment to pray today that God would empower your witness, in whatever shape that takes, today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 31 – John 3:31-36 (ii) ‘Spirit without limit’

All you can eat buffet. Unlimited data. We’re used to these kinds of promotions in our modern society – and they’re always tempting. In most restaurants we order particular dishes, and to order others would cost extra – but an ‘all you can eat’ buffet offers food potentially without limit. Similarly our phone contracts often cap what we can use – but the promise of unlimited data offers download possibilities beyond our wildest dreams... sort of.

But what about the spiritual life? Is there a limit to what we can expect? A level of maturity beyond which we cannot go? A cordon surrounding access to God beyond which we cannot pass, rather like the tight security detail for a famous person? A cap on what God can give, rather like the ceiling in a monthly data contract?

In today’s reading, John the Baptist’s makes this stark comment: ‘He gives the Spirit without limit’ (v34). In other words, *there is always more of God to receive*, more of his love and power to discover.

There is some debate over how to read this phrase – does the ‘he’ refer to God the Father, whose spiritual anointing of the Son is without limit? Or does it refer to the Son (Jesus) whose capacity to give the Spirit to those who seek him is without limit? The NIV translation favours the first of those, but I’m not so sure. Since the context is the preceding phrase, which references the one who ‘speaks the words of God’ (i.e. Jesus), and the marriage of word and Spirit in the ministry of Jesus is referenced at least twice in the next three chapters (4:24, 6:63), I think the ‘he’ here is Jesus.

Why does this matter? Because, if correct, it means that *the ‘Spirit without limit’ is for us and not just for Jesus*. We have an unlimited data contract with God. It’s not bound by time constraints (Sunday mornings?), prayer techniques or anything else. It is mediated through God’s word, as John testifies, but as long as we’re humbly soaking up as much of that as we can, then the promise is clear – Jesus is able to give the Spirit without limit.

What a promise to light up our day! Seize faith today and ask for more of God, who gives without limit. Invite His Spirit into situations where you or others need Him. And keep trusting that your spirit-filled life, as ‘one from the earth’, will speak to others today. All things are in Jesus’ hands.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 32 – John 4:1-3 ‘Divine delegation’

The story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well in John chapter 4 is one of the most famous in the bible. Over the next few days we’ll bask in its beauty, and be encouraged by all that this lovely encounter has to tell us. But today, let’s begin with a tiny detail that I’ve never noticed before...

Jesus’ impact is growing. John the Baptist is joyfully stepping aside – the ‘friend of the bridegroom’ – so that his cousin’s ministry can flourish, and by the start of chapter 4, Jesus is now baptising more disciples than John (v1). But then the gospel writer drops a glorious little bombshell: ‘although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples.’ (v2)

I love this footnote! What it tells us is that, even early in Jesus’ ministry, *he was happy to share his work with his friends and followers*. Jesus is no control freak, nor a micromanager who needs things ‘done right’. At this stage, his disciples still have very little real clue as to who he was or what he came to do, as the other gospels make clear – but even with their inexperience and incomprehension Jesus trusts them to play a central role at the very heart of his work.

I find this very encouraging. What’s true then is true now. If Jesus can trust *them*, then he can also trust *us*. He’s not looking for disciples who ‘have it all together’, who never make mistakes, who sail serenely through life. He simply wants to empower those with a surrendered heart and a willing spirit. *People like you and me*.

We may not have the joy of literally baptising, but we can all share in Jesus’ work. And we can do so, knowing that Jesus trusts us to do it, and is with us every step of the way. Over the last couple of days we have focused primarily on how God equips us to share our faith – but Jesus’ work includes everything that he can put his name to: caring for those in need, acts of compassion, campaigning for justice, encouraging the downhearted. And Jesus lets us do this vital work on his behalf.

So take heart today – yes, we trust in Jesus. But Jesus also trusts in you. Give thanks for this amazing privilege. And pray for enthusiasm and grace to do his work today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 33 – John 4:3-10 ‘Divine initiative’

One day late in the year 2000 I'd just been to a particularly inspiring talk in central London, given by the late, great Rev. John Stott. I was on the tube platform and remember turning it all through in my mind. I prayed a short prayer: 'Lord, I'm ready for something new. Please show me what it is.' Literally the next day, a friend of mine called me up and asked if I'd like to join a new team at church which was taking an Alpha course into the local prison.

The call changed my life. I spent the next two years visiting inmates every week, and the team was privileged to witness dozens of prisoners come to faith. Miracles were frequent, and my own faith was inspired and challenged in new ways.

It all came from a simple phone call. Someone took the initiative – or rather God took the initiative through someone! – to invite me, and life was never quite the same.

In today's reading, God in the form of Jesus took the initiative to invite someone, and her life changed forever too. The story of the woman at the well has so much to teach us, but let's begin at the beginning, which as somebody once observed, is a very good place to start. Jesus is tired and thirsty and sits down by a well. A woman comes along to draw water and Jesus asks the most simple – but also extraordinary – question: 'Will you give me a drink?'

The story of God's engagement with humans is ultimately always about *God taking the initiative*. God came to meet Adam in the garden. God came to rescue his people from slavery. God comes to the earth in Christ. And Jesus comes into this woman's ordinary life to meet her too. That's what God does.

God comes to meet us as well. He takes the initiative, knocks at the door. Yes, he loves us to seek Him. But let's take heart and never forget the fact that he seeks us first.

Even better, God doesn't just seek out the brightest and the best – the stars, the leaders, those born to high position. Quite the reverse. The woman in our story was shocked because Jesus, as a male Jew, just wasn't meant to speak to a Samaritan woman. But Jesus did it anyway. He loves to break down our human walls of prejudice. He just loves meeting people where they are.

So today, let Jesus meet you where you are. Sit awhile with him, and give thanks that he continues to seek you, even as you seek him.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 34 – John 4:3-14 ‘Living water’

On BBC Springwatch in 2020 there was a fascinating segment which looked at what you can find in the water of an average garden pond. A sample was sent to a lab, and what they identified was literally millions of living organisms, from simple microbes and algae to tadpoles, pondskaters and all kinds of larvae. We like to think of water as the stuff of life, though not quite like that! Nevertheless the average body of water is absolutely full of it – abundant life.

Unfortunately this kind of living water would be very dangerous for us to drink! However, there is another kind of living water which we absolutely need. It quenches not so much our physical thirst but something much deeper...

Yesterday we saw that when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he was already breaking all the rules of social convention to chat with her; he certainly has her full attention! Now, in our reading today, he engages it further with a cryptic comment, which moves the conversation from a simple one about water on a hot day to the deeper questions of life. What makes us really *live*?

Answer that question from a physical point of view and it's obvious. In a hot climate you couldn't last more than 3 days without water. However, what if our deepest need is *spiritual* water – water for the soul? Who could provide that?

'If you knew who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' (v10)

In one extraordinary answer Jesus takes the conversation to a level which reveals the most profound truths of existence. Our souls thirst, and each one of us cries out for spiritual water. Jesus knew this was true for the woman, but in fact it could have been anyone, which is why this conversation recorded in John 4 is so important. And what we learn is that *it's Jesus who satisfies that thirst*. So much so, that whoever drinks it 'will never thirst', but instead have a spring within them 'welling up to eternal life' (v14).

What Jesus says to the woman at the well is what he says to us today. Does your soul thirst? Here's the water which satisfies you eternally – Jesus is the water of life. Drink deeply, for this water never runs out.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 35 – John 4:15-26 ‘Anytime, anywhere’

Where do you find it easiest to meet with God? That’s an interesting question, isn’t it, and I suspect a sample of us reading today’s reflection would give a range of answers: for some, it would be a church building – perhaps a particular church building. For others, it would be their favourite place at home, a chair where they pray and read their bibles. For yet others, it would be out in nature, inspired by the beauty of creation towards the glorious Creator it points to.

The fact that we even ask this question marks a revolution in human understanding. For most religious worldviews in most cultures throughout most of history, God can only be met in particular holy places. In today’s reading, Jesus and the Samaritan woman both reference two of those places: for the Samaritans it was a mountain, for Jews the temple in Jerusalem. Indeed the latter was very much the place which the Lord God had decreed for his people, the place where he met with humanity, received their worship and cleansed them.

But something new was coming (v21) – a new time when access to God would not be limited to particular places or mediated through particular people or rituals. *The presence of God would be available to all humanity – anytime, anywhere. Wow!*

We’re so used to this thought that we rarely step back for a moment to appreciate just how amazing, how extraordinary, how revolutionary, how liberating that is. To be able to meet with God anytime, anywhere... in your chair at home, in nature, in any one of millions of buildings, all across the world. Forgive this reference, it’s not meant to sound flippant, I’m being totally serious when I say that I used to meet God in the toilet at work. When something difficult hit me and I needed to really pray, there was nowhere else to go where I could be alone. So I took a cubicle in the gents and just... prayed. And for a few minutes that place became holy ground as one stressed young(ish) man sought God. Anytime, anywhere.

Next time we’ll go deeper into *how* it is that we can meet God anytime, anywhere – but today, wherever you are, give thanks that *right there, you can meet God*. He is with you, He is listening, He is reaching out His arms of love. And wherever you go today, you can meet God there too. Amen, thanks be to God!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 36 – John 4:15-26 (ii) ‘Spirit and Truth’

Laurel and Hardy. Morecambe and Wise. The Two Ronnies. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Brian Clough and Peter Taylor. Redgrave and Pinsent. Bacon and eggs. Cheese and pickle. Quinoa and feta cheese.... (yes, really)

Some combinations were just made to go together, weren't they? Great on their own, together they're unbeatable. Yesterday we looked at one great combination: anytime, anywhere. What Jesus shared in this extraordinary encounter with the Samaritan woman was a revolution in our understanding of when and where we can meet with our Almighty Creator God. It is, for sure, amazing news. But the mechanism by which we can do this also matters. How is this possible?

The answer lies in v23, and in *another unbeatable combination: the Spirit and the Truth*. To gain intimate access to God anytime, anywhere rests on these two ingredients – that, as Jesus says, we worship God the Father 'in Spirit and in truth.' Why? Because these two lie at the heart of God's very being: 'God is spirit' (v24) and therefore when Jesus gives His Spirit to all who follow Him, this enables us to engage with God on His own terms, as spiritual beings.

Similarly, God's word, as St John tells us later, is also Truth (17:17). Everything God says is true, and God's truth has the power to set us free. So, Truth likewise connects us with the very core of God's Being.

Spirit and Word (truth), Word and Spirit. The two pillars of the spiritual life. *Everything else flows from these two*: our prayer life, our community life, our day-to-day life – *everything*. All the practices of a lively faith ultimately have to rest on these solid foundations: God's Word and God's Spirit. And since Jesus sends the Spirit, and is called the 'Word of God' from the beginning of time (1:1), it all ultimately points back to Jesus, the 'super-foundation' – or as the book of Hebrews puts it, 'the author and perfecter of our faith.'

It reminds us of the immense importance of investing time in understanding God's Word, and the equally important task of asking the Spirit to empower us to live out God's Word. Which is what you're doing right now! And by God's grace, may He empower you to live in the extraordinary and dynamic power of Word and Spirit this day – all the time, everywhere.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 37 – John 4:27-38 ‘Could this be...?’

Those of you who know my family well will know that we love crime dramas. It’s partly about the joy of a puzzle, and partly about justice and the value of every human life. The thing about these dramas is that it always comes down to evidence. What evidence is there for us to believe that so-and-so is guilty or innocent?

Evidence matters. In our current society it often takes centre stage, and not just in court. Depending on who’s asking, it might be evidence of a real relationship, of a right to remain, of whether the covid virus is advancing or retreating. Sometimes the whole of our society feels like a sort of extended crime drama, where everything is assessed according to ‘evidence’.

We may think that’s a good thing, or we may feel a bit uneasy about it. Perhaps a bit of both! Nevertheless, evidence allows us to make good decisions and form solid convictions. And this is just as true in matters of faith. What is it that allows us to stand strong in our faith, even when it’s being shaken? *What is our ‘evidence’ that we rely on when our faith is tested?*

As the Samaritan woman leaves her life-changing encounter with Jesus, she returns to the community with all kinds of big questions buzzing around in her head. But those questions come to rest on one very powerful piece of evidence. She had just met someone ‘who told me everything I’ve ever done’ (v29). She had experienced what it was like *to be divinely known and loved*, and this knowledge provided convincing proof that he really was the Messiah he claimed to be. She couldn’t wait to tell everyone! ‘Could this be....?’

Her experience acts as an encouragement and reminder to us, too. We too have our ‘evidence’ of what it has meant to us to encounter God. Times when we have sensed God’s presence, or received answers to prayer, times when we read Scripture and knew its truth deep inside us, or maybe even heard God’s voice directly in some way. Above all, we seize by faith the same experiential truth which changed the Samaritan woman’s life: that *we are known and loved by God*.

That was true yesterday, it’s true tomorrow – and it is also true today. Jesus comes to meet you. You are known and loved by him. Could this be... a moment to reach out to him again in faith and joy?

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 38 – John 4:27-38 (ii) ‘Spiritual food’

I love food. I won't pretend otherwise. And all food, really. I can derive as much pleasure from cheese and beans on toast as from an expensive meal or an exquisite dessert. Not that I'll refuse the latter if you ever host me for a meal, I hasten to add.

Food is a joy. Food is also *fuel*. We need to eat to have the energy required for the rest of life. In our passage today, Jesus was hungry and thirsty and the disciples try to get him to re-fuel his body: 'Rabbi, eat something' (v31). But Jesus replies cryptically: 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about' (v32).

What was this 'food'? Clearly not physical food – let's abandon the thought that Jesus might have been hiding a pitta under his tunic, or some olives in his belt. This is clearly some sort of spiritual food. Many commentators have concluded that this is a reference to the spiritual nourishment (and discipline) of fasting, and there is much merit in that conclusion. Fasting really is a form of spiritual food, and if you've never tried it (and it's safe for you to do so) I would recommend giving it a go. You'll be surprised how alive you feel, and how close to God, if it's dedicated to him.

But although I agree with this line of thought, Jesus does give us a much more direct answer in the text itself: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me' (v34). *Obedience is energising*. It fuelled Jesus' life, even when he was physically hungry.

The same is true for us too. How are we nourished spiritually? Fundamentally by obeying God. As we do God's will (in whatever form that takes) so we are 'fed', we are energised in our journey of faith. It becomes the fuel of our spiritual lives – even if others know nothing about it.

As you reflect, what is God calling you to do today? Dedicate it to him, cover it in prayer – and may that obedience be, not just fuel, but the choicest of spiritual food for you this day.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 39 – John 4:34-42 ‘Open your eyes’

I don't know if you remember that craze about twenty years ago for pictures that had hidden objects in them. If you looked closely, after a few seconds another image would 'appear' within the picture. Apparently about 92% of the population was able to do them – I must confess I never could. I would look, and look – but not see.....

There is *a great difference between looking and seeing*. When we lose something at home, we might look and look and eventually we will *see* the item we're looking for. Or we can think about a problem, looking and looking over the evidence until finally we *see* the pattern or the answer.

How do we look at the world currently? Or perhaps, more importantly, what do we *see*? In today's passage Jesus teaches his disciples about the difference between looking and seeing. The disciples are confused: by Jesus stopping in Samaria; by his conversation with someone he was not culturally meant to associate with; by Jesus referring cryptically to different types of hunger. They were looking at Jesus and at the situation: but they couldn't *see* what Jesus was up to. And Jesus counsels them: 'Open your eyes!'

Jesus then seems to head off on a tangent about harvest mottoes, quoting two of them (v35, v37). But again, this is really all about the difference between looking and seeing. The disciples saw cultural chaos, but Jesus sees what God is up to. The harvest Jesus is talking about is the growing presence of the kingdom of God, of a great hunger to know God and be restored into relationship with Him. Even Samaritans – hated enemies of the Jews, and out of favour for 500 years – are seeking God, seeking truth, seeking spiritual nourishment. This, Jesus says, is the start of a new and bigger spiritual harvest, as God's presence and kingdom breaks out in a new way across the nation and the world. Open your eyes! Can you see it?

Even today, in our unsettled season, *we too can see a great awakening of spiritual hunger*. As so many of our anchors become unmoored, people are seeking assurance, peace, solid truths and foundations on which to find hope. And we know just where they can find it! Just as the Samaritan woman commends Jesus as 'the man who told me everything' (v29, v39), so we too can point others in the same direction. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And so may God grant us grace to open our eyes and see Jesus today. And may God open the eyes of all those who seek Him, especially those we know and love. May we too be privileged to hear others say: 'now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world' (v42). Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 40 – John 4:43-54 ‘No honour in his own country’

Recently I was walking along our upstairs landing at home and passed a large picture on the wall. It's a collage of all our wedding cards, and it's been hanging in our house – wherever we've lived, six different dwellings during our married life – continuously for the last 25 years.

It struck me that I hadn't looked at it, even noticed it, for months. I pass it several times a day but I'm so used to it, it's just... there. Sometimes we get so familiar with things we stop noticing them, or enjoying them, perhaps we start to neglect them.

As the old saying goes: 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' I sometimes think that's a bit strong in most cases, but it's a healthy reminder that we can take things for granted, lose the wonder of something or someone. Jesus grew up in Nazareth in the region of Galilee – in a tight-knit and relatively small community he would have been well known as a child, then as a teenager and a young adult. 'Little Jesus with the grubby knees,' you might imagine his elderly neighbours saying as they looked at the mature adult returning and standing before them – just as perhaps you might have experienced when you've returned to the place where you grew up.

It must have been a shock to see the carpenter's son returning as a celebrated religious leader. They were used to him just being... ordinary. And that is what lies behind this puzzling phrase in v44 of today's passage: 'A prophet has no honour in his own country.' It means that people are too familiar with the person in question, they somehow can't see that over the years this person has become something *more*.

And so Jesus struggles to find any sort of authority or acceptance in the place where he grew up. We know from the other gospels that after he was rejected in Nazareth he went to live in Capernaum a little way away, and never returned. Here in John, Jesus moves on quickly to Cana, and we'll see what he does there tomorrow.

But there's a challenge for us too, isn't there. If we've walked with Jesus for a while, it's easy to get a bit too familiar, to lose the sense of wonder of who He is and all that He's done. The wonderful news of our faith is that *there's always more with Jesus*: more to learn, more to discover, more to experience.

Today, if you feel a bit jaded – and maybe even if you don't – pray for God to give you a fresh sense of wonder at the good news of Jesus, of His love, goodness, power and glory. May we have grace to give Jesus the honour that He deserves, and in doing so, find our hearts captured anew.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 41 – John 4:43-54 (ii) ‘Your son will live’

One of our favourite TV series of recent years has been ‘Unforgotten’. It’s a crime drama which solves old cases, sometimes 30 or 40 years after the event. The interplay of the characters is particularly good, but the central idea is what makes the drama compelling – the idea that, even many years later, the person who died *matters*, they are not forgotten.

We often hear media stories about ‘the forgotten heroes of such-and-such’, and today’s passage has been a useful memory jogger for me. I had forgotten that there are *two* miracles which take place at Cana in Galilee. By far the most famous is the wedding party (which we looked at in detail a few weeks ago), where Jesus turns water into wine. If you know much about the story of Jesus, or even a little, you’ll probably have heard of that one. Probably a significant percentage of people who rarely set foot in a church building would be able to identify ‘water into wine’ as one of Jesus’ miracles.

But there is second miracle which John records, whose location is almost entirely forgotten – in fact, it’s the next miracle in the gospel and we discover it here in today’s passage. After his visit to Jerusalem and back through Samaria, Jesus returns to Cana (v46), and miraculously heals an official’s son. It turns out that the son was in Capernaum, but Jesus’ power and spiritual authority is such that he can perform the miracle at some miles’ distance, healing the child by a simple word.

It’s an unsettling story, in a number of ways: that Jesus doesn’t journey with the man, but heals at a distance (one of the very few occasions this happens, though not the only one); that he is somewhat stern and terse with the official, despite the official’s mixture of faith and desperation. But at its heart is this glorious declaration: ‘*Your son will live.*’ (v50)

This takes me back to the heart of the gospel. What is our good news? Ultimately it is about life. *God’s plan and purpose for us is life* – abundant, eternal life. Wholeness in every dimension, life in all its fullness. What Jesus offers the official here is a wonderful demonstration of that – but it points to the bigger truth, and one that we can give thanks for today.

May God fill our hearts again with joy and thanksgiving at the life that He offers – and may we too both pray for and experience that life in our hearts, minds and lives today. Because of Christ, we too can live.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 42 – John 4:43-54 (iii) ‘Taking Jesus at his word’

Much of our news in recent years has been dominated by questions of credibility. Who is telling the truth and who isn't? If you're anything like me, most of the time our response is, increasingly, to throw up our hands and say: 'frankly, I don't trust any of them'. We live in an age marred by chronic 'truth decay'. Truth is no longer treasured as the noble pursuit of an objective reality; rather, like a good credit card, it's our 'flexible friend.' 21st century 'Truth' seems determined by whichever opinion consistently shouts the loudest to the most people – ideally saying the thing that this group of people secretly wants to hear.

How refreshing it is, then, to come back to this story in John and drink deep of this simple, but deeply profound phrase: 'The man took Jesus at his word.' (v50) If only it were always that simple! To hear something and trust its author so implicitly that the word is enough. We can simply receive it, and go on our way, safe in the knowledge that whatever was spoken was true, and real.

But, sometimes it really *is* that simple. *It all depends on who says it.* One of the great joys of our faith is that we can listen to Someone who is completely trustworthy. Who isn't tainted by corrupt money or secret prejudice. Whose purpose is life, and not to 'steal or kill or destroy' (John 10:10). Who gives continually of Himself for our wholeness and flourishing.

When I find the torrent of lies and manipulation overwhelming, it is pure joy to come back to this beautiful book – the Bible – and there find truth. *Something I can trust implicitly, because the Someone who spoke it loves me and gave His life for me* – in other words, Someone who I can likewise trust in the very depths of my being.

Much of the time, the key to spiritual life is disturbingly simple: it is to take Jesus at his word. I say disturbingly because we humans rather enjoy complicating things. Surely there's a catch?!

The royal official faced a similar dilemma. He wanted Jesus to come with him. But in the end, he overcame his internal dialogue and took a step of faith: he trusted Jesus. And his mustard seed of faith was wonderfully rewarded.

Today, may we too experience the deep joy of taking Jesus at his word. Which of his many beautiful words will you cling on to today? Let it sink deep, and may it likewise stir our hearts to faith, and trust.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 43 – John 5:1-6 ‘Do you want...?’

Today, let me make a confession here – I’m not very good at taking medicine. I often forget, which could just as easily be interpreted as ‘conscious forgetting’! Generally I find some treatment or other sitting on my table, looking at me and making me feel guilty.

But it does beg the question: do I want to get well? Is it worth enough to me to keep taking an unpleasant medicine every day for weeks or even months? Is my life hampered sufficiently by whatever the issue is to observe the discipline of medication every day?

Fortunately, most of my issues are minor, and have very little effect on the quality of my life. They pale into insignificance compared to the very serious disability that the chap in our passage suffered from. Whatever form his disability took, it left him unable to work, and carrying the double stigma of being thought to have inherited or contracted this disability because of family sinfulness (we’ll get to that bit in a couple of days). For 38 years he had lain by the healing pool quite palpably *not* being healed.

You would think he would give anything for healing! And yet Jesus asks: ‘Do you want to get well?’ (v6) It seems the most odd question, doesn’t it? Of course he does! ...or does he?

We desire many things for our lives. In quiet moments we may wish our lives to change in many ways. But if we’re honest, *we also carry a hidden fear of what those changes might mean*. We’ve lived a certain way for so long, it’s hard to imagine that life could be different. What if it’s worse? What if I’ve longed for something for so long and then it’s a disappointment? What if I end up wishing I hadn’t gone for this, or asked for that, or tried the other instead? What if, in making this change, I somehow lose a part of my identity?

So maybe it’s not such a daft question Jesus asks, after all. And maybe for some of us, we too have similar deep needs and desires which bring us conflicting emotions. Whatever our current situation, we still fear change. We want something, and we don’t want it. How can we *know*?

The answer is that you can’t – but you *can* know the Person you’re asking. I’ll leave today’s final word to Minnie Haskins: ‘I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.'”

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 44 – John 5:1-11 ‘The law forbids...’

We are fortunate to live in a relatively law-abiding country. Which is just as well, because there are a lot of them to follow. In 2010, the UK passed 3,506 new laws – and just in case you wondered if this is particularly driven by one political persuasion or another, the outgoing Labour government was responsible for 1,788 of them, and the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition for 1,718. So they're as bad – or as good! – as each other.

Admittedly 2010 was a record year for laws, but if you imagine totting up everything we've legislated since Magna Carta in 1215, it's going to be big number. As an aside, the oldest law which is still in force dates back to 1267, one which essentially stopped the nobility from recovering debts by foul means, requiring them to use the due process of law.

The Jewish law, given by God and recorded in the first books of the bible, totalled 613 separate commands (which rather pales in comparison, doesn't it?). It was a comprehensive vision of life, but also left many areas for interpretation. Over the centuries, these 613 commands were massively extended by *human interpretations of God's law*. For example, the very sensible Sabbath laws which forbade work on God's Holy Day (Saturday), were intended (a) to allow everyone to enjoy the benefits of rest; (b) to reinforce the equality of all people, since servants enjoyed the same time off as everyone else; (c) to break the stranglehold of the acquisition of wealth on people's lives and (d) to give people time to worship God properly. All good, really.

Somehow over the years these very healthy commands got distorted into obsessive discussions about what constituted 'work'. Eventually all tasks were more or less banned on the Sabbath, even very sensible ones like – in today's passage – people being able to carry their mat to wherever they needed it (particularly important if you had a disability). Hence the Pharisees objection to the healed man: 'The law forbids you...' (v10)

There's a salutary lesson here. We need laws – they set boundaries, and when applied fairly, allow people to live constructively in community. However, even good laws ultimately rest on systems of compliance and punishment. To enforce them is essentially a negative vision of living. Do this – or else!

In this story, Jesus applies the spirit of the law – indeed the correct vision of this particular law – and acts according to grace. *Grace is driven by love, not fear*. Grace prioritises the person not the rule. Grace heals rather than punishes. It's still the heart of our faith – and speaking personally, it's still the best word I ever heard!

I'm not saying that laws should be disobeyed, or that we don't need them. But we should always remember that *laws can only take us so far*. Jesus calls us – like the healed man – towards his grace, which transcends our structures and our systems. Today, let's rejoice that, thanks to Jesus, 'we are no longer under law, but under grace.' (Romans 6:14) And let's be those who share that grace lavishly with others.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 45 – John 5:7-13 ‘He had slipped away’

I wonder if you’ve ever experienced the kindness of a stranger? It’s an unusual sensation – this person appears just at your moment of need... and then disappears just as quickly. If that’s ever happened to you, then you’ll know what the man in our story feels like. Jesus has just changed his life forever, healing a chronic physical condition (v8-9). But as the man tries to explain himself to others, he realises that the person who has done this is nowhere to be found. As the text says, the man ‘had no idea who he was, for Jesus had slipped away...’ (v13).

The story of Jesus is a story of humility. Born in a shed for animals, surrounded by the scandalous whiff of a teenage pregnancy. Forced to live as a refugee in childhood, and then choosing to live in ordinary obscurity for his early adult years. He never wrote a book, or travelled outside of his country as an adult. He consistently refused power and privilege, and preferred the company of those on the margins of society. He lived effectively as a homeless wanderer (Matthew 8:20), and died a wrongful death, an innocent man executed like a criminal.

Not surprising, perhaps, that this kind of man would choose to practice kindness anonymously. He had done God’s work, and left the rest to his Father.

It is the path he too calls us to follow. He encourages all who would follow him likewise to practise their acts of kindness in humility, not taking attention for ourselves, but seeking our satisfaction solely from God (Matthew 6:1-4). And much of the time, his followers have taken him at his word. Even today, recent research has indicated that a Christian in the UK is 3 ½ times more likely to be involved in voluntary work as those who do not profess a faith. That work is largely unrecognised and unrewarded. Just millions of faithful followers quietly doing their master’s bidding. Just as Jesus intended.

It can be hard to resist the temptation for plaudits and praise. There is a bit of us that wants to be noticed for the good that we do. And every so often, if you do receive a compliment or a thank you, treasure it. There’s nothing wrong with receiving and enjoying unsought thanks! But today, let’s be inspired again by Jesus’ humility, let’s give thanks for his example, and let’s pray for grace to do our small acts of kindness in the same spirit, knowing that our great God smiles down on us as we do.

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Day 46 – John 5:1-15 ‘Our deepest need’

What is your deepest need? It’s a good question to ask, isn’t it? I suspect there would be a lot of different answers to that question. Some would say health, others happiness, and yet others love and relationship.

This unusual story of the healing at the pool is really *all about our deepest need*. Today we’ll read the story one last time (before we get to Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees) and draw some threads together. In particular I want to tackle the most difficult part of it head on – verse 14. What on earth does Jesus mean when he says: ‘Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you’?

Jesus is always full of surprises – whenever we try to put him in a box, he seems to defy the limitations we put on him. Already we’ve seen him ask what appears to be an obvious question (v6) and then mystifyingly slip away into the crowd (v13). Nevertheless, verse 14 is one of the most controversial in the gospels. Was Jesus really endorsing the prevailing view of the culture that the man’s disability was caused by some sin he (or his ancestors) had committed? And that therefore, unless he changed his pattern of life, he would suffer a similar fate again?

This is largely the view taken by scholars, who argue that Jesus was still very much ‘of his culture’ and was unwilling at this stage to publicly contradict it. However, that seems unlikely: partly because Jesus didn’t seem shy of challenging cultural norms at the temple in ch2 or by the well in ch4; and, more tellingly, he himself refused to endorse this viewpoint in a similar episode at the beginning of chapter 9:

‘As Jesus went along he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”’ (9:1-3)

It’s hard to imagine Jesus contradicting himself so obviously, so it must mean something else...

Which brings us back to our deepest need. In the end, the story of Scripture and of humanity is that *our deepest need is to be reconciled to God*, or in language of John, to know God’s true and abundant *life* within us. The man had been healed physically, but Jesus here is pointing to his deeper need to be made whole spiritually as well. The ‘something worse’ is a life still not reconciled fully to God.

In a way, this story is the equivalent of the famous story of the paralysed man, who was lowered through the roof and healed both spiritually and physically. It reminds us that God’s plan for us is glorious wholeness in every dimension, every facet of our being.

We may not have experienced something as dramatic as the healing by the pool, but we too are recipients of God’s abundant life. Today, let’s give thanks for that wonderful gift, and pray that we might dwell in that life ever more fully. If there are things that bind us, may those too be brought to our great God in prayer, that we might live in greater freedom and wholeness.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 47 – John 5:16-19 ‘Always at his work’

Where is God when....? I’m sure that’s a question you’ve heard numerous times. Perhaps you’ve asked it yourself. Something bad or unexpected happens. Something we wish *hadn’t*. Something that causes us pain. And we wonder: where is God? Is He silent? Why didn’t He intervene?

It’s natural to ask those questions. God’s people have always done so. The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was once asked to describe the psalms, and he replied that he liked to picture the psalms as ‘a little old Jewish man, shaking his fist against God.’

The fact that we can shake our fists is instructive in itself. God is not a capricious tyrant who cannot tolerate being questioned. That tells us something very important about who God is, and what God is like. He can take it – He can absorb our pain within himself.

It’s also important to understand that God never takes a holiday. If bad things happen, it’s not because God has taken His eye off the ball, or had a break. God instituted the Sabbath for our benefit, but as Jesus says in today’s passage, God is ‘always at his work’ (v17). God’s care for us never stops. God’s desire for His kingdom to come in this troubled world is continuous, too.

But God doesn’t force himself on situations, or us. He may be constantly attentive to our world, but not at the expense of our freedom to choose. There is a mystery why certain miracles happen, and others do not. At the pool, the man was wonderfully and spontaneously healed – and Jesus reminds his persecutors that doing good is not stopped by the Sabbath. God is always doing good.

For all that, we may have unanswered questions, or unhealed wounds. Perhaps today, we can give those questions and those scars back to God. Invite Him to be at work in them. And may that simple thought that God is still working today, in your life and in the world, bring you a measure of comfort and peace. God’s love and care for you never ceases. He is always at His work.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 48 – John 5:19-23 ‘Follow the leader’

I wonder if reading the words ‘follow the leader’ immediately conjured up visions of the classic playground game. Perhaps you were momentarily transported back... The idea of the game was very simple – it did exactly what it said on the tin: someone was appointed the ‘leader’ and everyone had to copy whatever the leader did. If you didn’t, you were out!

In today’s passage we see a divine version of ‘follow the leader’. Having healed the man at the pool, Jesus is now in debate with the Pharisees, who are hot under the collar because Jesus had appeared to break Sabbath laws – although in fact he hadn’t, he’d only challenged their *interpretation* of the law by healing on the Sabbath. In reply, Jesus has already told them that he was doing God’s work (v17) – in other words, they’d misunderstood the spirit of God’s law, which was never meant to stop people doing good, even on the Sabbath.

However, in these verses he goes a step further. This work, he says, is not just commended by God – *it is God’s very work, conducted on behalf of God Himself*. Here we see for the first time Jesus declaring his relationship to God publicly. He has already said it privately to Nicodemus (3:16), but this is very different. He is in the capital city, Jerusalem, surrounded by the great and the good. And he scandalises them because he refers to God as his Father (v17, v19), and to himself as the Son. This immediately puts his own life at risk (v18) – but he hasn’t finished yet...

In this beautiful personal testimony of Jesus’ relationship to his Father, he admits that his whole *raison d’être* is to do what God does (v19). Indeed, he *only* does what God does. It is ‘follow the leader’ on a divine scale. This includes great works (v20) and the very gift of life itself (v21).

We are now the body of Christ – his hands, feet, eyes and mouth in the world. So it follows that if Jesus’ calling was to do the things God does, *so we too are to bless what God is doing*. We are not God – but we carry God’s presence and His call to do what He would do. To care for others, to serve the poor and vulnerable, to bless the world, to be bringers of life, carrying the presence of Christ wherever we are. And may God bless that call in our lives, this day and this week.

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Day 49 – John 5:24-30 ‘Crossing over’

I love bridges. They’ve always had a fascination for me – something about the design, something about the view as you go over one, perhaps even a cheeky sense of ‘cheating’ nature by traversing something that should be impassable.

It’s hard to pick a favourite bridge, but Clifton Suspension Bridge in my old home of Bristol would have to be right up there – the view is remarkable, and the feat of engineering to achieve it barely less so. Near the top would also be the Hornsey Lane road bridge over Archway Road, which I walked across most weeks as a child to get to the local park. Watching four lanes of traffic zoom past either to or from Highgate was thrilling as a 5-year-old – and quite exciting even now!

Ultimately the purpose of a bridge is to enable us to cross over. And in today’s passage, Jesus describes another ‘crossing over’, this time a fundamental one: from death to life. The thread of John’s gospel is governed by two deep contrasts: darkness and light, death and life. And in each case, Jesus comes to bring us the latter. He is the light which shines in the darkness, a light we step into (3:21). And, as he shares here, *he is also the path from death to life*. ‘Whoever hears my word and believes.... has crossed over from death to life’ (v24).

It’s a stunning claim, perhaps dimmed by our familiarity with it. But it has the power to shock nonetheless: the journey of following Jesus is ultimately a path from death to life. It is the great ‘crossing over’ we all make, if we believe in Jesus and in his good news.

Take a moment to reflect on this great truth. What was that bridge like for you? Perhaps the crossing was simple: you heard and believed and made the journey right away. Perhaps it was more like the Clifton Suspension bridge: long, unlikely and quite scary. Perhaps the winds buffeted – or maybe they still do. But whatever the bridge was like, ultimately what matters is that *you crossed it*. And in doing so, you received Jesus’ great gift to us: life.

However long ago you crossed that bridge, today let’s rejoice that we crossed over – and may that thought give us hope to keep journeying along the road. It is still the path to life.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 50 – John 5:24-30 (ii) ‘Life in himself’

A couple of years ago I showed our young people’s group a fascinating video about space. We marvelled at the sheer size and scale of it. As pictures of galaxies and supernovas danced across the screen, I could hear the gasps of amazement, even through my mediocre Zoom camera. As we got to the Big Bang, I put the idea to them that the Big Bang was science’s way of describing how God first began to create the universe. And it’s been expanding ever since.

There are lots of things we learn from marvelling at creation. Certainly we can gasp in awe at the extraordinary power which fuelled the universe, which speaks of God’s majesty. We can also note how *God can’t help bringing life*. Most of the universe is inert matter, but God has ‘life within himself’ (v26) – this God at some point has to fill what He creates with *life*. And so we have our beautiful earth, bursting with life.

This idea of God having life within himself matters because it helps to explain how we too can enjoy eternal, abundant life. Life is not just a ‘construct’ or a mechanism, like winding up a clock. God possesses it innately, and it follows that anything he touches possesses it too. So when Jesus comes to earth, he carries that life within himself (v26). And as Jesus’ followers are brought into his family and receive his Spirit, *that life is imparted to us too*. So ‘those (of us) who hear will live’ (v25). Not just now, but eternally. Life imparts life imparts life.

In times marked by increasing darkness and worry, locating and dwelling in the source of irrepressible life seems to matter even more. Jesus is that source! Today, let’s give thanks for that life – and let’s breathe deeply of it. For just as Jesus imparts it to us, so we too can be bearers of that irrepressible life to others – pleasing the one who sends us (v30).

Life imparts life.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 51 – John 5:31-40 ‘The witnesses’

I wonder if any of you have ever appeared as a witness, say at a trial or in a legal dispute. I never have, though I had a close call once about 25 years ago. I got as far as the waiting room only to discover that the barristers had accepted my written testimony and didn't need me to appear in person. I must confess to being absolutely terrified, in fact I was so nervous that morning I had forgotten to put a belt on when dressing, forcing me to keep my hands in my pockets on the journey there to stop my trousers slipping down!

Sadly, our legal system needs witnesses because it is presumed that the defendants or plaintiffs are probably not telling the truth, and therefore independent corroboration is needed. Even Jesus, the only perfect human being who ever lived, understood this principle: he knows that what he says about himself is not going to be treated as proof (v31). So in today's passage, as he continues his debate with the religious leaders, he points to several other witnesses which *demonstrate the truth of who he is (the Son) and what he has come to do (bring life)*.

First there is his cousin John, who we call The Baptist, whom Jesus describes beautifully as 'a lamp that burned and gave light' (v35). Then there are the miracles – these are 'weightier' (v36) because they are manifestly things that only God can do. Next the Father himself is named – and here Jesus is probably referring to the voice at his baptism, and where the Spirit descended like a dove (1:33).

Finally there are the Scriptures, which, Jesus says, 'testify about me' (v39). This is perhaps the boldest claim of all. All of his opponents considered scripture to be the very Word of God. And this Word points to Jesus!

Today, all believers have the great joy of seeing the whole of Scripture studded with references to the coming Messiah. Right from God's promise of a rescuer to crush the serpent's head in Genesis 3:15, the Word testifies that someone is coming – someone special, God's anointed. Greater than Moses, greater than David, promised by the prophets, prayed for by God's people.

Why not take a moment to dip into one of those great promises: say Isaiah 9, or 11, or 53. Give thanks that Jesus is the real deal – *the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams not just of a nation but of the world*. These are the witnesses – a sure and solid foundation on which to build our faith.

And may that foundation inspire us to be witnesses too, when opportunity arises. For He is indeed the one in whom we have life (v40).

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 52 – John 5:41-47 ‘Seeking glory’

Glory. It’s one of those words that everybody knows – and probably assumes they know what it is – but is very hard to define. It’s also a word that has appeared a couple of times in John already, and forms a major theme of the book: ‘we have seen his glory’ begins John in 1:14. When Jesus turns water into wine, ‘he thus revealed his glory’ (2:11). Today’s passage is also all about glory.

But what is ‘glory’?

The Hebrew word in the Old Testament is ‘*kabod*’ and it literally means ‘weight’. So, when the glory of God appears, it is experienced almost like a weight pressing down – no wonder people fell to the ground! This idea of ‘weight’ became shorthand for *God’s manifest presence in a situation*, and by extension it then came to mean anything that exalted God. Therefore, God’s glory was anything that pointed to and honoured God.

In its true and original meaning, *glory is really God’s alone*. However, once the word became shorthand for the practice of honouring or exalting someone or something, then it could transfer to others as well. And of course this is how we use it today.

In our passage, Jesus challenges his opponents to make sure they’re seeking glory in the right places. Like most of us, they liked to ‘accept glory from one another’ (v44): but Jesus calls them to restore glory to its true home – to ‘seek the glory that comes from the only God’. Ultimately the only true source of glory is God himself. We are to seek God’s glory first and foremost, not our own.

As the verse implies, God is also able to bestow this glory on others – but that is God’s initiative, not ours, and the rest of the gospels make it clear that God’s definition of glory turns our values upside down. It is bestowed in humility and service – in other words, in the very opposite actions which tend to attract human glory.

God’s glory is a beautiful thing. And there’s something fitting that the Lord’s Prayer finishes with this acclamation: ‘For the kingdom, the power, *and the glory* are yours, now and forever. Amen.’ Why not close your devotions today with that prayer, and especially that last line. Glory is God’s alone. And may that glory be manifest in our lives today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 53 – John 6:1-15 ‘The miracle of multiplication’

At the front of St Mary’s churchyard in Wavendon is a big oak tree. You have to walk under it every time you come up the path to the church door. And, come late Autumn, the tree sheds its leaves, and also thousands of acorns. I became very aware of that as I was standing outside the church after the Sunday service early in December and wherever I put my feet – crunch, crunch, crunch. It must be heaven for squirrels.

Pick up any one of those acorns and you have the potential for a new tree, also able to produce, in time, thousands of acorns. Biologists will no doubt explain that in evolutionary terms – that only a tiny proportion of seeds (acorns) are able to get into the soil and propagate, so the production of thousands is necessary for the oak to ensure its own survival. And that’s all well and good. (And good for the squirrels!)

But I also to think of it as *the miracle of multiplication*. We can see it across nature. One organism has the capacity to produce thousands of others like it. The apple I had for breakfast had 3 pips in it, which in turn could theoretically grow another 3 trees, each yielding hundreds of apples per year.

This is not to diminish Jesus’ outstanding miracle in our passage today, as one packed lunch multiplied to feed thousands of people – possibly the most famous miracle of all, and the only one which appears in all four gospels. But sometimes we like to divorce it from the natural world, treating it more like ‘magic’: I think it’s better to observe that Jesus transforms the inherent capacities of nature and harnesses them entirely for God’s glory. He demonstrates the miracle of multiplication in a glorious and transcendent way.

And it *is* a miracle. Loaves can’t reproduce, in or of themselves. Neither can fish out of water. But what Jesus does is not something ‘unnatural’ – rather it is *nature transformed and radiating God’s glory*. It is how the world entirely in harmony with God’s purposes is meant to function. Where all are divinely provided for, where there is abundance, where life multiplies.

And we too can take heart that *God is able to multiply our small offerings*. That life in harmony with God’s purposes is inherently fruitful. It multiplies, and blesses those around us with the overflow of its abundance.

What might that look like for you? It may not mean great acts, rather small acts offered with great love. But let’s offer our mustard seeds of faith and action, trusting that God will miraculously multiply them today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 54 – John 6:1-15 (ii) ‘Nothing wasted’

A few years ago at the church where I previously ministered we started what would now be called a ‘fresh expression’ of church. It was a new congregation which met in a hall on Sunday morning, and was designed to reach families and others who perhaps didn’t feel entirely at home in a more traditional church setting.

It started well. We had 45 to our first meeting, and there was a real buzz in the room. But over the coming months, the initial enthusiasm waned. We couldn’t quite get the right ‘DNA’ to the venture and some of the early attendees stopped coming. After six months, we were down to about 15, and with my season of training coming to an end, the future leadership of the venture was uncertain. We reluctantly took the decision to call it a day. It had been an exciting experiment, but it just hadn’t flown.

About two years later I caught up with some of the key group that had invested in it. After we left, the group had decided to keep meeting in one of their homes. They all felt a natural connection, and wanted to experiment some more with ‘doing church differently’ as a group of families. They were still part of ‘regular church’ but every couple of weeks they also shared together, and it was going really well. Deeper friendships were forming and they felt energised in faith. They admitted that they never would have pursued it were it not for the ‘failed’ church plant which preceded it.

In the kingdom of God, nothing is wasted. There is really no such thing as failure, only insight into where is God is leading next. After feeding the 5,000 Jesus too insists that leftover food be picked up, declaring: ‘Let nothing be wasted’ (v12).

There are, of course, other conclusions that can be drawn from Jesus’ words. There is a welcome invitation to careful stewardship, perhaps especially timely in our current season of consumer debt and environmental pressure. Abundant as life is, the earth’s resources are not unlimited and our culture of waste is unsustainable.

There is also the particular importance of looking after our food stores. With an estimated 2 million tons of food being thrown away annually just in the UK (or 30 kg per person), Jesus’ words constitute a prophetic challenge to our way of life.

These are all well and good – but today I want to point towards another conclusion: nothing dedicated to God is ever wasted. *Every act, every word, every prayer we offer matters.* It all makes a difference.

Today, wherever you are, and however you feel, take heart from this encouragement: whatever you offer to God matters – nothing is wasted. Jesus’ kingdom is able to bless all that we are and all that we do, for his sake.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 55 – John 6:1-15 (iii) ‘King by force?’

October 2020 marked the 540th anniversary of the start of the Spanish Inquisition. There are a number of episodes in the history of the Church of which it isn't proud, but the Inquisition must rank as one of the worst. The imposition of 'orthodox' belief through violence, torture and intimidation did huge damage to the credibility of those who claimed to follow the way of Christ, and thousands of people lost their lives as a result.

Among the many shameful conclusions of this episode in church history, not the least is that imposing faith or 'the will of God' through force is *a path explicitly rejected by Jesus*. Time and again Jesus refuses either power or coercion to achieve his purposes. In today's passage, after the outstanding miracle feeding thousands, the air is ripe for revolution. Many of his followers have concluded (rightly) that he is the Messiah, which must mean (wrongly) that his next job is to raise an army and fight the occupying power.

Jesus is having none of it: 'knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, [Jesus] withdrew again to a mountain by himself' (v15).

Authority is not the same as power. Jesus possesses all the authority of the universe. But he refuses worldly power. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The human soul is susceptible to the love of power and control, and many a great person has been led astray by this temptation.

Jesus refuses to play that game. His kingdom is not of this world. And so he withdraws to refocus on his true mission: to bring the abundant life of God into human hearts and lives. To see a society founded on the principle of *agape* love (i.e. selfless service), humility and grace.

Few of us possess worldly power. But *we carry the authority of the King*. Today, let's both pray for those who do exercise worldly power, that their hearts would be yielded to God and rooted in love and service. And let's also take heart that God continues his extraordinary work in our lives – and the lives of those we pray for and bless – without 'power' but with divine authority.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 56 – John 6:16-21 ‘Obedience in testing times’

‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ So the Lord declares to his people in the great prophecy of Isaiah (55:9). It’s both a wonderful and an unsettling thought. Much as we always long to see the whole picture, God is simply *bigger* than us; and although we rejoice in his extraordinary love and grace, we can’t always fathom exactly what he’s thinking. We simply have to trust, and, as far as we can, obey.

The disciples must have felt like this in today’s passage. Jesus has just completed an outstanding miracle, but is troubled by the response of the crowd, who harbour designs of revolution: so he withdraws to avoid further repercussions (v15). In Matthew’s version of this famous story, we learn that Jesus tells the disciples to get cracking and row over to the other side of the lake, despite the fact that (a) it’s dark; (b) they’re on their own without him, and (c) the weather is notoriously temperamental, and high winds across the lake are common (and dangerous at night).

What is Jesus up to? In truth, we don’t know for sure. Certainly it is a test of obedience; but it might also be a genuine concern for their safety – with rumours of revolution they need to keep a low profile as much as he does; it might simply be that they need to get home, as their destination is Capernaum; or it might, as Matthew emphasises, be another chance to demonstrate Jesus’ authority and identity. Perhaps all of these are part of the answer! Life is usually like that.

But whatever the reason, the disciples find themselves in the middle of the night in some difficulty (v18) – and afraid. Where is Jesus? What is he up to?

There are times when this is our reality, too. Perhaps this season is just such a time. Perhaps it’s something else, either now or in the past. And we feel afraid. But let’s take heart in what Jesus does next: *he returns to them*. He *reveals* his power and glory. And he *reassures* them: ‘It is I: don’t be afraid’ (v20).

In the high winds and rough seas of life, Jesus is our sure companion. His ways are not always easy – but they are higher, and their purpose is our ultimate good and blessing. It sometimes feels risky to trust: but today, let’s seize faith and ask God for grace to trust again. He is there: don’t be afraid.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 57 – John 6:22-24 ‘Giving thanks’

If you had to describe the feeding of the 5,000 in one short phrase, how would you do it? I imagine many of you would use words like ‘a great sign’, or ‘a spectacular miracle’. Some of you might point to the way Jesus involved and mentored the disciples, others to the basketfuls left over.

But how does John describe it? Not how you’d expect. ‘After the Lord had given thanks.’ (v23) No reference to the multiplication or the miracle. No reference to the little boy, the organisation or the leftovers. According to John, the key marker was that *Jesus had given thanks for the food*.

Some context is useful here. It is traditional at the start of a Jewish meal for the head of the household to bless the bread and break it. The blessing is called the *hamotzi*, and the usual words in English are: ‘Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.’ (Traditional churches sometimes use a form of it just before communion.) So, on one level, it is normal for a Jew like John to use ‘giving thanks’ as shorthand for what happens next.

But I don’t think that’s the whole story. Elsewhere John refers to miracles as ‘works’ or ‘signs’ rather than ‘thank offerings’. He even does so later in this chapter.

It reminds me *how important the act of thanking God is when it comes to the eating of food*. Food is a fundamental part of God’s goodness and provision in our lives. Humans might plant, harvest, distribute and cook food – but it is God who ultimately provides it. It’s no coincidence that ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ is the central phrase Jesus gave us in the Lord’s Prayer, tying together the phrases in the first half which seek God’s glory, and those in the second which invoke God’s help.

Saying grace at meals has somewhat fallen out of favour recently, even in Christian circles. As a child, I was raised with it at every meal: something simple during the week, like ‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful’; and on Sundays, all holding hands round the table, something grander: for example, singing the chorus from ‘We plough the fields and scatter’ or ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow.’ Graces can be long and wordy, or short and pithy: ‘Heavenly Pa, ta’ is the shortest one I know!

But I must confess to being less conscientious in thanking God before every meal than I used to be. And today’s passage challenges me on that. It’s not just that the miracle happened as Jesus thanked God for the food; it is the miracle of God’s provision *every time* we thank God for the food.

Life is gift. And food is an integral part of life. You may be much better than me at saying grace. But either way, let’s renew our commitment to gratitude, especially for the food that we enjoy. ‘All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above – then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.’ Amen!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 58 – John 6:25-29 ‘Food that endures’

We are fortunate to have some apple trees in our garden. 2022 was a particularly bumper year – but whether the year is good or bad, the last job is arguably the most critical, and that is to wrap the apples individually. It’s a bit tedious, to be honest, but more than once over the years we’ve stored a box in the garage and then fished it out a couple of months later, only to find that a couple of rotten apples have spoiled the whole box.

Food spoils. It’s the natural way of things. Most of us have little grey or brown or green bins in our kitchen to recycle our leftovers – much of which a few days earlier was perfectly edible food. And it’s just as well that it does spoil – left to its own devices, food waste becomes incredible fertiliser benefitting next year’s crop. Nature has a remarkable way of renewing itself.

That said, the benefits of food are temporary. However good (or big) our meal is, we need to eat again a matter of hours later. Jesus reminds the crowd of this in today’s passage. They were all still excited at the miracle they’d just witnessed, but Jesus warns them to be careful not to misinterpret it (v26). Their Roman rulers were well known for using ‘bread and circuses’ as an effective distraction to keep the population preoccupied; food is necessary, but it’s not the be all and end all, and it doesn’t determine the nature of Jesus’ mission. Jesus is not here to rule an earthly kingdom: as he says to Pilate later, his kingdom is not of this world.

Instead, Jesus encourages the crowd *to look for eternal food* – ‘food that endures’ (v27). Indeed he tells them to ‘work’ for it ahead of physical sustenance.

But there’s a sting in the tail: it’s not the sort of work they were expecting. Their enduring ‘work’ is to believe in Him. At first, this sounds either like a paradox or a cop-out. But believing is more than merely intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. Biblical belief is better translated as ‘trust’: it is something active, whole-hearted, it changes our lives and our lifestyles.

To believe in Jesus is to place our trust, our purpose, all that we are, in his hands. It’s not about worldly power or material gain, which is where the crowd was getting him wrong. But it is the true work of God.

Today, let’s choose again to place our trust in this Saviour, that we too might have our fill of his glorious eternal food. And may that fuel our lives, for his glory.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 59 – John 6:30-35 ‘Bread of heaven’

No-one sings their National Anthem like the Welsh. It remains one of my bucket list wishes to watch a Rugby match at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, just to hear ‘Land of my Fathers’ belted out by 72,000 Welsh rugby fans. Even now, whenever Wales play at home and the national anthem begins, the volume on the TV gets turned up way too loud and the hairs on my neck stand on end – especially if the accompanying picture, as often happens, is of a grizzled 18-stone prop singing his heart out with tears streaming down his face.

Usually some time before we get to the crescendo of the national anthems, there will also be a rendition of ‘Guide me O thou great Jehovah’ – and no doubt when you read the title for today, many of you immediately thought of the classic hymn. The words were written in the 18th century by William Williams – you can probably guess the land of his birth – but it wasn’t until the words were set to the rousing tune Cwm Rhondda in 1904 by John Hughes that it became the unofficial soundtrack to the Welsh Revival and came to prominence.

The theology of the first verse comes straight from our passage today. As Jesus draws the parallel with God’s miraculous provision of manna in the desert after the Exodus (you can read the story in Exodus 16), so now he is the ‘bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’ (v33). As we saw yesterday, this is eternal sustenance, and Jesus summarises it perfectly in the iconic phrase of v35: ‘*I am the bread of life*’. Eternal, abundant life – the true life which God means for all of us to enjoy.

No wonder the crowd’s imagination is stirred – heavenly bread? “Sir”, they said, “always give us this bread.” (v34) Feed us now and evermore – this is what we want!

As it happens, most of them eventually *don’t* want it, once they realise the implications – a sad reality which dawns as the gospel goes on. But today, let’s recapture the excitement of the crowd, and claim their first response as ours.

Where do you hunger today? Let the bread of heaven feed you – now and evermore. And may the words of William Williams’s hymn be our prayer today:

*Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty, hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me now and ever more; feed me now and ever more.*

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 60 – John 6:35-40 ‘I am...’

Who are you? Or rather, if you were asked to describe yourself, what would you say?

Studded throughout John’s gospel are seven answers to this question: seven ways that Jesus used to describe himself. But they’re not quite the sort of thing we might say about ourselves! Which probably isn’t a surprise... today, however, we read the first of them: ‘I am the bread of life’ (v35).

It’s a natural follow-on from what Jesus has been saying in the last few verses. Life is found, Jesus has said, not just in physical sustenance, but in believing in him; in working for food that endures, eternal nourishment. It makes sense, then, for Jesus to summarise his teaching in this famous and striking phrase: ‘I am the bread of life.’

To know life, we must ‘feed on’ Jesus. As the church grew, this sense of feeding naturally became associated with the act of receiving bread and wine, which is variously called Communion, the Eucharist (from the word ‘to give thanks’), the Mass (the old word for ‘feast’) or the Lord’s Supper.

That’s all well and good, and it gives us a tangible ‘hook’ to interpret the phrase - but this is probably not the first meaning. Since, from what he’s just been saying, Jesus is quite clearly drawing a distinction with the physical act of eating bread, it much more likely means a *spiritual* union with Jesus – to trust in him, to receive his Spirit, to be filled with his abiding presence day by day.

And let’s go a little further and note that the very phrase ‘I am’ is significant. In Greek it’s heavily emphasised by Jesus in the words *Ego eimi* – I Am: capital I, capital A. The name God gave the Israelites, the name so holy that no Jew would speak it – Yahweh – is almost impossible to transcribe, but in Greek it is usually rendered as (you guessed it) ‘I Am’.

So, this is more than just a striking description of Jesus’ mission and purpose. It points towards his identity at the very deepest and most profound level. Jesus is not just a good human being, he is the divine Son, God on earth in human form.

It follows that, as we feed on this bread of life, *we are not just receiving something that leads us towards God, we are feeding on God himself.* Jesus dwells in us by his Spirit – not just for a few hours until we need to eat again, but permanently. No wonder Jesus was able to say: ‘if you feed on me, you won’t go (spiritually) hungry again’ (v35).

Today, let’s give thanks for this gift of the bread of life. Let’s consciously choose to receive it again. And let’s resolve to keep ‘feeding’ on the abiding presence of Christ, nourishing our lives every hour of every day.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 61 – John 6:35-40 (ii) ‘Who chooses?’

Do you choose God or does God choose you?

It’s a good question, isn’t it, and it’s one which people have debated since time immemorial. And it’s a vital one too, as it sits at the heart of the relationship between divine authority and human free will. Just how free are we? Are our actions all pre-determined? Or does God give us real capacity to make our own choices?

Over the centuries whole Christian movements have been founded on differing interpretations of this question. At one end, there are doctrinal systems like Calvinism which, at its extreme end, insist that all actions are predetermined by God, so that even what we consider to be ‘free’ choices are in fact foreseen within the will of God.

Towards the other end, there are viewpoints like Arminianism which assert that God gives us free choices, so that, whilst God remains in overall charge, what he essentially creates for humans is a space within which humans can exercise choice. Put bluntly, the will of God can be resisted.

These might sound like dry arguments now, but they have had a huge impact on Western culture – not just in church life, but in wider society. They also dramatically affect how we see God. One poor church leader in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries changed his mind (in print) several times as to whether he was eternally saved or eternally damned, since according to a strict Calvinist interpretation of things, he had no say in the matter!

But what does Jesus think about all this? What’s fascinating is that *Jesus is quite happy to agree to both viewpoints*. It’s right here in v37: ‘All those the Father gives me will come to me (divine sovereignty), and whoever comes to me I will never drive away (human free will).’

What if the answer is not either/or, but both/and? What if God is in charge, *and* we are free? So God is still authentically God, and we are still authentically human? As my dad’s old vicar used to say: ‘Perhaps when we look back, we can agree that God did indeed choose us; but no-one can say: “I cannot come to God, because God does not choose me.”’

This is indeed good news! Today let’s rejoice that *God chooses us* – and that is important, we’re not left on our own, frantically reaching out in the darkness, wondering if God is there. Let’s also rejoice that *we can choose God, too*. Today, make that choice. And do so, knowing and rejoicing that God will never drive you away. Amen, thanks be to God!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 62 – John 6:35-40 (iii) ‘I shall lose none’

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty good at losing things. It can be all kinds of things, but it's usually my glasses. I'll take them off temporarily while doing something else and wander off – then an hour or so later I'll have to retrace my steps to work out where I might have put them down. As they've got thin, dark frames they tend to camouflage quite easily. I probably need some of those brightly coloured glasses that Prue Leith wears on The Great British Bake-Off, which you couldn't miss wherever you left them.

It's unsettling to lose something. It reminds us that we're not perfect or as much in control as we'd like to be. It's not that the item isn't important to us, it's just that we get distracted and make mistakes. It's the human condition.

It's tempting to wonder if Jesus is like that, too. Perhaps for many of us especially who've grown up with dominant images of the 'hippy traveller' Jesus, so popular in the 60s and 70s, wandering round Palestine in sandals with long hair and a languid expression, it's easy to imagine that he might have the odd brain-blip.....

Not a bit of it!

Jesus is a man on a mission. And whilst his deep humanity seeps through every page of the gospels, he remains the divine Saviour throughout, a sure and certain hope for all of us. And here in our second look at today's passage, he sums it up in this glorious truth: 'I shall lose none of all those [the Father] has given me' (v39).

Jesus never 'loses' people. We might sometimes loosen our grip, but he never loses hold of us. We are safe in his presence, and he has the love and the power to bring us safely home. Thanks to Jesus, all who look to him will enjoy eternal life (v40) and God will raise us up at the end of time. This last point is so important Jesus says it twice in quick succession – in v39 and v40. In other words, he really, *really* wants us to grasp the full reality of what that means!

Our present often feels uncertain. But our future is secure. And that means our present is actually secure too, since *Jesus will never leave us or lose us.*

Today, let's look to the Son and spend a few moments dwelling on this beautiful truth. Jesus has never lost you, Jesus doesn't lose you now, and Jesus will never lose you. You are safe in him, and his plan for you is abundant and eternal life. May that truth, and that life, be yours today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 63 – John 6:41-51 ‘All taught by God’

‘I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.’ So quipped Groucho Marx, and it’s one of my favourite quotes. I’m not much of a ‘clubbable’ person either. But Groucho puts his finger on a deeper truth here. There’s something in us humans that likes to create a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality. We define ourselves by our ‘tribes’, and that gives us a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

It is also deeply divisive. Some people are in, some are out. And sadly, this mentality can also affect matters of faith. For all that beliefs – of all things – should be dealing with universal questions, we find it hard to resist the temptation to sink into the ‘club’ mentality.

In our passage today, Jesus faces more grumbling. At its root, the discontent stems from two very human failings. Jesus’ message is being questioned, both because he wants to widen the club, and also he doesn’t appear to be ‘the right sort’ in the first place. Underneath these debates lies a fundamental question: who gets access to God? Is it only members of a particular group?

In later chapters Jesus will address the question of whether one particular human group has special access to God in more detail. But here, the root of the grumbling is more to do with his humble background. ‘How can he say these things,’ the leaders mutter, ‘when we know where he comes from?’ (v42) A divine messenger couldn’t have a human mother and father, surely? Especially not a Northern carpenter’s background!

Jesus challenges this by reminding them of God’s greater plan for all humanity. He quotes directly from their greatest prophet, Isaiah: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ (v45) In other words, hundreds of years before Jesus came, *God’s plan was always that access to God would be available to everyone*. God’s blessing was for all nations (this goes way back to Abraham in Genesis 12), and all can now come to God the Father and know eternal life.

The ‘way in’ is Jesus: ‘I am the living bread.... Whoever eats this bread will live forever.’ (v51) And we too are beneficiaries of this great truth! Thanks to Jesus, we have free and full access to God. We are no longer shut out of the club, we are part of the family now.

This is a hard section of John’s gospel, but let’s rejoice in this simple truth today. *All of us can know God now*. All of us can walk with him and draw strength in his abiding presence. Where would you like God to teach you more today? Why not ask him? It’s a promise.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 64 – John 6:51-59 ‘Given for the life of the world’

Of all the many changes forced upon us in the last few years by the Covid-19 pandemic, not the least for many of those in the Christian community was the loss of the capacity to share bread and wine together. Since the earliest days of the church, sharing bread and wine has been vitally important to our community life. It was commanded by Jesus, and although the exact format of its expression varies hugely across cultures, its essence takes us back to the heart of our good news. *Jesus gave himself ‘for the life of the world’* (v51).

As Jesus continues his debate with the religious leaders – who are by now arguing among themselves (v52), he now refers much more explicitly to the sacrifice he will be called to make. Thus far, his references to feeding on him as the bread of life have been open to interpretation, but now he is much more blunt: his flesh and blood must be received to know the life of God within us (v53-56, repeated every verse, to ram home its importance).

Scholars have long debated whether this ‘feeding’ is literal or spiritual, and certainly the connection to the physical act of sharing bread and wine, later celebrated by the church in remembrance of Jesus, is inescapable. But in a way the debate as to whether it is physical or spiritual is irrelevant, since Jesus as the Divine Son carries both the physical and spiritual within himself. It is, surely, *both*.

Which is especially good news, if the pandemic has affected how you are able to receive Communion/the Eucharist/Mass. Even if, for example, we can’t share a common cup, we can still ‘feed’ on Jesus spiritually and receive his life.

Ultimately the references to flesh and blood point to Jesus’ death on the cross – his life offered for us all, that we might receive God’s new life, forever (v58). The greatest act of human history, in many ways the pivot of *all* history: God’s sacrifice of himself for our forgiveness and healing.

Today, take a few moments to go back to the cross. Give thanks for what Jesus did for the world – and for you. And receive his forgiveness, his healing, his hope, his *life*, again.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 65 – John 6:60-71 ‘The source of life’

I was once told a story attributed to David Watson, the famous Christian leader, and one-time vicar of St Michael-le-Belfry in York. After a particularly stirring service, a student approached him at the end asking to commit his life to Jesus. Watson’s response, so the story goes, went something along the lines of: ‘Don’t be ridiculous! You do realise what it’s going to cost you? Go away and pray about it this week, and if you’re still ready to commit your life, come and find me next Sunday.’

A week later, the student did indeed return, and committed his life to the Lord.

Some of you may have raised an eyebrow at the minister’s response. Accustomed as we mostly are to trying to make faith look as attractive as possible, it’s shocking to see someone apparently go out of their way to put people off!

But the approach has good precedent. Look closely at the gospels and you’ll see Jesus does exactly that on numerous occasions. As someone once summarised: Jesus came to comfort the disturbed... *and* disturb the comfortable.

Here in John chapter 6, just such an encounter has taken place. Jesus knows that many of the crowd have got the wrong end of the stick about him, expecting their Messiah to be all about glory and conquest. They even want to impose this vision on him, whether he likes it or not (v15). So Jesus spends much of chapter 6 setting them straight. He is indeed the key to true life, but the path to this life is through surrender not conquest (v29), through spiritual growth not physical successes (v27, vv49-50), and ultimately through his sacrificial death (v51-59).

‘This is a hard teaching,’ the crowd responds, ‘who can accept it?’ (v60) The end result is that many give up on Jesus, disappointed that he’s not the Messiah they wanted (v66). Something easier next time, please!

It’s unsettling to reflect on this aspect of Jesus’ teaching. But at the same time, we can acknowledge that Jesus was led by absolute integrity, and that he was always refreshingly clear about what his mission would cost both himself and his followers. It is the narrow path, the road less travelled, the call to surrender and to sacrifice alongside the joy, the hope, the peace and the love which accompanies it. Indeed, what we often find is that this *joy, hope, peace and love comes precisely through the surrender and sacrifice*. It sounds strange, but it is the kingdom way, God’s way.

Jesus knows this – his words are ‘Spirit and life’ (v63) – and so *he calls us unashamedly to the true path of life*. Human success models ultimately can never succeed for long – which is one way of paraphrasing ‘the flesh counts for nothing’ – it is the life of the Spirit which endures.

May God grant us grace to receive these challenging words afresh today, and thus to receive the true life of God, imparted by the Spirit of Jesus. May his joy, hope, peace and love be ours, too.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 66 – John 6:66-71 ‘To whom would we go?’

‘Where else could we go?’ I first wrote this reflection in 2020, the day after the announcement of another national lockdown. I must confess it carried a certain bittersweet irony! Life had just got more, well, constrained again. Most of us were feeling that, come the appointed day, there will be nowhere to go... again.

That time has thankfully passed – though I’m conscious that it changed us all, in various ways. But as we reflect today, what encouragement can we take from this passage? The context is something equally hard to swallow for Jesus’ disciples. He’s not the Messiah they thought he’d be; the journey he’d just committed himself – and them – to suddenly looked a whole lot harder than it did when wine was pouring out of wedding jars, and bread was being liberally distributed around the shore of Galilee.

Was it time to quit?

Peter’s response contains both realism and hope. Realism in that deep down he knows there’s no alternative to Jesus, no plan B. But hope in that he also declares the truth that is our hope, too: Jesus, ‘you have the words of eternal life... [We know that] you are the Holy One of God.’ (v69)

The pandemic may have eased – but the world remains as challenging as ever, maybe even more so. *But we have hope.* A hope that is not dependent on our government, our personal resources or our capacity to fight either pandemics or any other global crisis we face currently. Our hope goes deeper. It is in Jesus’ *identity* – the Holy One of God – and his *words*, which have the power to bring life.

Jesus is a sure companion in these turbulent times. One who is loving, loyal and true. One who never leaves us. One who delights to give us rest, and whose peace is a gift which transcends understanding. One whose promise goes beyond the grave, but also brings comfort and even joy in the here and now.

These are the words of life, spoken by the only one whose word is completely trustworthy. Take a few moments today to feed on those words most inspiring for you. Our lives are held by this God – and for that we give thanks, and cry out in hope:

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb: praise and glory, wisdom and thanks, honour and power and strength, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 67 – John 7:1-9 ‘A change of heart’

On one of the shelves in my study, I have a woodcut of a famous drawing: ‘Praying Hands’ by Albrecht Durer. Durer was one of the great artists of the Northern Renaissance, but this particular work has a wonderful backstory – albeit one that is not conclusively proven. The story goes, however, that Albrecht and his brother Albert were both talented artists – however, the family business also needed help, so Albrecht pursued his dream while his brother worked with his father in the mines. After a few years Albrecht returned home, by now a celebrated artist, and invited his brother to go and do the same. Years of hard labour, however, had ruined his brother’s hands: he could no longer draw or paint. In gratitude at his brother’s sacrifice on his behalf, Albrecht created this beautiful ink sketch, ‘The Praying Hands.’ (<https://www.learnreligions.com/praying-hands-1725186>)

Sibling relationships are complex – especially if one child is seen to achieve public success or recognition. Albert is a wonderful example of a positive outcome, but there are many examples of relationships that go awry. Prince Harry’s difficult relationship with his brother has dominated the news for several years now; this is not the place to comment on that, but the title of Harry’s recent autobiography – ‘Spare’ – makes it clear where the source of this resentment comes from. An insensitive putdown from his childhood has taken root and stayed with him throughout his life.

Today’s passage highlights another tricky set of sibling relationships. At first sight, Jesus’ brothers’ advice to their famous sibling to go to Judea looks wise: after all, they would have been aware that many had deserted Jesus (6:66 – see Saturday’s reflection), so a major festival was the perfect opportunity to put things right: (v4) ‘No-one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret... show yourself to the world.’

But John makes it clear that they had failed to grasp the heart of Jesus’ mission. It was not about ‘appearances’ or popularity, there were deeper and more fundamental things at stake. He concludes quite bluntly: (v5) ‘For even his own brothers did not believe in him.’ If this seems harsh, Mark says exactly the same about Jesus’ family (Mark 3:21,31-32). They simply couldn’t get their heads around what Jesus was doing, the figure whom Jesus had become. To start with, they were skeptical – now, they were thinking like politicians or PR advisers. And Jesus challenges them accordingly: (v6) ‘My time is not yet here; for you, any time will do.’

There is, though, a postscript to this story. Jesus had four half-brothers, and two of them became leaders in the early church: James chaired the important Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and Judas – called Jude by the early church to distinguish him from the infamous disciple of the same name! – wrote one of the New Testament letters. In other words, we know that at least two had a change of heart: they ‘got it’, they understood who Jesus really was and came to follow him, not just as their famous brother, but as their Lord and Saviour.

Today’s story reminds us, both that family relationships can be challenging, especially if not all our relatives share our faith. However, it also encourages us that there is hope – even those who ‘don’t get it’ sometimes do. May the stories of James and Jude inspire us to keep praying for our families – especially our siblings, parents and children – trusting that the Lord would reveal himself to them in his good time.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 68 – John 7:1-13 ‘A change of mind?’

Can the Son of God change his mind?

That might sound like a fanciful question, the sort of thing that gets theologians agitated but nobody else... however, when you think about it, it is quite a significant question to answer. How human is Jesus? If he really is the divine Son made flesh, with (in theory) access to all the wisdom of the universe, is it possible for him to make a decision and then change his mind some time later? Would that mean he is just a great human being after all?

It was certainly a question that vexed the scribes responsible for copying out precious portions of John's gospel. Here, in today's passage, Jesus says one thing to his brothers: (v8) 'I am not going up to this festival;' and then, some time later, he apparently changes his mind and goes anyway (v10). What are we to make of it?

Some theologians have suggested that Jesus knew all along that he would be going, he just wanted to do it secretly – but that would then put Jesus dangerously close to lying, since he was quite clear with his brothers that he *wasn't* going. And one thing pretty much all of us can agree on is that Jesus doesn't lie. That would certainly imperil his identity as the Son of God, the one sinless human being there's ever been.

Some scribes – probably monks and therefore followers of Jesus who took their sacred task very seriously indeed – came up with another solution: add the word 'yet' to Jesus' conversation with his brothers; so, verse 8 is written in some surviving manuscripts as: 'I am not *yet* going up to this festival.' This conveniently resolves two problems – Jesus misinforming his brothers and/or changing his mind – but creates another: would his 'time' really have come so quickly after he had just said it didn't?

It comes back again to our question: can Jesus change his mind? For what it's worth, this is where we need to accept that Jesus is both fully divine *and* fully human. He has all the authority of the universe, but he is also subject to exactly the same limitations as the rest of us: he gets hungry, he gets tired, he cries and yes, dare I say it, he also changes his mind sometimes. He knows the general trajectory of what he is called to do, but it is not mapped out in minute detail, so that every step is pre-planned and micro-managed. So, he can tell his brothers he's staying in Galilee, and then think better of it later.

Personally, I find this a great encouragement. It makes Jesus all the more relatable. Yes, we worship him, we stand in awe of him. But he also calls us to follow him, and I take great heart from the fact that Jesus has to wrestle with exactly the sort of tricky decisions we do – and if need be, change his mind.

Jesus knows what you face: our 'normal' challenges, with grey areas and 'judgement calls'. So, take these to him today. Trust him to direct your paths. And do that, trusting that, even in our failings and weaknesses, he can turn these things to good, for those who love him. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 69 – John 7:14-24 ‘The right education?’

Of the 57 British Prime Ministers since Robert Walpole first served in this office in 1721, 44 studied at Oxford or Cambridge; for their schooling, 20 attended Eton, a further 26 another private school – just 11 had a non-fee-paying education. 9 attended both Eton and Christchurch College, Oxford.

However, if you think this is just an extreme example of the vagaries of the British class system, think again – this kind of link between education, privilege and power is nothing new. Go back 2,000 years and you’ll see a similar version of it operating in Israel during the time of Jesus. Wealthy families provided most of the rabbis, and the system self-perpetuated as other wealthy families sent their bright children (boys, inevitably) to train under the best-regarded rabbis. It was an elite circle; not quite a closed shop, but when a rabbi with a northern accent (and Nazareth was the geographical equivalent of Sheffield) starts making waves it’s no surprise that the first thing people start asking is: (v15) ‘How did this man get such learning without having been taught?’

The question is loaded, of course: it’s not that Jesus hasn’t been taught, it’s just that he hasn’t had the *right* education or gone to the ‘right’ schools. He’s an outsider, the equivalent of the academically brilliant comprehensive lad at Oxford who suffers put-downs because he doesn’t know how to hold a fish-knife or pass the cruet correctly. And Jesus has met this attitude before – even one of his own disciples, when first hearing of Jesus, had the same instinctive response: ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ (1:46)

Jesus’ reply addresses the question in three different ways. First, he makes it clear that his wisdom comes direct from God (v16). Second, he points out that this is not just something that has to be taken on trust – if they really knew the law, they would know that his teaching has divine wisdom embedded in it. The problem is that they don’t really know their scriptures as well as they think they do. Centuries of interpretation, layer upon layer, have blinded them to what some of their law was intended to mean – for example, they’d missed the point completely on matters of the Sabbath (vv22-24).

Third, the truth of what Jesus teaches only becomes obvious when you try to actually *live* it: (v17) ‘Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God.’ And again, the issue here with his critics is that ‘not one of you keeps the law’ (v19). This is not a question of ‘interpretation’ but obedience. Jesus calls us not just to believe but to ‘repent and believe’ – i.e. to follow, to change our lives (which is what ‘repent’ really means). Then his wisdom becomes embedded with divine authority and blessing in our lives.

Today, give thanks that God doesn’t care what school you went to! Jesus looks at the heart; and beyond that, to the life. Those who follow Jesus know the true value of his teaching. May the Lord grant us all grace to follow today, and so to find abundant life.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 70 – John 7:25-36 ‘Identity check’

Nowadays much of life relies on proving our identity – there are many things we can’t do without it: get married, open a bank account, fly on a plane. And we’ve mostly got used to having ‘photo ID’, like a passport or a driving licence, to demonstrate that we are who we say we are.

And that last observation goes to the heart of today’s passage – it’s full of questions (six in just twelve verses), but could be summarised with this one question: Jesus, how do we know that you are who you say you are?

Jesus’ answer picks up where we left off yesterday. His identity as the Messiah is validated ultimately through the experience of following him: it’s a step of trust and obedience which, as he promises, will demonstrate that he is the Anointed One: (v17) ‘Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God, or whether I speak on my own.’

In contrast, the debates among the people are limited either to unscriptural myths, like the one we see in v27 – ‘when the Messiah comes, no-one will know where he is from’ – or from the excitement generated his miracles (v31). And, of course, the miracles are important signs: they point to his identity. But Jesus is clear that signs alone are not enough. His authority as one sent from God (v28), his mission (v33) and his message (v26) underpin the very visible confirmation provided by the miracles.

The problem is: it is *those* fundamental things that are being doubted or opposed – and this explains why Jesus appears to contradict a famous verse in Luke: ‘seek and you will find’. Here, he says the opposite to those debating with him: (v34) ‘You will look for me, but you will not find me.’ The word ‘look’ in this verse is the same as the word ‘seek’ in Luke – what’s going on?

It all comes back to trust. Jesus’ famous promise in Luke was made after he gave his followers the Lord’s Prayer. To those who have prayed ‘your kingdom come, your will be done’ all the wisdom and provision of heaven is available – those who seek *will* find. But to those who refuse to acknowledge God’s revelation of his Anointed One (Messiah), then the door will remain closed until they take that step of trust.

Today, choose to take that step of trust – it is a daily call, whether we’ve never taken that step before, or done it thousands of times over many decades. The promise is the same: Jesus invites you to receive all that he has for you, to seek and to find. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are his, now and forever. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 71 – John 7:37-44 ‘Living water’

In the time of Jesus, the Festival of Tabernacles – or Sukkot – was essentially what we would call a Harvest Festival, taking place in the autumn. On the last day of this festival, which was (and is) celebrated in Jerusalem every year, it was traditional to enact a water ritual, one connected with the need for rain the following year. We need water for life, and the festival reminded every devout Jew of this truth.

Jesus knew that, too – but at this particular Festival of Tabernacles, he stood up and declared a radically different interpretation, one which would change the world: (v37-38) ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’

For all that we need physical water, Jesus insists, we need spiritual water, too. And we find this water in Jesus. Indeed, we find more than that: once the life of Jesus flows *within* us, it has the capacity to flow out *from* us, too. A year or two later, John experienced this for himself, gathered with the other disciples seven weeks after Jesus had risen from the dead. The Holy Spirit – the living water – was poured out on them; and, just as Jesus had promised, not only were they filled, the ‘water’ poured out into the community as well. New languages were given, new boldness to declare the good news flourished in their hearts, and new followers were baptised.

So, John is confident to add his interpretation to what Jesus said: (v39) ‘By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.’ The same Spirit available to us now, and to all who confess the name of Jesus. Hallelujah!

What is more debated is which scriptures Jesus was referring to. Is it partly a reference to the Exodus miracle of water gushing from the rock (Exodus 17)? Or a reference to God’s great invitation through the prophet Isaiah (55:1)? Possibly – my own view, for what it’s worth, is that the background is found in Ezekiel 47, and the wonderful vision of water flowing from the temple. Since Jesus ‘is’ the new temple (see John 2:19-22), then these are the streams of living water Ezekiel foresaw. And when the Spirit comes to dwell *in* us – and not just with us (John 14:17) – these streams can flow from within a human soul out into our families and community, flooding the streets of our world with the grace of Christ.

The message divided people then (vv40-43) – and still does, today. But it is our glorious reality. The water of life is there for us to drink. May the Lord grant us all grace to drink deeply today, and so to find grace not just for streams within, but also flowing out to the world around us. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 72 – John 7:45-52 ‘Heart-warming’

The journey to faith takes many forms. Occasionally it is instant – someone hears the good news and responds with joy. Sometimes God intervenes miraculously – many years ago I was asked to organise a group which included a young woman who’d come to faith on an Alpha course. This was not uncommon in our church; however, she had found out about the course in an amazing way. Her partner had been given a flier whilst walking through the train station on the way home from work. He’d got home and thrown it in the bin – later that evening, she too had gone to put something on the same bin and had noticed the flier. She picked it out of the bin, decided to attend, and came to faith in Christ. And all because her partner had thrown a flier in the bin!

Most often, however, our journey towards Christ is precisely that – a journey. Research suggests it takes an average of four years from someone first hearing the message to putting their faith in Christ. In today’s passage, we see part of that journey in one individual, someone we’ve already met in John’s gospel: Nicodemus. This was the Pharisee who came to see Jesus secretly at night in chapter 3. He wanted to know more – but he was scared to be seen doing so, and struggled to understand what Jesus was teaching. The encounter ends and we’re left wondering what Nicodemus made of it.

Today, we get evidence that God is very much at work in Nicodemus’ heart – while his colleagues are busy slandering Jesus (v47) and anyone who believes in him (v49), Nicodemus sticks up for Jesus and reminds them of the principles of their law (vv50-51). Even if he is not yet ready to nail his colours to the mast, he has clearly moved towards Jesus since his late-night encounter, and has also overcome his initial fear of being seen to be doing so.

Nicodemus is on the journey – and in fact he appears one more time, in remarkable circumstances: by the cross, helping Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus’ body down. In three episodes – the night encounter, the defence here in chapter 7, the witness by the cross – John marvellously sketches out the journey of one man towards his Lord.

Your story may be different – but it is also a story of God at work. Like Nicodemus there will be important episodes. Like Nicodemus, the Lord is drawing you to himself. Today, give thanks that, like Nicodemus, you have a story. Maybe take a few moments to reflect on that story: of how God made – and makes – himself real to you. And wherever you are on your journey, may the Lord continue to draw you to himself.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 73 – John 7:53-8:11 ‘The divine balance’

So, here it is – one of the most hotly contested passages in the whole of scripture! The majority of the early manuscripts of the bible don't have it, so the million-dollar question is this: was it originally part of John's gospel but was taken out because it was too scandalous to include it? (There were whispers that people might incorrectly conclude that Jesus appeared to be condoning adultery.) Or was it not part of the original text but was added later – invented or otherwise – as an example of Jesus' radical compassion?

The truth is that we can't be sure, this side of heaven. However, very few bibles are brave enough to leave it out altogether – it usually appears in italics or brackets! My own personal view, for what it's worth, is that, if the story in its original context would have shocked its readers, it's more likely to have been taken out than put in. Why include it otherwise?

So, if we tentatively conclude that this was a real encounter, then what do we learn? At this point we hit the second reason why this is such a hotly contested passage: here we see Jesus as both radically compassionate and radically holy. Sadly, our culture has too many voices which want binary answers, even in the church: we have to be *either* this *or* that, we can't be *both*. It is a particular shibboleth in our current discourse that we can't love people *and* challenge them. Compassion and holiness are put on opposite sides of an ideological chasm, with people shouting at each other across the divide.

And this is one of those passages most used as a peg for people's hobby horses, especially in this particular debate – which is a tragedy because what we see here is one of the best examples in all of scripture of what a God who is both perfectly holy and perfectly loving actually looks like.

When faced with the woman's accusers, Jesus responds first with compassion. He points out their hypocrisy and abuse of power. Much easier to point the finger than to examine our own hearts! But he doesn't ignore the sin which led to her accusation, either. Having defended and protected her, he also challenges her to change the way she lives: 'Go now and leave your life of sin.' Great compassion and great conviction. Radical love, radical holiness.

How we need this divine balance today! Real discipleship involves both radical compassion and radical challenge. Jesus' heart always tends towards mercy – and praise God that it does! But, having embraced us as we are, he loves us too much to leave us as we are. We are called to a new life, which conforms to the divine blueprint the Lord has laid out for us. So, today, if you're aware of a part of your life that falls short of what God desires for you – first, receive his forgiveness and loving embrace. And then, hear his voice calling you to leave it behind. Pray for grace to keep going, and growing. That is the way of Christ. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 74 – John 8:12-20 ‘The Light of the World’

Light is one of the universal religious metaphors in our world. Jews have Hanukkah, or festival of lights; Hindus and Sikhs have Diwali; Buddhists talk about the path to enlightenment. Light is one of the few images to have almost universally positive connotations. 1.5 million people each year even take about 12 million trips to Blackpool for its illuminations, and other attractions, making it the second most popular single European tourist destination after St Peter’s in Rome. Strange but true.

So, what is it about the Christian understanding of light that makes it so distinctive? What have we got to say about it that sheds any unique, well, I have to use the word, *light* on the subject? Or is today’s passage just a Christian version of something which all religions can aspire to?

It all comes down to the source: lots of religious teaching on light says: ‘this is the light’. Only Jesus says: *I am* the light. And not just for my followers, for the whole world: (v12) ‘Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’

In saying ‘I am the light,’ Jesus is not just pointing to his divine identity, he is saying some other vital things as well: first, I am the *source of life*. Matter needs light to grow – the ancients didn’t have the scientific proof of photosynthesis, but they knew it all the same. As chapter 1 of John says: ‘in Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.’ We don’t just need sunlight, we need Son-light. Today’s word from Jesus is an invitation to life, life in all its fullness. Where is Jesus inviting you to enter more fully into his life?

Second, Jesus is telling us that he is the source of truth. Returning to ch1, the Light is also the Word, or as Psalm 119 famously puts it: ‘your word is a lamp to my feet and a...? *light* to my path.’ Light and truth are connected – think of the phrase ‘to shed light’ on things. Jesus’ light is there to guide us, to direct our paths. So, our second invitation from Jesus for today is: is there something in your life where you need Jesus’ light for your path? Why not ask him to shine his light, to help you see the way ahead?

Finally, Jesus is telling us that he is the source of goodness. This is the more challenging aspect, one which Jesus refers to in chapter 3 of John: ‘Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.’ When we come into Jesus’ light, it both causes us to grow, but also shines a light into the dark places, it exposes things which Jesus wants to heal or to change. So, our third invitation from Jesus for today is: is there something ‘dark’ in your life where you need Jesus’ light?

Jesus invites us, today and every day, to come into his light. To experience his life, to shine his light on the paths of our life, and to expose the things which need to change or heal. By God’s grace, will you accept that invitation today? Whoever follows him will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 75 – John 8:21-30 ‘From above’

Anyone who reads newspapers online will be familiar with the terms ‘above the line’ and ‘below the line’. For those of you who still read an actual paper (and we all need things to line our food recycling bins!), ‘above the line’ refers to the articles printed by the journalists themselves; ‘below the line’ refers to comments which readers can submit in response to the articles. It’s like a conversation generated by reading the article.

In many ways, you could summarise the task of online journalism nowadays as being to inform, and where necessary persuade, those ‘below the line.’ Needless to say, anyone who reads the comments below the line will see a variety of responses: from thoughtful reflections and sometimes helpful corrections, to bile and blatant prejudice, where it’s quite clear that the person hasn’t read the article properly, or maybe has read it but hasn’t wanted their own view challenged – they hear only what they want to hear, anything that backs up what they thought all along.

In many ways, this idea of ‘above’ and ‘below the line’ is very much the context for today’s passage. Jesus is debating with his opponents (the Pharisees) most of whom, it seems, have already decided against Jesus, and therefore are determined to hear only what they want to hear. They have long since abandoned any pretence at an open mind; the questions they ask are more designed to catch him out than a genuine attempt to learn something new.

The fundamental sticking point is whether Jesus really has been sent from God. Numerous times Jesus has referred to his Father (recently in v16, v18 and v19) as the one who has sent him, and also the one who testifies on his behalf (via the scriptures and Jesus’ miracles) and to whom Jesus is accountable. In that sense, Jesus is – as he says here – ‘from above’ (v23). In other words, he has come from God (the Father): he is the Word made flesh, as John so beautifully puts it at the start of the gospel.

But the Pharisees reject this, refusing to admit either the evidence of Jesus’ miracles (signs), or the references to God’s anointed in the scriptures. This is why Jesus describes them as ‘from below’. They are bound to earthly thinking, rejecting what you might call ‘heavenly’ evidence. As a result, Jesus warns them strongly of the consequences of this (v21, repeated in v24).

There is, though, one final proof which Jesus refers to, one which is yet to come: (v28) ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he.’ Remarkable as it sounds, the ultimate proof of Jesus’ heavenly identity is his scandalous execution – the ultimate self-giving sacrifice paid by our glorious self-giving God.

This self-giving God turns the values of our world upside-down. The One from above inverts the wisdom of the world below. And, despite fierce opposition, the passage finishes in hope: (v30) ‘Even as he spoke, many believed in him.’ The glorious truth is that in doing so, those ‘from below’ are united with the One ‘from above’. This is our truth, too: may the Lord grant us grace to hold fast to the One ‘from above’ – and, like Jesus, may we know the abiding presence of the Father with us (v29) – today, and every day.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 76 – John 8:31-36 ‘True freedom’

If you were to pick one word which defines our worldview in the West, it might well be ‘freedom’. It runs through much of our culture, in many guises (and disguises). But freedom is a slippery word, it can mean lots of things. In modern Western society, we usually mean individual rights and the opportunity to do what I/we want (within legal limits, though not always). It is essentially freedom *from* – from constraints, whether imposed by government, religion or just other people.

But does this make people free? Imagine taking a journey across a barren landscape: perhaps you’ve experienced a wilderness area in your own travels. How do you know where you’re going? What we need are the ‘constraints’ of roads (or paths) and signs. These ‘restrictions’ imposed on our journey actually make us more free, not less.

Freedom, it turns out, is only experienced within healthy boundaries. When God gave Eden to the first humans, he only gave them one boundary – don’t eat from this *one* tree – and we didn’t like it, we rebelled against the idea of any restrictions and, tempted by the seductive lie of power as freedom, we crossed that boundary, too. The result was *less* freedom, not more.

So where is true freedom to be found? Jesus’ answer is very clear: (v32) ‘the truth will set you free’. Our culture surrounds itself with seductive lies: just as in Eden, just as in first-century Israel. But it is the God-created ‘boundaries’ of truth which enable us to be truly free. This truth is found in Jesus, and Jesus alone: (v36) ‘if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ As the true human, he knows what enables humanity to flourish. It’s not ‘do as I say and not as I do’ – but live as I live and you will be truly free.

So much of our culture asks: ‘where is the power to live well?’ Today we have the answer: the power is in the truth, the truth found in Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Word made flesh, the author of life. And anyone who finds this truth finds real freedom.

Today, give thanks that Jesus comes to set us free. May we rejoice again in the life-giving freedom of his truth, and, whatever seductive lies our culture whispers in our ear, let’s ask (and keep asking) for more grace to live in this freedom. For if the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed. Amen!

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Day 77 – John 8:34-47 ‘Disputed parentage’

In 1854, aged 25, Roger Tichborne, heir to his family's title and fortunes, was presumed to have died in a shipwreck. His mother never accepted that he was dead and advertised extensively in the press, offering a reward for information. Twelve years later, a butcher known as Thomas Castro came forward, claiming to be Roger Tichborne himself. The case caused a sensation – amazingly he was accepted by Lady Tichborne as her son, but not by other members of the family, who sought to expose him as an impostor. Years of legal wrangling followed – the claimant was eventually charged with perjury and sentenced to 14 years in prison in 1874 – the jury declaring him to be a third person – neither Roger, nor Thomas, but Arthur Orton!

It's a fascinating piece of history, but the question that lies at the heart of the case is exactly the same as the one posed by our passage today: how can you prove who your parents are? Although the context is very different, the answer to the Tichborne case and to Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees in John 8 is the same: it's your behaviour which gives it away. The assumed 'Roger Tichborne' was apparently coarse and uneducated, which seemed very odd for the heir to a noble family. No amount of protesting that years as a butcher in Australia had changed his manners fooled people. The gentle-born, privately educated young gent who disappeared could not have changed so much.

And Jesus makes the same point to the Pharisees: if God was really their Father, they would live differently – they would embrace Jesus' teaching (v38), they would love him (v42) and listen to his testimony (v43), and they certainly would not try to kill him (v37, v40)! Deliberately attempting to frustrate the work of God is behaviour that comes from an entirely different source: the devil (v44).

This fairly blunt assessment, of course, does not go down well. But in saying these things Jesus does tease out one very clear message: he tells the truth, whereas the *raison d'être* of the devil is to lie – indeed, he is 'the father of lies.' I find it challenging that in our typical hierarchy of sins we tend to put lying quite a long way down the list. Violence, abuse, sexual sin, theft and slander would come near the top of most people's lists, and lying is often downplayed as fibs, whoppers, spin, alternative facts or – in a phrase attributed to Winston Churchill - 'I did not lie, I made a terminological inexactitude'!

But Jesus, it turns out, takes lying a whole lot more seriously. Indeed, he sees it as the critical distinction between living God's way or the alternative. Let's be clear: life has grey areas and differences of opinion, and there is nothing wrong with honestly agreeing to disagree. But today's passage remains a powerful word to our 'post-truth' culture: Jesus is definitely not 'post-truth'!

Holding fast to the truth in all situations is incredibly hard – today's passage causes me to cry out in prayer for more grace, more divine assistance to live with this kind of transparency and authenticity. Perhaps it does the same for you, too. Take heart: Jesus is the truth, he gives us a permanent place in the family of God (vv35-36), and he is in the business of setting all of us free. May God grant us all grace to live in the truth, by the truth and with the glorious truth in our hearts that if the Son (who speaks all truth) sets us free, then we will be free indeed. Even us. Even today. Amen.

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Day 78 – John 8:48-59 ‘Before Abraham, I am!’

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one we’ll never fully get our heads around. The idea that God is 3-in-1 and 1-in-3 – one being, three natures. I get asked a lot about it, and why it matters so much. And the way I generally reply is that, since we live our physical lives in three dimensions, I want to worship a 3-dimensional God.

The Trinity gives us a rich vision of God. It allows us to worship a God who is both transcendent and intimate – he’s not just ‘up there’ or ‘down here’, he’s both. It also explains how we know that God is love. The truest form of love in the biblical sense is not a feeling, it’s a practical word – it manifests itself in action. We know that God is love because he has relationship *within himself*: three natures, each of whom love and serve the others in a perfect interdependent community of love. God’s love for us and for all creation flows out of what exists within himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (As an aside it also helps to explain why we as humans have a unique capacity for building community and a unique desire to love and be loved – it’s at the heart of what it means to bear the image of God.)

So, although the understanding of the Trinity developed over time, it was there at the beginning. It was not a case that God was alone, and then along came Jesus (making two) and then the Spirit (making three). God was always 3-in-1, from eternity.

John has a unique insight into this: he begins his gospel by telling us that the Word (Jesus) was there with God at the beginning – along with the Spirit, which is already attested in at the start of Genesis. And now, in today’s passage, Jesus declares it openly. He continues his debate with his opponents, whose own contributions have, by this stage, descended into lies and slander – he is accused in v48 of being a Samaritan (untrue, he was born in Judah, grew up in Israel and is descended from one of the twelve tribes) and demon-possessed i.e. that he gets his spiritual power from the wrong source.

And the debate hinges on two inter-related topics: whether there is eternal life, and who inherits the blessings given to Abraham. It’s worth noting that the idea that there is life after death only developed clearly in Jewish thinking quite late. There are hints throughout the scriptures, but even in Jesus’ day, many did not believe in it as a reality for all God’s people; they were led by the Sadducees, who tried to argue with Jesus about it elsewhere (see Mark 12:18-27).

Jesus is accused of undermining, not just traditions which go back to Abraham, but even Abraham himself (vv52-53). And Jesus contests this in two ways: first he insists that Abraham ‘rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day’ (v56). And second, and more explosively, that he pre-existed Abraham: (v58) ‘Before Abraham was born, I am!’ This is dynamite – a clear assertion by Jesus that he has divine status, that he is not just sent by God, but *is God himself*. He is using a Greek form of God’s holy name, and indicating that he already possesses (eternal) life within himself.

No wonder they got mad! But as we read this extraordinary encounter today, we can joyfully affirm the truth of what Jesus declared to the crowds: that he is the Son of God, who has life within himself. He didn’t just appear ‘out of nowhere’ – he was, and is, and is to come. He is the Alpha and Omega, there at the beginning, with us now, and reigning for all eternity. Before Abraham was born, he is. Before we were born, he is. And for generations to come, he is. Before your day began, he is, and when it ends, he is. He is your eternally present source of life. Of course he will sustain you today!

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Day 79 – John 9:1-3 ‘Displaying the works of God’

Human beings are innate meaning-makers. Unique in all creation, we do not accept things as they are – we ask ‘why’. We are wired to make order out of chaos, to find and create meaning. This often brings huge benefits; but, when faced with things outside our control, we often struggle, or attempt to impose a meaning. Think of Job’s friends: for a week they did everything right – they sat with Job in supportive silence. But then... they couldn’t resist trying to work out *why* Job had suffered. There must be a reason, someone must be to blame!

Job’s friends are much like us – and much like the disciples in today’s passage, as we begin chapter 9 and reflect on another outstanding miracle of Jesus. Despite the basic lesson of the book of Job, a sense persisted among God’s people that any form of disability must be some sort of curse or judgement. It was partly a misinterpretation of God’s original promises in the Books of the Law (the Torah): whilst the Lord made it clear that obedience brought blessings and disobedience brought curses, this was primarily applied to the land and to the nation’s security, not to individuals. It was the later rabbinic traditions that took this principle beyond its biblical limits, to teach that individual afflictions must have a root cause in *something*.

So, although it might seem shocking to us, it was perfectly natural, within the context of the time, for the disciples to ask the question that they did: (v2) ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Someone must be to blame! Jesus’ answer was remarkable, even revolutionary: (v3) ‘Neither.’ Before we get onto the next part of Jesus’ answer, let’s pause there; in one word, Jesus is radically challenging the way their faith was being badly taught, what we might call ‘folk religion’ today. It’s the wrong question, Jesus is saying – no-one is to blame, no-one is being punished. Let’s look at this the other way round...

And so he continues: ‘... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’ The obvious direction of this reply is to do with the miracle Jesus is about to perform. No blindness, no miracle. Jesus takes the man’s situation and transforms it – because that’s what Jesus does.

But we can go further. The risk of thinking of Jesus’ reply only in terms on the miracle is that it limits the ‘works of God’ in this man. Jesus is also challenging his friends to look beyond the man’s disability. This man is perfectly capable of displaying the works of God, whether he is blind or not. Blindness is no barrier, either to the kingdom of God or to a fruitful, godly and Spirit-filled life.

Whatever we carry, whatever we bear, God is able to display his work in us. Our fallen nature (v2) does not rule it out, because we worship a God of grace and of transformation. May the Lord continue that work of grace and transformation in us – and in all whom we pray for today.

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Day 80 – John 9:1-5 ‘While I am in the world’

At time of writing, we are entering the season of the year when our days are at their longest. Already at nearly sixteen hours today from sunrise to sunset, by June 21st – the longest day – it will be 16 hours and 41 minutes, with correspondingly just 7 hours and 19 minutes of ‘night’. In the modern world, this makes relatively little difference to our patterns of work, since we have electronic lights to enable us to work during the dark days of winter. But in ancient societies, working life was directed by the hours of daylight. When night came, very few could work.

In today’s passage, Jesus uses this idea to describe his own ministry. His presence in the world is the spiritual equivalent of ‘day’: so, (v4) ‘as long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me.’ He says this in response to seeing the blind man, whom we first encountered in our previous reflection in John 9. Jesus sees this man and knows he has ‘work’ to do. The consequences of this encounter will be far reaching, and will take us through the next two chapters of the gospel. But it begins with two very simple responses of Jesus: first, he *saw* the man.

How easy it is to miss these opportunities, simply because we do not see the needs around us! Our culture struggles constantly with compassion fatigue – as I suspect, do many of us. But Jesus keeps seeing – and moreover, he is moved to respond. It is one thing to see, but another to *act*. We’ll see how Jesus does that tomorrow – but today, we take a moment to reflect on his motivations. Jesus feels a deep sense of urgency, because he knows his time is short: (vv4-5) ‘Night is coming, when no-one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’

Here, he returns to his famous saying in the previous chapter – only this time, he doesn’t use the form of special emphasis which makes it an ‘I Am’ (divine) statement. It is simply an observation – he is called to bring the Lord’s divine light wherever he goes. And, conscious of this calling, he is able to see and to respond to this man’s condition.

But why, you might be asking, did Jesus refer specifically to his light being manifest ‘while he was in the world’? Did it stop after his death, resurrection and ascension a year or two later? Not at all! Once the Spirit is poured out, Jesus is still in the world – acting through the lives of his followers. The baton is handed on: ‘I am the light of the world’ becomes ‘*You* are the light of the world.’ The light burns still, in the hearts of all his followers today.

Today, give thanks that Jesus’ light shines through you. Pray for grace to see, to be moved and to act, according to his will, that this light would shine brightly, wherever you are. Amen.

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Day 81 – John 9:5-12 ‘Dust to dust’

‘The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul (or being).’ So reads the account in Genesis chapter 2 of the creation of the first human. We are made of the ‘dust of the earth’, something we are reminded of at every funeral or burial service: ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’ Once buried, our bodies then decompose and return to ‘dust’ once more. It’s not something we like to think about, but it is a profound reality that we have to acknowledge, as part of the human condition.

The nature of the Fall, and what it means for our human condition, forms the backdrop to this wonderful miracle in John 9. It is very significant that the man Jesus heals is ‘blind from birth’ (v1) – this is not an illness, or something that has developed over time, it has been there for his whole life. Jesus is very quick to correct the disciples that it is not the result of some particular sin (v3), but it nonetheless remains a consequence of the Fall, in that the perfect life the Lord designed for humanity to enjoy in his presence is affected at every level.

This explains why Jesus decides to act in such an unusual way. He often heals with a word – and sometimes he uses saliva, which repels us now; but, in those times, saliva was generally thought to have curative properties. So, the spitting is not as strange as we think – what is different is the fact that Jesus deliberately uses some dirt mixed into his saliva to make a clay paste. We’ll see tomorrow why ‘clay’ contributed to his debate with the pharisees, but today, let’s focus on why Jesus used some ‘dust’ to heal the man’s sight.

Fundamentally, this is an act of re-creation. Like the Lord God in Genesis 2, *Jesus is forming life from ‘the dust of the earth’*. Only this time, it is mixed with Jesus’ own saliva – making it clear that Jesus is the source of life itself, the one who creates and re-creates, the one who brings renewal and transformation.

Amazingly modern science validates the ancient narrative of Genesis 2 in one remarkable respect. If you look at the composition of the human body, it is about 18% carbon – the ‘dust of the earth’. However, the dominant element is oxygen, which makes up 65% of our bodies (primarily in the form of water molecules) – ‘the breath of life’. We are partly dust and mostly breath!

This ‘breath’ is what Jesus comes to bring life to (the biblical word ‘Spirit’ means ‘wind’ or ‘breath’). And as we read today, he brought renewal and re-creation to the man at the Pool of Siloam. It’s what he does. And it’s what he longs to do for us, too. Jesus is re-creating each one of us – fragile creatures, who are partly dust and mostly breath. Pray that his transforming power continues to be at work in you, and in all those to whom Jesus is bringing new life. Amen.

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Day 82 – John 9:13-23 ‘Persistent unbelief’

Many years ago, I visited the local prison weekly to encourage some of the Christian prisoners. I remember one evening sharing a bible study with the group, and as we were leaving, one of them asked for prayer. His blood pressure was so bad he had permanent tinnitus and couldn't sleep. So, we prayed, and left. The next afternoon, this prisoner found a friend of mine, a fellow prison visitor, in the chapel; he was very excited and shared that he had been wonderfully healed overnight. The tinnitus had gone, he'd slept well, and when he visited the prison doctor that morning his blood pressure reading was that of a fit young man in his 20s (he was in his late 50s).

It was an amazing answer to prayer – but the doctor's response was fascinating. When the prisoner told him about how he had been prayed for the previous evening, the doctor dismissed it and told him that the medication he was on was simply starting to work. The problem with that view, as the prisoner told my friend in the chapel, is that he had been taking the same medication every day for ten years! Quite a coincidence that it suddenly had a dramatic effect after more than 3,000 days...

‘None so blind as those who will not see.’ You may have heard this saying, and it accurately describes the skeptical attitude of many people towards faith, even when presented with clear evidence that ‘there are more things in Heaven and Earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy’ (with my thanks to Shakespeare). In the case of the prisoner above, even a rapid and medically verifiable change was dismissed, because it didn't fit with the doctor's worldview.

More generally, it has been noticeable in recent years to see how many atheists have abandoned the idea of a single universe, because the probability of a planet capable of sustaining intelligent life is so infinitesimally small. The odds are stacked in favour of a Creator, but rather than admit that, it is more prevalent now to say that there could be an infinite number of universes (or rather, multiverses) – though, of course, to make such a claim with absolutely no evidence for the existence of other multiverses requires rather more faith than most religious people!

And in today's story, we see the response of many Pharisees to Jesus' miraculous healing of the blind man. There is a side issue here, in that Jesus did this 'work' on the Sabbath (and here the making of 'clay' could be classed as work, which was forbidden in the rabbinical tradition) – but, the bigger issue is that they simply can't believe that the man had been healed. They didn't like Jesus, they rejected his claim that he is the Messiah – but, rather than admit that this miracle might be evidence to the contrary, they try desperately to disprove the evidence of their own eyes – even to the point of finding the man's parents and somewhat offensively asking them if he really was born blind (v19). ‘None so blind as those who will not see....’

We may know of people we love, close to us, whose persistent refusal to believe hurts us deeply. Let's pray for these precious souls today. No-one is beyond God's love. The Lord can light a spark at any time. And may the Lord grant us all grace to have eyes to see his love, mercy and glory, this day and every day. Amen.

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Day 83 – John 9:24-34 ‘One thing I do know’

This particular passage has a special memory for me – or rather verse 25 does. When my wife and I got married 25 years ago, the last song we played at our service was a slightly unusual choice: it was by one of my favourite bands of the time, Primal Scream, and the song is called ‘Moving’ on up.’ It’s basically a gospel song, very different to much of their lyrical output, and (in case you’re worried) very appropriate to sing in church: it begins, ‘I was blind, now I can see.’ We had a band formed of our friends playing for us, and the vicar enjoyed singing it so much he spontaneously asked them to play it again!

Life is complicated. Perhaps especially so in this era: alongside the very human challenges of suffering, injustice, sickness, war – the things humanity has always wrestled with – we have a whole host of very recent and new things to get our head around: technology, AI, climate change. Most of us feel as if we can never keep up; there is always so much changing, so many threats and possibilities, it’s bewildering.

It is maybe of some comfort to recognise that this sense of dislocation is not as new as we think. The Industrial Revolution, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, even the rapid developments brought about by the Roman Empire in many territories (including Israel) around the time of Jesus all created a sense of foreboding or uncertainty.

One of my favourite hymns was written by William Young Fullerton, a Baptist preacher born in Belfast who was friends with the great Charles Spurgeon. Fullerton also lived in a time of great change and uncertainty – the late 19th century – and his hymn ‘I cannot tell’ captures that sense that there is so much we cannot really fathom about our faith and our world. I cannot tell so much, Fullerton begins each verse.... *but* this I know... *but this* I know... *but this* I *know*.

It is the cry of the blind man in our story today. Harassed by the Pharisees, pressured and unjustly accused, his dramatic encounter seems to have brought him nothing but trouble so far! Relentlessly interrogated to admit that Jesus is a ‘sinner’, not only does he refute that quite bravely – (v31, v33) ‘God... listens to the godly person who does his will... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing’ – he also makes this simple but profound testimony: (v25) ‘One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!’

In difficult times, we all have things we can cling to, undeniable truths which form the foundation our lives. You have a story with Jesus, a story of God’s work in your life. Our world may drive you to distraction, you may feel helpless or anxious – but there are things you *do* know, things you can rely on, a Love that will not let you go. ‘One thing I do know’: take a few moments to remember that thing (or those things), that your faith might rise again, and that you might stand, today and always, firmly on our Rock – the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Day 84 – John 9:34-41 ‘True sight, true blindness’

Brother Andrew, one of the great missionaries of the last century, was once stopped in his car while smuggling bibles into Communist Eastern Europe. The bibles were not well hidden, and as the policeman opened the boot, Brother Andrew prayed this simple prayer under his breath: ‘O Lord, you who made the blind to see, make seeing eyes blind.’ The bibles were there, right in front of the policeman’s eyes, but miraculously he didn’t ‘see’ them and waved Brother Andrew on his way!

If the policeman in this story suffered a temporary literal blindness, in today’s passage, Jesus reflects on a different sort of blindness – the spiritual kind. Chapter 9 draws a striking contrast between the healed man and the Pharisees in their response to Jesus, one that he refers to in v39: ‘For judgement I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’

The theologian R.A. Lambourne makes the helpful observation that all of Jesus’ miracles are ‘judgement’ moments (the root of the Greek words for judgement used in the gospels, including here, mean division or decision): they are points of decision about Jesus, they draw dividing lines – what do you think of Jesus, are you with him or against him?

And that is very true here: the wonderful healing of the man’s physical blindness led the man to worship Jesus (v38) and the Pharisees to reject Jesus, even to the extent of throwing the man out of their company (v34). The Pharisees were generally revered by society as those who could ‘see’ – but Jesus has exposed their true blindness, rejecting the work of God and the One sent by God to accomplish this work. In contrast, the blind man not only marvellously receives literal sight, he receives spiritual sight as well – he believes in Jesus (v36).

The kingdom of Jesus turns things upside down – the blind see, those who complacently think they can see may well find out that they are blind, after all. This extraordinary chapter of John teaches us that what makes the difference is humility (‘one thing I do know’, v25) and worship (v38). If we direct our love and honour to the One who alone is worthy of it, then the Lord graciously gives us eyes to see him as he really is. We receive true sight.

Take a few moments today simply to worship Jesus. Let him fill your heart with gratitude; and may the Lord grant us all the grace to lift our eyes and see him as he really is – that we might also see everything else as it really is, too. Amen.

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Day 85 – John 10:1-3 ‘Called by name’

What’s in a name? It’s an interesting question, isn’t it? We humans have a deep-rooted need to name things. We can see this even in trivial matters: we’re watching a series on motor-homing at present – not that we own one, but we’re intrigued by the idea. And for the first two episodes of this programme the conversation has returned repeatedly to what the motorhome should be called: the wife wants to call it Millie, the husband prefers Henry, John or something altogether more esoteric!

It's just a motorhome, rented for a few weeks – but it still *needs a name*. A name confers identity, and also attachment. I remember talking to a farmer who shared that he never named animals that were destined for the abattoir, only ones that he planned to keep – once he named an animal, he grew attached to it, and then the grim but necessary part of his job became too painful.

We get this desire to name things from God. In Genesis, the first specific task given to humanity was to name everything else. That’s not just a job, it’s part of what it means to bear the ‘*imago Dei*,’ the image of God. We name things because God does; because God wishes to confer identity and love on the things he names – as do we.

As we begin looking at John chapter 10 – one of the richest and most loved portions of scripture, and one where we can pore over almost every verse – we encounter this wonderful truth about the Good Shepherd: (v3) ‘he calls his own sheep by name.’ This lovely image – based on the real life of an Israelite farmer in Jesus’ day, where all sheep were valuable and given names – echoes the great prophetic promise of the Lord in Isaiah (43:2): ‘I have summoned you by name; you are mine.’

In essence Jesus is affirming: that promise in Isaiah is now fulfilled – in me, the true Good Shepherd. He calls each of us *by name* – which means he knows who we are, and he values us highly enough to confer a unique identity upon us. Just take a moment to let that sink in – in the great mass of eight billion souls, the Lord knows *you*. Yes, you. You’re not just part of one great nameless blob. He calls *you* by name.

Tomorrow, we’ll look at what it means to know the voice of the Shepherd who calls us: but today, give thanks that the Lord has called you, and not just in a general sense; he has called you *by name*. And may He grant you grace to live peacefully and joyfully, today and this week, in the security, the love and the blessing that this confers upon you. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 86 – John 10:1-6 ‘They know his voice’

Sheep don't always have a good reputation. Most of us find them visually appealing, certainly unthreatening – but we tend to think of them as stupid and easily led. ‘Like sheep’ is a common way of describing those who tend to follow unthinkingly. Modern science, however, is starting to change this view – take, for example, this summary of research published in 2008 (*italics mine*):

“Sheep are generally held in low regard as far as cognition and social skills are concerned. However, there is now increasing evidence from studies of their behaviour and brain function that they have highly sophisticated social and emotional recognition skills using faces, voices and smells. *They are able to recognize and remember many different sheep and humans for several years or more and appear to have some capacity for forming mental images of the faces of absent individuals.*”

We recently watched a fascinating TV documentary which demonstrated this very point. Sheep can recognise faces, and also voices. This only proves what many farming cultures – and shepherds – across the world have known for centuries: sheep know their shepherd's voice.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cog_grSFINs)

And, as we continue in John chapter 10 today, this insight lies at the heart of the next part of Jesus' profound teaching about himself as the Good Shepherd and his sheep. Having reminded his listeners that the shepherd calls his sheep by name, he now describes the reciprocity of the relationship: these sheep know his voice.

It could be said that one way to describe the journey of faith is learning to recognise Jesus' voice more often and more truly. Why? Because, as Jesus says, *we follow the voice we know*: (v4) ‘his sheep follow [their shepherd] because they know his voice.’ The most recent example which Jesus is referring to is the blind man who has just been healed and is now following Jesus – but it applies to all of us. We are on a journey towards knowing Jesus' voice, because we will follow the voice we know.

We see this ‘voice’ most clearly and repeatedly in scripture – it's why these Daily Inspirations exist; but also through the wisdom of mature followers, who act as ‘under-shepherds’ for us, through the convicting Spirit manifested in prayer – and occasionally in more overtly dramatic ways. However the voice of Jesus manifests itself, our task is to recognise it, and follow it.

What is the Lord's voice saying to you today? May God grant us all grace to recognise, and follow. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 87 – John 10:7-9 ‘I Am the Gate’

On the second Sunday of 2017, we were about to start the 9.30am service, when one of our welcomers came and found me urgently. ‘Come outside, you’ll want to see this,’ they said. So, I hustled out and watched one of the more unusual sights I’ve seen in my years here. Running along the road, and just passing the churchyard gate, were about fifty sheep. We had no idea where they had come from or where they were going. I don’t think they had any idea where they were going either!

There was great excitement – and, for lack of a better idea, we decided to corral them in the school car park over the road from the church, and try and find out who the farmer was. A few willing souls stood on sentry duty. It actually took about 2 or 3 hours to get hold of someone, by which time the grass verges around the car park had certainly had a good trim from fifty grazing sheep, and the ‘hired hands’ were very cold. By lunchtime, the sheep were safely back in a nearby field.

What’s the moral of this story? Sheep need a shepherd. Look what happens when a large flock is left to its own devices. Alongside this, ‘never leave your gate open,’ would certainly be another! As we edge closer to Jesus’ famous saying, ‘I Am the Good Shepherd’, today we think about the much less well-known counterpart in this passage: ‘I Am the Gate’. And the most important thing to observe is that, in the farming culture of the day, Jesus is basically talking about the same thing, or rather the same person – the shepherd *is* the gate for the sheep. And here’s how....

In those days sheep lived mostly out on the hills by day, and then at night in the sheepfold, which was not a covered barn, but more like a fortified pen. It would be built with loose stones piled to form a rough, walled enclosure – just high enough to keep the sheep in and wild animals out. There was no gate as such, but when the sheep were in the pen the shepherd himself (or a colleague) would literally be the gate. They would sit in the gap and protect the sheep directly. No dogs or locked metal gates – just one brave shepherd. This is why Jesus calls himself both the Gate and the Good Shepherd: in first century Israel, that was two ways of saying the same thing.

It also explains why Jesus makes the link with salvation: (v9) ‘Whoever enters through me will be saved.’ He is literally the way in to the sheepfold, the entry point to all God’s promises. Those who come in via His gate will ‘find pasture’ – all they need to live.

As we spend the next few days delighting in this rich biblical image of the shepherd, today let’s give thanks that Jesus is our ‘way in’: our Gate. He is the Saviour, not just of the world, but of each of us. We have all found our way into his sheepfold. Simply put, the key to life is found in Him; and, as we claim this beautiful truth, may we go out and find pasture – all that we need to live – today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 88 – John 10:7-10 ‘Abundant life’

As seasons of the year go, this is definitely the season of abundant life. Perhaps it's the amount of rain we've had over the winter and spring, but I'm not sure I've ever seen things so lush – which is code language in many places for overgrown! The wild flowers, as well as the weeds, seem more densely grown than ever. Nature is bursting with abundant life.

This is often in contrast with how many of us feel on a day-to-day basis. Nature might be bursting with life, but we aren't. Life can be a struggle, for many reasons. And yet, deep down, we instinctively sense that this is not how it's meant to be. We are made for more; yet, it can be hard to articulate what this 'more' is.

Jesus understands this. That is one of the profound blessings of the Lord coming to walk the earth in human form – he *knows*. He has lived in our skin, felt as we felt. He has been hungry and thirsty, tired and fed up, he has wept at loss and bereavement. And yet... and yet, he wants to reassure us that there is more. He has come to bring us more. We face battles in this life, not least from a spiritual enemy who wants to 'steal and kill and destroy' (v10). But this is not the end of the story.

At this point we need a simple, but vital, language lesson. Greek has two different words for 'life'. The first is *bios*, which just means physical existence. It's where we get words like biology from. But there is a second word: *zoe*. This means 'the essence of life' – true, eternal, spiritual life, the things that make life worth living. And this word – *zoe* – is the word Jesus uses here in this wonderful verse:

'I have come that they may have *zoe* (life), and have it to the full.' Or, as other translations put it – to have life *in abundance*. Abundant life – now that would be something, wouldn't it? This is what Jesus came to bring us: not just forgiveness, not just direction and purpose, not just a community to be a part of, but life. Real, abundant life.

We can interpret this kind of life in many ways: one marked by faith, hope and love; by joy in the tough times and a peace that transcends understanding; a life marked by wonder and awe, and that has the capacity to see the hand of the Lord in all kinds of things. Today, spend a few moments reflecting on what that abundant life would look like for *you*: right now, in this day, and whatever you're facing. Seize faith to believe that this is a promise for you – and for any of Jesus' followers that are on your heart and mind at present. And may the Lord grant all of us this abundant life, this *zoe* life, today. Amen.

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Day 89 – John 10:10-11 ‘The Good Shepherd’

And so we finally get here! The iconic image of Jesus as The Good Shepherd. There’s so much we can say – and some we’ve already said this week – but before we explore the image (and the rest of this passage) further, today let’s remind ourselves to link verse 11 to verse 10. Paragraph breaks are not there in the original text – we impose them in our translations. These translations are wonderful, not least because we can read God’s word in our own language; but sometimes we can miss obvious clues – and here, let’s just pause to reflect on the simple point that the abundant *zoe* life that Jesus talks about in verse 10 is directly linked to our relationship to the Good Shepherd in verse 11.

Indeed, relationships lie at the heart of what Jesus means by abundant life – in laying down his life for the sheep, the Good Shepherd comes to restore us to right relationships, in every dimension:

First and foremost, with God. Jesus doesn’t explain *how* laying down his life will do that for us in this passage, but there’s plenty of other texts in scripture that do. His sacrificial death on our behalf makes forgiveness possible, wiping the slate clean and restoring our souls. We are set free to live lives of praise to God, at peace with ourselves.

But it doesn’t stop there – having set us in right relationship with God, it also restores and renews our relationships with each other. The Good Shepherd longs for us to start relating in love, just like he does; and he gives us his presence, by the Holy Spirit, to do just that. Most of the references to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament are addressed to people plural – i.e. to the community of God. We are being built into a place of worship where God lives by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).

Finally, the abundant life of the Good Shepherd brings purpose to our wider relationships. We carry the good news of the kingdom everywhere. We have a message of justice, of care for creation, of the value of all people – we have a vision that gets us up in the morning, and is with us when we go to bed at night. In short, we become people of purpose. When we pray ‘your kingdom come,’ we also pray: ‘your will be done, on earth as in heaven.’ That’s Jesus’ manifesto for the world, that earth would increasingly resemble heaven, as the abundant life of God is done here, too.

This is the abundant life which the Good Shepherd longs to bring us. It what he lays his life down for. As we’ve reflected over the last few days, our calling is to know his voice, and follow, trusting that his is voice is the way to salvation and fullness of life. This is your Good Shepherd. Take a few moments to praise him, to receive his peace and presence, and be filled with purpose for all that the Lord calls you to, today. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 90 – John 10:11-15 ‘Caring for the flock’

I recently watched a remarkable wildlife documentary about octopi (that’s the plural of octopus!) Many octopus mothers – including the one in this film – are known to lay eggs only once in their lives. They guard and care diligently for the eggs, all the while losing weight and weakening due to a lack of food – largely because their constant vigilance to protect their young against predators means they can’t risk leaving them to eat. Indeed, in recent scientific observations, an octopus mother even refused food when offered pieces of crab by the research team. Over time, they also change colour, usually taking on a ghostly pallor. These remarkable mothers often die soon after the eggs hatch, essentially sacrificing themselves for the success of their children.

This example provides a great illustration of what Jesus is teaching about today. When it comes to the privilege and responsibility of nurturing life, much depends on the one nurturing. When things get difficult, what is the one nurturing prepared to do for the sake of those in their care? Life as a shepherd in ancient Israel was hard, and often dangerous, if a wild animal came sniffing around. All you had was your courage and a rod to beat them off, and that was it. Unless the sheep were your overriding priority, there would be a strong temptation to run away, just as Jesus warns his listeners.

It’s why we need a shepherd, rather than a hired hand (v12). The shepherd simply has too much invested in his flock – emotionally and otherwise – to run away. When he sees a wolf coming, he stands his ground, for the sake of his flock, even risking his own life (v11, v15), if that’s what it took.

Jesus wants us to know that this is the kind of shepherd he is. It’s why we need to trust him as our Good Shepherd. There are many other voices: not just ‘hired hands’ who’ll let us down, but thieves who want to destroy (v10) – to rob us of all that makes life worth living. Voices which lie and deceive. Our first calling is to listen to Jesus’ voice – and tomorrow we’ll reflect on that in more detail.

But today, can I invite you to place your life once more into the strong and loving arms of this Good Shepherd: the One who never runs away but will be with you, no matter what, in every situation you face. The One who has proved his worth by already laying down his life for you. The One who alone is able to offer you life to the full. This is our Good Shepherd – and, as we trust ourselves into his care, may he lead all of us in the right paths: today, this week and always.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 91 – John 10:14-21 ‘Listening to Jesus’ voice’

Back in my ‘office’ days, one of the highlights of the year was the Company Sports Day. Before you get notions of some sort of serious competition, this was more It’s a Knockout than Diamond League Athletics. Events included the Space Hopper Relay, welly wanging, egg and spoon race, you get the idea – all washed down with a picnic and free drinks all afternoon. What could possibly go wrong?

The last event each year was the biggest and most chaotic of all. It was a relay race, where all participants had to run to the end of the course, put a blindfold on, spin on a stick ten times and then try to run back to their team. The team would help them find their way back by shouting out – so each participant had to listen carefully for the voice which enabled them to get home. As you can imagine the fun was in the fact that people were so dizzy they usually ran off at an angle of 45 degrees before falling over in comic fashion. One particularly memorable year, my wife ran very fast at an oblique angle straight into the managing director, almost knocking him over. But I digress.

Thankfully I don’t remember anyone actually getting hurt – but in a way I think that race feels a lot like life to most of us. We feel disorientated, bewildered at the complexity of life, which seems to keep spinning us round. Many of us have no idea where we’re going most of the time – and even if we do, if can feel daunting trying to get there, like running blindfold and dizzy in a crowd of other blindfolded dizzy people. And there are so many different voices, all shouting for our attention. ‘Do this, try that, buy the other.’ How do we know which voice we can trust?

As we continue to rejoice in Jesus’ profound teaching about his identity as the Good Shepherd, today’s passage reminds us that the key to life is *to know which voice to listen to*. If we listen to the right voice, everything else will fall into place. Conversely, if we fail to listen to it, we shouldn’t be surprised if the rest of life feels dislocated.

Jesus is very clear that his is the Voice above all others, and he can make this bold claim because he carries unique authority: the only one with the authority, not just to lay down his life, but also to take it up again (vv17-18). Only God can decide to rise from the dead! And because of this unique authority, his invitation to listen to his voice goes far beyond his own people: (v16) ‘I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also... There shall be one flock and one shepherd.’

It is these last two claims – to unique authority and global reach – that continued to divide his listeners. Both are either wickedly arrogant or wonderfully true. There isn’t really a middle ground, as C.S. Lewis famously observed. It divided people then (vv19-21), and now. Which Voice will we listen to? Which flock are we part of? Praise God that he has given us a Good Shepherd! Life is challenging, and we are often tempted to doubt. May faith rise in each of us again today to trust the Good Shepherd, to listen to his voice, and to live as one flock, for the sake of His world.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 92 – John 10:19-33 ‘One with the Father’

For children of my generation, the great film saga of our childhood was Star Wars. I was not quite old enough to appreciate ‘A New Hope’ when it came out in 1977, but by the time *The Empire Strikes Back* came out in 1980, it was my birthday treat to go and watch it with Dad. By 1983 and the release of *Return of the Jedi*, we were all hooked – and the big reveal of that film was the identity of Luke Skywalker’s father – none other than the ultimate bad guy, Darth Vader.

The difficulty with anyone accepting this could be the case came from the fact that Luke was apparently nothing like his father. Except... what was apparent all the way through the series was that Luke had exceptional power, the sort of power that only Darth Vader possessed – only that Luke channelled it for good, rather than evil.

In today’s passage, the debate over Jesus’ identity continues to rumble on. We left it in v21 in the Autumn of the Jewish year (soon after the Festival of Tabernacles); almost three months later, at the Festival of Dedication (which we know better as Hanukkah), the debate is still going on: (v24) ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’

It’s no surprise that the debate reignites as this particular festival: Hanukkah reminded God’s people of their wonderful liberation from Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC, and it was naturally a moment when Messianic fervour would be at its height. And Jesus is very clear with his reply: (v25) ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe.’

In fact, as he insists, if they won’t listen to what he is saying, all he can do is demonstrate his identity, to let the divine power manifest in his works speak for him (v25). He’s saying, in effect, ‘if you won’t believe what I say, then look at what I can *do*, and have done.’ It’s like the million-dollar question at the heart of the Star Wars films; except, of course, that Jesus’ Father remains entirely good and perfect. But the point remains: you can spot the Son because he bears the imprint of his Father.

And this divine imprint brings a wonderful promise: because Jesus really is the Lord, he is certainly able to keep all those who follow him: (v28) ‘I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one will snatch them out of my hand.’ It turns out that his questioners’ vision of the Messiah was too small all along: not just a divinely commissioned human liberator, but the Lord himself made flesh. ‘I and the Father are one.’ (v30)

This is dynamite, and the charge of blasphemy is inevitable (v33) – and would of course be justified, if it were not true. But if it *is* true... then today we can rejoice that our future is secure, because it is entrusted into the one Being in all creation who has the power to keep and to save. No-one – *no-one* – can snatch you out of your Father’s hand. Hold fast to that today – and may it bring you great peace, and joy.

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Day 93 – John 10:30-42 ‘In that place, many believed’

Sometimes in life, the best thing to do is to retrace your steps. Perhaps because you’ve got lost, or perhaps because you need to go ‘back to your roots’, back to the start. This is often a good thing – whilst it could be seen in some circumstances as an admission of failure or defeat, it can also be the opposite, something proactive and hopeful, a determination to refocus ourselves.

Jesus has had a year or more of persistent opposition – every time he goes to Jerusalem (part of his religious identity, and we should never forget that he was born a faithful Jew, whose identity was formed in that crucible of faith), he is torn into by his enemies. John chapters 5-10 cover roughly a year: it begins with an unnamed Jewish festival (5:1) – most probably Tabernacles or Hanukkah – and proceeds through the spring festival of Passover (6:4), the autumn feast of Tabernacles (7:2,14) and finally the winter celebrations of Hanukkah (10:22) – and the result every time is the same. More debate, more opposition, more repetition of the same arguments. In fact, it gets worse each time, such that his opponents are now trying to seize him (v39).

What does Jesus do? He goes back to the start. He goes back to where his cousin John’s ministry began – across the Jordan, in the Judean desert (v40). This is where the Baptist first preached that the Messiah was here, where he pointed out Jesus as the One, where thousands re-dedicated their lives to God. This is where there was spiritual hunger, and spiritual fruit. Jesus is re-charging his batteries: not so much away from people, but back in a place where he is welcomed, where his word is listened to, and where many believe (v42).

It’s interesting that this is a remote place – not an urban centre, but one which invites commitment. People have to make an effort to get there, it’s somewhere you only go if you really want to, if you’re hungry to grow spiritually. This is why it’s such a good resting place for Jesus. He spends most of his life going to people – it’s in his nature, because the Lord is the One who takes the initiative, he naturally comes looking for us. But here, people come to him, they seek him out. Here, he is restored by spending time with those who are truly seeking him. Perhaps it’s no surprise that after a few months in this remote place, of recuperation and renewal, he takes on his greatest challenge of all – the raising of Lazarus, and the events that follow swiftly upon it.

Perhaps a few of you reading today need to go back to the start, to your roots. A place to rest and to grow. A place of spiritual hunger and renewal. Jesus did it – do you need to? Let’s be clear that this is *not* running away – and if that is your motivation, it won’t work. But if that still, small voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, is gently beckoning you back to the start, to rediscover your first love, then take a few moments to reflect what that might look like for you.

And if that’s not the place you find yourself in today – store it away, be alert for the time when that is the word for you. Why not pray for those who are being called to that place of rediscovery and renewal? And, like those who sought Jesus out across the Jordan, may we continue to find in Jesus our first love, our joy and our hope. Amen.

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Day 94 – John 11:1-5 ‘The one Jesus loves’

I wonder what you feel about T-shirts with messages? It's very much a 'marmite' thing: some people love them, others loathe them. I'm old enough to remember the phase many years ago when it was common to get back to school after the summer holidays and see a number of people walking around with following emblazoned on their front: 'My friend went to [insert holiday destination] and all (s)he brought me back was this lousy T-shirt.' Thankfully I never had the pleasure, though I've often been partial to wearing certain brand names (purely for market research purposes), and do own football shirts, which rarely avoid advertising *something*.

How about this one, though: a few years ago, I listened to a church leader describing the T-shirt he really wanted to own – it said, 'Jesus loves you' on the front; and on the back it said – '...but I'm his favourite!' I've no idea if he ever got hold of this garment – but it does beg a very important question: who does Jesus really love?

Today's passage gives us a clue. We begin a very famous chapter, one of the most celebrated in the whole of scripture, with one of the most iconic stories: the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus, we are told right at the start (v3) is 'the one you love.'

But not just Lazarus: two verses later, we learn that 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister...' (v5). This, of course, is being written by John, who describes himself regularly as 'the disciple Jesus loved'.

It turns out this Jesus loves everyone. And not just 'everyone', as in one big lump of people. But individuals. Lazarus. Martha. Mary. John. You.

You are the disciple Jesus loves.

If you've never really taken a moment to think of it like that – take that moment now. Embrace it. Soak in it. Jesus loves, not just all people, but you – with all your flaws, faults, foibles and failings.

This really matters, for so many reasons, not least of which is that life is hard to fathom. Things happen we don't or can't understand. We'll look at this in more detail tomorrow, but we get a glimpse of it here (v4): 'This illness will not end in death,' Jesus declares to his disciples – and immediately we're thinking (if we know the story): but it does. Lazarus does die. What does Jesus mean? I don't understand!

And that's the point, isn't it? There is so much we don't understand. But *this* we do: Jesus loves us. Each one of us. You are the disciple Jesus loves. We can trust all things into his great love. Let's do that today, and every day.

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Day 95 – John 11:5-16 ‘This world’s light’

In any survey of the greatest barriers to faith, the question of suffering always comes at the top of the list. Ahead of science, of biblical reliability, of judgement, of doubt – all the other thorny issues which cause people to wonder. And the reason for this is ultimately personal: when people struggle with suffering, it’s not an abstract question. ‘Why does God allow suffering?’ nearly always means, ‘Why did God allow me/my family member/my friend to suffer?’ Life throws up questions we can’t answer; questions we want to address to God.

This famous story of Lazarus is a perfect example of this. Many of us love this story, we treasure it, and it contains one of the greatest promises in all scripture (‘I am the resurrection and the life’ – more on that tomorrow); but in our eagerness to celebrate what Jesus ultimately does, we have to face the difficult questions, too. In yesterday’s and today’s passages, there are at least four confusing things to navigate, the first of which we noted yesterday in v4: ‘this illness will not end in death.’

Then v6: Jesus loves Lazarus and his sisters but chooses to delay his visit. Even worse, he says in v15: ‘I am glad I was not there.’ At the time Jesus said this, who on earth could have interpreted that in a pastorally positive way? Finally, in then apparently changing his mind and deciding to go, Jesus is potentially putting his life, and his disciples’ lives, in danger: (v8) ‘a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you and yet you are going back?’

None of it makes any sense – at least not in the moment these things happened. Is this not our experience, too? And when it is, how do we face it?

There’s no perfect answer to that question, but this passage does give us two vital clues, two great comforts: the first is that only the Lord knows the end of every story. We know the beginning, maybe the middle – but the Lord knows the end. God acts for his glory, and that of his Son (v4), and he orchestrates our lives ‘that you may believe’ (v15). So often we can look back and see the hand of God at work, in ways we couldn’t appreciate at the time. Not always as dramatic as in the case of Lazarus, but definite threads of grace and blessing, even in seasons of suffering and trial.

The second is that we have a Light to guide us. Jesus draws a contrast between walking in ‘this world’s light’ and stumbling in the darkness (vv9-10) – but he’s not just talking about sunlight. He is the true Light of the world, and this light is available to all his followers, even if we can only see a few steps ahead at certain points in time.

Ultimately, seasons of trial and suffering call us to trust – in God’s purposes, in His goodness, in his Light. For some of us reading today, we find ourselves in such a place. I invite all of us to pray for those facing such times. And if that’s you, our passage ends with a beautiful invitation: Jesus turns to his friends and invites them to go with him. Jesus is calling you to trust, to go with him: will you go?

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Day 96 – John 11:17-27 ‘The resurrection and the life’

Whenever I read today’s passage, I have this sense of walking on holy ground. It’s such a well-known encounter – Jesus and his friend Martha, a shared grief, a conversation about life and death – and yet always somehow ‘other’: holy, mysterious, awesome. A passage to make you take off your shoes and kneel in wonder.

At the heart is this extraordinary statement: (vv25-26) ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.’ It’s the fifth of Jesus’ ‘I am’ statements – you can probably remember some of the others, maybe not the order! Thus far, we’ve had: I am... the bread of life (ch6), the light of the world (ch8), the gate for the sheep (ch10), the good shepherd (ch10 again). Each one reveals a facet of Jesus’ divinity – the One who nourishes us for ever; the One whose light draws us and guides us; the One who protects us; the One who pastors us – and now the One who brings us life.

There are two Greek words for ‘life’: *bios* and *zoe*. The first – *bios* – just means physical existence. The second – *zoe* – means real life, spiritual life, the things that make life worth living. This is the word for life that Jesus uses here. This is the life to which he calls us – what he described in the previous chapter as ‘abundant life’ (10:10).

It’s a life we can know now, before we die. But this passage also reminds us that this hope extends beyond death (v26). You could say that on this earth, we have both kinds of life (*bios* and *zoe*), but in eternity there will be only *one* kind of life – *zoe* – the life Jesus talks about here: abundant and eternal.

It’s quite a thought. And, for all the joy of Lazarus’ physical resurrection in the next part of the story, it’s a thought we need to hold onto. Our hope goes beyond the grave, into eternity. This hope, Jesus declares, comes through believing in him (or ‘on’ him, a translation I like, because it carries that sense of dependence and trust). It is freely given, available to all who will receive it at any point, and lasts forever. Wow!

Jesus had this conversation with one individual – but, as so often with Jesus, what he shared with her is for all of us. As we stand on this holy ground today, let’s give thanks for this promise of life, for the hope, the peace, the joy and the purpose it brings. And may our response be simply that of Martha’s – whether for the first, or thousandth, time: ‘Yes, Lord, I believe!’

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 97 – John 11:28-37 ‘If you had been here...’

‘If only I’d been there...’ I wonder if you’ve ever found yourself thinking something like that? Sadly, many of us have, usually with a sense of loss at something we missed out on. It can also work the other way round: ‘if only you’d been here,’ someone might say to us – maybe an event we’d have enjoyed, or maybe because we could have contributed something that was needed. A skill, perhaps – either practical or medical.

Sometimes our absence relates to a situation which causes us to feel guilt, because our presence would have made a positive impact. This certainly seems to be the case in our famous story, and Jesus’ encounter with (previously) Martha and then (today) his sister Mary. It is the *first* thing that both sisters say to Jesus – ‘if you had been here...’ – perhaps in sorrow, but possibly also in accusation. They both love Jesus, but that might make their disappointment and sadness all the more acute. Certainly, those watching this remarkable episode were more accusatory: (v37) ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’ Where were you, Jesus, when we needed you?

That question is one that many of us face in the trials of life. As we reflected a few days ago, when bad things happen we feel confused, our faith is challenged, we may feel we have hard questions to ask Jesus. And what we observe today (as we did a few days ago) is that Jesus can take our hard questions. He doesn’t get angry or self-justificatory. Indeed, he feels our pain.

The word John uses in v33 which is translated ‘deeply moved’ is far more visceral than that. It literally means ‘his guts wrenched’ – it is a compassion so deep he feels physical pain or nausea. Jesus empathises *that* much – not just with Mary and Martha, but with us, too.

The shortest verse in the bible is perhaps also the most profound: (v35) ‘Jesus wept.’ In those two simple words, we see God’s great heart of compassion for humanity – the heart that led him to create us, to provide for us, to come to this broken world to love us and meet with us and befriend us and bless us and save us. We worship a ‘with-us’ God – not just an ‘up-there’ God, one who is too majestic to get his hands dirty, or his cheeks streaked with tears. We worship a God who weeps for his dead friend.

It’s not a philosophical answer to the problem of suffering, but a heart of compassion, an arm round the shoulder, a promise of his presence. And, whilst Mary and Martha experienced Jesus’ physical presence, our good news is that, by His Spirit, we can know Jesus’ constant presence in our hearts, his abiding comfort and compassion.

If you weep today, Jesus weeps with you. If you rejoice, Jesus rejoices. He is with you. Always.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 98 – John 11:38-40 ‘The glory of God’

‘If you believe, you will see the glory of God.’

It’s quite a promise, isn’t it?

When we talk about glory nowadays, we usually mean some great achievement, or something which merits great praise – this weekend we’ve had talk of FA Cup glory, for example, for the winning teams, especially those who registered shock victories. And that’s all well and good – but it’s missing a vital link. In biblical terms, the word ‘glory’ refers to the manifest presence of God. It literally means ‘weight’ and originally appears whenever God shows up directly in the presence of humanity.

The first biblical references all occur around the time of the Exodus, the giving of the law and the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert. So, when Moses and Aaron first begin their priestly ministry, we’re told that, ‘the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell face down.’ (Leviticus 9:23-24)

You can see the missing link: when God’s glory appears, it results in praise and awe – but that is the *outcome* of the glory, *not* the glory itself. The ‘glory’ is God’s manifest presence with his people.

Let’s fast-forward to the story of Lazarus and our passage for today – and specifically, Jesus’ extraordinary words to those gathered by the tomb: (v40) ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’ How is God’s glory, God’s manifest presence, demonstrated in the age of Christ? In resurrection life! God is the author of life, and his presence brings life. ‘We have seen his glory,’ John declares at the start of the gospel (1:14), and now his friends and onlookers will see it demonstrated in the most remarkable way: God’s presence, bringing life.

Since Pentecost, one of the greatest parts of our good news is that God’s manifest presence – in other words, his glory – is available to all believers, all those who follow the Messiah who promises the Lord’s glory to those who believe. Wherever the Lord is bringing new life, there we can see his glory. God is working his ‘glory’ in us: ‘We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.’ (2 Cor 3:18)

We are all slowly being transformed by God’s Spirit – something which, as that wonderful verse declares, brings ‘ever-increasing glory’ to the Lord. Where is God’s glory at work in you at the moment? Where might you see God’s glory bringing life today? Pray with confidence, because those who believe, Jesus promises, *will* see the glory of God. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 99 – John 11:40-44 ‘Lazarus, come out!’

Of all Jesus’ miracles, the raising of Lazarus is the most dramatic. The feeding of the 5,000 may have been on a larger scale, the walking on the water more terrifying – but the combination of extraordinary power and sheer pathos we see here gives this miracle a unique position in the gospels. John certainly gives it that kind of billing: he only records seven ‘signs’, and this is the final one; since seven is the biblical number for perfection or completeness, we can conclude that, for John, this is the most perfect, the most complete.

It’s not Jesus’ only raising of somebody else from the dead: we have already marvelled at the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7) and Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8). But this is the first resurrection miracle where the person Jesus raises is already entombed. The gap between Lazarus’ death and his rising is days, not hours. Even Jesus’ great friend (and Lazarus’ sister) Martha doubted that he could do anything *now* – when Jesus tells people to move the stone, she questions the wisdom of his actions, and the smell that people will have to endure (v39).

There is, therefore, no doubt as to the extraordinary nature of this miracle. Jesus is not just restoring the breath of life, but reversing decay. That much is clear from the striking description of Lazarus appearing, still fully clothed in bandages (v44). It must have been an unforgettable sight for those privileged to witness it. We’re not told what Martha and Mary thought, but we can only imagine their shock and joy. Nor are we told what Lazarus made of it all – all we know is that he was dining with them all some time later (John 12:2). Life went on!

What makes this such an important ‘sign’ for John is of course that the raising of Lazarus directly prefigures what Jesus will do himself. Jesus was himself entombed, and wrapped in bandages when he rose from the dead. If Jesus can do this for Lazarus, he can do this for himself, too. Or, as Peter puts it on the Day of Pentecost: ‘But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.’ (Acts 2:24) Jesus simply has too much life!

We, too, are called into this life. We may still be living, physically, but Jesus’ call to Lazarus in some ways is also his call to us: ‘Come out! Come into the new life I have in store for you! Be alive in me!’

Today, thanks to Jesus, you have resurrection life. Like Lazarus we do all still die – but death is not the end. The tomb is not our final destination. We are made alive in Christ. As we give thanks for that resurrection life today, let’s resolve to live that life to the full, to bring it to others, to share it with the world. In our different ways, we are all Lazaruses.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 100 – John 11:43-48 ‘If we let him go on like this...’

Light attracts some creatures and repels others. We see this all through nature; and it's not just the unappealing creatures who prefer the darkness: think of owls or leopards – beautiful animals, however deadly they are!

It's easy to imagine that Jesus' miracles must have been universally welcomed. After all, who could possibly be offended by bodies being healed, people being fed, and (here) someone even being raised to life? But, as we know, that isn't the case. The theologian R.A. Lambourne comments that all of Jesus' miracles are *krisis* moments – *krisis* is the Greek word which means judgement: in other words, people have to make a decision. Are they for Jesus or against him? Will they follow him or reject him?

The raising of Lazarus is a supreme 'krisis' moment: not surprisingly, as John records (v45), 'many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.' Imagine being there, and seeing *that*.... most of us would do the same!

But not everybody. An act so powerful, so subversive of cultural norms, has other repercussions: (v46) 'some... went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.' This group felt entirely differently, they saw Jesus' spiritual power as a direct threat to worldly power – not just theirs, but Rome's: (v48) 'If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.' Revival risked revolution; and revolution risked repression.

Throughout history the freedom and life Jesus brings implicitly challenges other power structures – even if the people so transformed by Christ live as model citizens. You can explain it in all kinds of ways, but in essence it boils down to simple, old-fashioned human pride. To believe in Christ is to humble ourselves, that God might raise us up. Some prefer to hide in the darkness (John 3:19-20); but praise God for all those who come into the light (John 3:21)!

As we reflect on this extraordinary story today, may God give us all grace to respond as that first group did: to put our faith in Jesus, and trust in him for life. And let's also pray for the many millions of fellow followers round the world who live under oppressive regimes. May they experience that true peace which passes understanding, and may the joy of the Lord be their – and our – strength.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 101 – John 11:49-53 ‘Better that one man die...’

Many years ago, I was privileged to pastor a young lady who'd come to faith on an alpha course our church had run. I asked her how she'd found her way to Alpha. She replied that some people from church had been handing out fliers for alpha in the train station, and her partner had taken one. He'd got home, looked at the flier and thrown it in the bin. Arriving home from work later, she had noticed the flier in the bin and wondered it was. She fished it out, read it and decided to attend the course, despite her partner's scepticism. As a result, she had marvellously come to faith, and was now seeking to follow Jesus!

This kind of amazing story reminds us that God can use even 'negative' actions, or opposition, to achieve his purposes. In fact, if her partner had not 'opposed' the course, but instead just filed the flier away somewhere, she may never have come to faith at that particular time. God was at work in a contested situation.

If that was a small (but miraculous) example of God's 'mysterious ways', then today's passage is arguably the biggest example of them all. Jesus' actions have aroused the determined opposition of the religious leaders of his day. The raising of Lazarus – a clear demonstration of his Messianic identity – has significantly increased the stakes. Jesus is no longer just an unorthodox rabbi, he is a destabilising influence, a threat (v48). So, he must die. That is the blunt conclusion (v53).

But what the religious leaders don't realise is that, albeit for completely the wrong reasons, they are only fulfilling the Lord's purposes all along. In what must be the greatest unintentional prophetic word of all time, Caiaphas declares the gospel in his words of condemnation: 'You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.'

Looking back, John can see clearly what God is up to: Jesus' death acts as a representative sacrifice for humanity – not just for the Jewish nation, but also for the world (vv51-52). As it turned out, Jesus' death only maintained the political status quo for another 35-40 years. In the late 60s, a huge rebellion began, which ultimately led to the destruction of 'the temple and the nation' (v48).

But Jesus' death – praise be to God! – saved humanity for all time. And more than that, his death also paved the way for a new humanity, one which is 'made one' in Christ (v52).

Today, let's give thanks that God is at work in all circumstances, however confusing or challenging they may appear. We only see a part of the picture – God sees it all. Perhaps take a moment to reflect on times in the past when God has worked in surprising ways in your life. And pray with confidence to trust in that same Lord for now, and for the future. He is always faithful.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 102 – John 11:54-12:2 ‘He withdrew to the wilderness’

Today’s passage is one that can be read on two levels. In narrative terms, it forms a ‘quiet moment’ between the two emotional peaks of the dramatic raising of Lazarus (ch11) and the even more dramatic return to Jerusalem, which ultimately led to his arrest, trial, death and resurrection (ch12 onwards). Knowing that a very powerful group now wants to kill him (v53), not surprisingly Jesus withdraws from the public gaze (v54).

He finds a village about 13 miles from Jerusalem – far enough away to be out of sight, but close enough to be able to return in one day’s walk – where he stays with his disciples. And just as well: although Jesus is keeping a low profile, the crowds are still desperately looking for him: (v56) ‘Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?’ Moreover, the Pharisees have spies ready to pounce on any sighting of the notorious rabbi from Nazareth (v57).

Even when Jesus returns, he stops first in Bethany to see his great friends (12:1-2). Bethany is on the same side of Jerusalem as the village where he was staying, so Jesus doesn’t need to enter the city and can therefore retain a low profile until it’s time to ‘go public’ again.

That’s the practical explanation of what’s going on... but there’s a deeper meaning here, too. John calls the village ‘Ephraim’. This word has powerful connotations: it was the name of the patriarch Joseph’s second son, and it means ‘fruitful’ – so named because God had made him fruitful in Egypt, the ‘land of his affliction’ (Genesis 41:52). The actual name of the village was Ephron – mentioned in 2 Chronicles 13:19 – but I don’t think John is making a mistake, he knows what he’s doing. He wants us to understand two things: first, Jesus is recharging spiritually. So goes to the village called ‘fruitful’ to prepare himself for what is to come. It begs the question for us: where is your fruitful hideaway – the place you go to recharge?

Second, Ephraim is often used as the name for the whole northern kingdom of Israel. This village is not in that area – it’s in Judea, in the land of the tribe of Benjamin – but again, this is not a mistake. John is saying, in effect, that Jesus dwells for a season in ‘Ephraim’ (equating to the northern kingdom), before fulfilling his mission in Jerusalem (the southern) – in other words, he brings the two together, just as the great prophets foretold. Ephraim nourishes Jesus before he saves the world on a rocky outcrop in Judea. Jesus redeems the whole people of God as part of his mission to rescue all of humanity.

It turns out that there’s much in a name! As we begin our week, may the Lord grant us all times in ‘Ephraim’ – fruitful renewal – that we may also be fruitful in all that the Lord has for us: this day, and every day. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 103 – John 12:1-11 ‘A preparation for burial’

The beautiful story of the anointing at Bethany is also one of the most debated – at least, John’s version is. Why does he change the details? And does this cast doubt on the reliability of the bible?

Let’s tackle this head-on today. And we have to start by acknowledging that this account does appear to be a splicing together of the other two ‘anointings’ in the other gospels: the early episode where a ‘sinful woman’ pours perfume over Jesus’ feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) and the other Bethany anointing accounts in Matthew and Mark where an unnamed woman pours expensive perfume over Jesus’ head (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:1-11). So, here in John’s account, in a house in Bethany near to the time of Jesus’ death (like Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts), Mary pours perfume over Jesus’s feet (like Luke, albeit a different location at a different time).

It is possible to harmonise most of the discrepancies: Simon the Leper – the owner of the house in Bethany according to Matthew and Mark – could be another brother to Mary, Martha and Lazarus, or indeed the first name of Lazarus himself. In that case, Mary could then be the unnamed woman in the account of Matthew and Mark. In similar vein, Mary could have anointed both Jesus’ head *and* Jesus’ feet, so both accounts are true. In this line of thinking, the gospels give us two anointings of Jesus: by an unnamed woman early in his ministry (recorded by Luke) and by Mary at Bethany recorded by Matthew, Mark and John, albeit with different details included.

This is possible – what isn’t possible is that John records a different time of this encounter. In Matthew and Mark, the anointing happens in what we now call Holy Week i.e. *after* Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Here in John, it happens *before* – the triumphal entry comes next.

What are we to do with all this?

The first thing to say is that genuine eyewitness accounts differ – and their authenticity in fact relies on small differences between the accounts. That’s what makes them human, and credible.

The second thing to say is that we can still be sure that Jesus was anointed at Bethany – it’s recorded by three different writers – and that this anointing meant something important.

...which leads us onto the vital question of meaning and interpretation. John is very different to the other gospel writers. If the other writers are photographs, John is a portrait. For him, the meaning of the encounter is all-important. If that means a little latitude on the precise details, then this is justified if it illuminates who Jesus was and why he came more clearly. John wants us to truly believe that Jesus is the Servant King of all humanity. Therefore, he is anointed *before* he enters Jerusalem, since anointing was the act of declaring a king. But it was his *feet*, not his head, as a reminder of his humility – hence John also has the unique foot-washing episode at the Last Supper in a chapter’s time.

This may offend our scientific sensibilities; but truth goes deeper than simple precision. As a historian myself, I do struggle with John’s more cavalier attitude; but we need John in the canon of the bible – think what we would lose without him!

Ultimately, what is incontestable is that Jesus himself knew the significance of this encounter – and as our narrative moves into the decisive final week of Jesus’ life, may our hearts continue to anoint Jesus as our true King. And may that overflow in extravagant worship, as it did for Mary. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 104 – John 12:12-19 ‘Blessed is the King!’

Palm Sunday is such a familiar story to many of us; we celebrate it every year, on the Sunday before Easter Day. The image of Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem is one etched into our minds, and we usually approach the day with a mixture of excitement and awe. Excitement that privations of Lent are nearly over, that the biggest week of our year is upon us, that the crowds are cheering Jesus on. And awe, perhaps, too, because we know what comes next, and how quickly the crowd turns. How quickly perhaps we turn, too.

On Palm Sunday Jesus reveals himself as both the Jewish Messiah and the King for the whole world. The donkey is significant, as John’s quotation of Zechariah makes clear: Jesus was proclaiming his humility, but also fulfilling a great prophecy which related to God’s anointed rescuer. That’s why the crowds were excited. The Rescuer was arriving in Jerusalem, just as Zechariah had predicted 500 years ago.

But even as Jesus raises their hopes, he confounds them too. Not just the donkey – prophecy or no prophecy, what sort of king arrives on a donkey? – his first act (not recorded by John, but recorded in the other gospels) is to go into the temple and challenge the materialism and corruption of the biggest festival in the Jewish year.

Jesus came, but not as they expected him to.

And that theme is one which runs through the whole of the gospels. Jesus constantly surprises us. He comes, but not as we expect. Born a King, but not in a palace, rather an animals’ feeding trough. He prefers the company of the disreputable to the respectable. He is rejected by his home town. He challenges the prevailing interpretation of the Sabbath laws. He withdraws whenever popular excitement gets too much. He demonstrates his authority, but tells people to keep quiet about it.

And then... he arrives in Jerusalem as King, but on a donkey not a stallion. He receives the embrace of the crowd but then challenges their religious practice. He doesn’t even stay in the city, but as Mark records, leaves and spends the nights in Bethany. In our days of PR gurus and image management, no self-respecting adviser would recommend any of these things. What sort of a king is he?

He comes, but not as we expect.

And the good news of this passage is that this is exactly what Jesus does, and still does. He is not an upholder of the religious establishment or the old ways. Jesus is not limited to our buildings or our books. He is always making everything new. His Spirit, like the wind, is wild and free. He is perfectly able to meet with us where we are, to bring us joy in unexpected places, and the peace that transcends understanding. He is with us right now....

Today, let’s approach this extraordinary Saviour with that same mixture of excitement and awe. And may the Lord still come to us in unexpected ways today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 105 – John 12:1-19 (reprise) ‘Collateral damage’

Some years ago, I watched a fascinating programme about child behaviour. Ten boys and ten girls (none of whom knew each other) were each invited to a location to live under the same roof for a limited time. Their behaviour was observed by psychologists, and the aim of the programme was to show how they formed relationships and interacted.

There were lots of striking things about the programme – but one thing that stuck with me was that in each group there was one troubled child, who found it hard not to get their own way, to observe guidelines or behavioural norms, or to form healthy relationships. And this one child made the life of the rest of the group very difficult indeed. No matter that 9 were broadly well-adjusted – it just took 1 to ‘spoil’ the group.

It’s just one example, but so often we see something similar in society. It only takes a small number of troubled people to cause a lot of damage for everybody else. Underneath the dramatic narrative of the Anointing at Bethany and the Triumphal Entry we see a similar pattern at work: among the disciples there is Judas (vv4-6); among the vast crowds there are the Pharisees (vv10-11,19).

For all the disciples’ journey with Jesus over three years, it just took one disillusioned soul to betray him. For all the enthusiasm and worship of the crowds, it just took a small number of determined opponents to get Jesus arrested, and then sway the crowds to turn against him.

Even Lazarus risked becoming collateral damage in this powerplay: it is a bitter irony indeed that the man who had just been resurrected now fears for his life simply for the impertinence of being very much alive (v10)!

Jesus, of course, knew all this. Although anybody else might also be seen as collateral damage in the face of frustrated ambition and corrupt power, he retains this extraordinary sense of being in control of a narrative which appears to be happening around him. Jesus’ divine identity is so great that he can even redeem the very things that are against him, the very people who want to destroy him. Indeed *their plotting ultimately only served to achieve his purposes*, and – in another moment of great irony – make the Pharisees’ greatest fear become very much a reality: (v19) ‘Look how the whole world has gone after him!’

Look indeed. And we still do – 2,000 years later, the world is still going after Jesus: some, sadly, to persecute, many more to follow. We too, are invited to go after Jesus: to meet him, to marvel at him, to worship him. And may the Lord stir our hearts today, as it did those crowds, to declare with our lips and our lives: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 106 – John 12:19-24 ‘The hour has come’

If you like watching thrillers, you’ll know the moment in the story when the tables turn. The heroes have their backs against the wall – but suddenly the very thing that their captors or enemies thought they had under their control is turned against them, and the heroes prevail. The idea repeats itself so often that we more or less take it for granted. We rarely stop to think where it comes from, why humanity so often needs to tell such stories – or indeed to trace it back to the greatest ‘table-turn’ of them all.

As we reflected yesterday, Jesus sees the bigger picture well before anybody else does – he knows where this is leading, and, amazingly, *he goes there anyway*. And what we see in today’s passage is Jesus ‘turning the tables’ on the very idea the Sanhedrin were discussing after the raising of Lazarus – let’s head back briefly to Caiaphas’ words in 11:50: ‘It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ One person for all people...

...exactly what Jesus has in mind – but here’s how he describes it in today’s passage: (v24) ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.’ It’s the same ‘one on behalf of all’ image – but notice the crucial difference. Jesus is not just saving others from death (which he is), he is also bringing *life* to many. The very thing Caiaphas describes brings so much more than Caiaphas can imagine: it brings life, it reproduces itself multiple times over.

Jesus calls this his moment of glory – and let’s not miss how radical this description is. How is the ‘the Son of Man... glorified’? (v23) By his sacrificial death. What a world-changing definition of glory! Who else before Jesus could possibly have thought of glory like this? And in the 2,000 years since, the vast majority of the extraordinary human beings who have also lived like this have been inspired by the original blueprint of Jesus’ own life and death.

Near the start of the gospel (ch3), Jesus foretold this moment when talking with Nicodemus: he calls it his ‘lifting up’ (3:14). But it doesn’t refer to his resurrection, what you might call his subsequent and ultimate ‘lifting up’, or even his ascension into heaven. It refers to his death – his lifting up on the wooden cross. This, for Jesus, is the ‘hour’ when he is glorified, and draws people to himself.

What a wonderful Saviour we have! Today, let’s give thanks for Jesus’ courage, his obedience, and the way his abundant life has marvellously reproduced in us. We are his ‘seeds’ – may we too keep growing in this abundant life and hope which our glorified Lord won for us. Amen.

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Day 107 – John 12:20-27 ‘Whoever serves must follow’

If you watch a programme nowadays you may hear this message before it begins, or written near the top of the opening scene: ‘Warning: may contain content unsuitable for some viewers.’

A similar ‘warning’ could well be applied to our passage for today. It begins with some unexpected visitors – and here we can see a lovely parallel with Philip’s own encounter with Jesus in the first chapter of John (1:43-51), only this time he brings some Greek visitors to Jesus, rather than Nathanael. However, unlike the first encounter, Jesus takes the conversation in a very different direction, reflecting the different moment in which he finds himself.

‘We would like to see Jesus.’ It’s a wonderful opening request – but the rest of the passage could effectively be subtitled: ‘What would you really like to see?’ Or perhaps: ‘When you really see Jesus, and what’s about to happen, you may not like what you’re about to see as much as you think.’ Be careful what you wish for.

Let’s be clear that Jesus is not pushing these visitors away; but he does use the opportunity to be candid with those who are flocking to him, to make them aware of where this is all heading. Jesus knows he is heading towards his sacrificial death – but he makes the broader point that ‘losing one’s life’ is intrinsic to the way of Jesus (v25). For many of us that may not be literal martyrdom, but for all of us it means a fundamental change of focus: we orientate ourselves away from the seductions of this world towards another kind of life entirely, the abundant, eternal ‘zoe’ life of Jesus.

‘Whoever serves me must follow me.’ (v26) You can imagine the potential shock for Jesus’ visitors to hear these words. What, really, Jesus? Follow you like *this*? He does, however, add a great promise: ‘My Father will honour the one who serves me.’ We honour (serve) Jesus by actually following him – thinking like he thinks, living like he lives, loving like he loves – and receive honour from our heavenly Father in return.

This is the Way which our Lord call us to follow. May the Lord grant us all grace to follow in the dust of our heavenly Rabbi, trusting that he will honour all who serve him. There, indeed, we will see Jesus.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 108 – John 12:27-33 ‘I will draw all people’

Human beings have long associated glory with elevation. The winner of a gold medal stands on the top step, higher than those who come second or third (or lower). A monarch usually sits on a seat which is raised off the ground. Even in old churches, it is traditional to have at least one step from the main seating area into the area where the bread and wine is blessed. It's a physical expression of the 'lifting up' which accompanies glory.

As we observed a couple of reflections ago, Jesus uses this particular phrase 'lifted up' to describe what is about to happen to him. It is both a literal description of his crucifixion, but also a spiritual description of what he will achieve through it. The word can also mean exaltation, which is a extraordinary description of (what was seen as) a criminals' death, and marvellously illustrates how our amazing Lord turns everything upside-down and makes all things new.

In today's passage Jesus himself describes this lifting up as representing three things. First, it is his destiny: (v27) 'for this very reason I came to this hour.' Every gospel makes it very clear that what happens to Jesus is no accident, and Jesus is supremely aware of this, including the terrible cost: (v27) 'my soul is troubled'.

Second, it is a judgement on this world – the moment at which the forces of evil are defeated (v31). And yet, at the same time it is also, thirdly, the moment when Jesus 'will draw all people to myself' (v32). How can it be a moment of both judgment and invitation? Because Jesus takes the punishment which the judgement of this world decrees upon himself. The judgement is enacted upon him, so that all of us can be beckoned into the new life of God. Jesus has paid the price of judgement on our behalf.

No wonder he calls out: (v28) 'Father glorify your name!' To which his heavenly Father replies: 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' To those watching Jesus being executed at Mount Moriah (the place of the skull, or Calvary), it can hardly have seemed like his moment of glory, his moment of 'lifting up'/exaltation. And yet, *this* is what enables to great prophesy of Isaiah to be enacted: 'The mountain of the Lord's temple... will be exalted (lifted up) above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.' (Isaiah 2:5)

Praise God that he has drawn us to himself! Jesus' lifting up has won our salvation, and his name is forever glorified. Today, let's pray for Jesus to draw others, too – people we know and love, our community, any we are led to remember before the Lord. May the Father continue to glorify Jesus' name again, and again. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 109 – John 12:34-36 ‘Becoming children of light’

As I write this towards the end of January, we are familiar with the idea of light not lasting very long! In fact, as I write this reflection mid-afternoon, Jesus’ words ‘you are going to have the light just a little while longer’ rings true in a very literal sense. At this time of year, any tasks which require daylight also require us to keep an eye on the time, in case darkness overtakes us.

Jesus reminds his hearers that light being overtaken by darkness is also about to happen in the spiritual realms. Even if it is correct for his questioners to say that the Messiah carries eternal authority and therefore will indeed remain forever (v34), he wants them to know that the human life of the Messiah will be short, and about to cease (v35). The two are not mutually exclusive: as we saw yesterday, the Son of Man will reign forever *precisely through* his sacrificial death.

His advice is simple: believe in the light (v36), and walk in the light (v35). As he is the Light of the World, Jesus is inviting them (and all people) to believe in him. But it’s about more than just believing: since the Light (ch8) is also the Way (ch14), then we are to follow this Way – which is another way of saying, as Jesus puts it in this passage, that we are to walk in the light.

It’s a lovely image, and a very practical one: it’s much easier to navigate by light rather than darkness. If you try and do it in the dark, you won’t know where you are going (v35). Jesus’ light leads us in the way which leads to abundant, eternal life.

And as we walk in the light, something else happens: we become what we behold, we ‘become children of light.’ (v36) It’s an image St Paul picks up in his letter to the Ephesians – and here we can see how so much of what Jesus teaches has been passed down to the early Christian leaders: ‘For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth).’ (Ephesians 5:8-9)

If the fruit of the light sounds like something of a mixed metaphor, let’s not forget that most plants need light to grow – and in this case, as we walk in the light and become children of light, the ‘fruit’ that grows in us is goodness, righteousness and truth. It’s a pretty fair summary of the sort of life Jesus had in mind when he addressed the crowd in today’s passage.

So, today, may the Lord grant us all grace to walk in the light of the Lord – and let’s pray that this light may shine forth in goodness, righteousness and truth. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 110 – John 12:37-41 ‘They still would not believe’

‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.’ So begins the sixth chapter of the great prophet Isaiah, someone who was privileged to witness what few people ever get the chance to see in this life: heaven itself. However, it did not initially seem to be a privilege, as Isaiah recounts: (v5) *“Woe to me!”* I cried. *“I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”*

Thankfully, Isaiah’s fears proved unfounded – he was cleansed and spoke directly with the Lord himself, who commissioned him to take God’s message to the people. And it is in this commissioning that we have the background to today’s passage. We cannot fully grasp what Jesus is sharing here unless we go back to Isaiah 6, because Jesus’ second quotation from Isaiah comes directly from Isaiah’s vision of God in that very prophecy. And it begs the awkward question: does God stop people believing? That appears to be the surface meaning of what God says to Isaiah, and at the very least gives us pause for thought.

However, it’s not the whole meaning. The context of most of the book of Isaiah – including ch6 – is the persistent, stubborn unbelief of his people. God reveals himself again and again; yet people refuse to repent or trust. So, eventually, God lets them have their wishes.

This is very much Jesus’ experience, too; today’s passage begins: (v37) ‘Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.’ It’s hard to credit, isn’t it? So many signs, and yet some people simply refuse to come to Jesus. This is why John goes back to Isaiah, partly to demonstrate that, sadly, ‘twas ever thus. There is nothing new under the sun.

But there’s also a golden thread of hope – because Isaiah’s conversation with the Lord in the throne room concludes with God saying that judgement would follow, but ‘the holy seed will be the stump in the land’ (Isaiah 6:13). The stump is, of course, Jesus – the ‘shoot of Jesse’ (Is 11:1) which will bear fruit and bring salvation – the Messiah who is here, right now, before the crowds. John makes the link clear by declaring that ‘Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.’ (v41) What an amazing thought – that Jesus was there, in that heavenly conversation, knowing that he would fulfil the Father’s word to Isaiah seven or more centuries later!

Today’s passage is both a challenge and an inspiration: a reminder that some people will remain stubborn in their unbelief, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, Jesus comes anyway to just such stubborn people, people like us, with the deep longing of the Father’s heart to heal them (v40). No-one is beyond the love of God; no-one is beyond rescue this side of the grave. Let’s keep praying for those we love, and let’s give thanks that God keeps overcoming our own stubbornness. His arm (v38) is always stretched out to save.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 111 – John 12:42-47 ‘The One who sent me’

If you want to know exactly what God is like, look at Jesus.

Such has been the conclusion of church leaders and scholars down the centuries. For example, Archbishop Michael Ramsey famously declared: 'God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.'

But this is not one of those statements that has been fathomed out by clever reasoning, or mature reflection on the text of scripture, important though those are. No, this central tenet of the faith comes directly from Jesus himself, most clearly in today's passage: (v45) 'The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.' In other words: If you want to know exactly what God is like, look at Jesus.

This profound revelation unfolds in two directions in our text for today. The first is a challenge; after the persistent unbelief of one group of people that we looked at yesterday, today we meet a different group: those who do believe in Jesus, but are afraid to acknowledge their faith openly (v42). John ascribes this reticence to fear of stigma and consequent loss of status: 'fear they would be put out of the synagogue.' He concludes: 'they loved human praise more than praise from God.' (v43)

If this sounds harsh, then what Jesus says makes it clear that such fear is missing the point. In seeing Jesus they are seeing Yahweh, their Lord, the very One they profess to worship and follow. How could they keep quiet about that?

Although it is easy to judge such attitudes, Jesus refuses to (v47). Candidly, frail as we are, it remains a temptation for any of us, too. If this is something we struggle with, or someone we know, let's take heart from the other dimension to Jesus' statement – a great encouragement: (v46) 'I have come into the world as a light, so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness.' God is light, and Jesus – the true and exact revelation of God – is the light that illumines all our paths. If we honour him in all circumstances, if we resist the temptation to hide our faith, Jesus' light will shine brightly, showing us the way.

May the Lord grant us all grace to see Jesus as he really is, and may his light give us courage and direction, today and every day. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 112 – John 12:45-50 ‘All I have spoken’

The Trinity is an eternal mystery – God who is three-in-one and one-in-three, perfect unity and also perfect community: Father, Son and Spirit. They are all equally God, but they also have different roles or functions as part of the Godhead.

Today’s passage is a case in point. Jesus is the complete and representation of the Father – Yahweh – on earth: (v45) ‘The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.’ But that does not mean he is the Father himself – he remains the Son, which means he has a different role: (vv47-48a) ‘I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words.’ The Son saves, the Father in heaven ultimately judges.

But, lest we split them too far apart, the Father’s judgement rests on people’s response to the Son’s message: (vv48b-49) ‘the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.’

So Jesus is not outsourcing judgment to the Father, and the Father is not outsourcing the gospel message to the Son – they are both fully God, indivisible and fully united on everything.

It’s pretty hard to get your head around, isn’t it? And at one level, that’s the point – we are not God – we are simply invited to trust in this great God and, wonderfully, experience the amazing, eternal, abundant life he offers. This is a hard passage, and it’s not easy to talk about judgment. But, as we close our week, let’s land here, in this last verse. God’s heart is ultimately that we should be saved, that mercy would triumph over judgment (James 2:13). Jesus’ message is ultimately a reflection of the Father’s heart: (v50) ‘I know that his command leads to eternal life.’

God longs that we would know life. He sent Jesus to save us, that we might experience that life. The last few days has been a challenging read, but what a great way to end it! Jesus both brings and *is* the good news of the Father. May that good news bubble up in our hearts, minds and spirits today – hallelujah!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 113 – John 13:1-5 ‘Succession planning, kingdom-style’

If you’ve ever worked in the corporate world or in business, you’ll hear about succession planning: the way that leaders prepare to hand over power and responsibility after they’ve left, in particular by nurturing leaders to succeed them. It’s not a new idea – apparently Genghis Khan did something similar 800 years ago, involving his sons in leadership from a young age, and appointing a primary successor before his death. (I draw no direct comparison here with modern business!)

Today we begin what you might call the final stage of Jesus’ own ‘succession planning’. He has lived and trained a group of close friends over the last three years, but now he is approaching the climax of his ministry – something of which he is well aware: (v1) ‘Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.’ He has one more evening and night, before he leaves them. How would any of us use that time?

All the gospel writers place a strong emphasis on these last 24 hours of Jesus’ life. The events are recorded in detail, and many of us know them off by heart: the Last Supper, Gethsemane, betrayal, arrest, trial, Pilate, Simon carrying the cross, crucifixion. However, only John focuses primarily on Jesus’ teaching, on the way Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to come. Chapters 13-17 are some of the greatest and most profound in all of scripture, and one gets this strong sense of walking on holy ground whenever we open these texts, so I must confess to some trepidation as we approach these next few weeks. Thankfully it’s God who speaks, and not me! The text will do its own work in all of us.

But what strikes me at the start is how extraordinary Jesus’ interpretation of succession planning really is. In the world, it’s about the transfer of power. Here, Jesus’ form of succession planning is all about self-giving service. His primary act is to wash his disciples’ feet – the task of a servant.

It tells us everything we need to know about how to lead, Jesus-style. This is not some sort of pre-death self-loathing, or tokenistic ritual: (v3) ‘Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.’ Jesus exercises his ‘power’ *precisely through* humble service. Or, as he says elsewhere: ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.’ (Mark 10:43)

It is nothing less than a revolution in our understanding of how things really work. It also makes no sense to those who see life through the lens of worldly power. And yet, less than 70 years after Genghis Khan’s death, his great empire split into four; ten years after that, three of those four territories submitted to the rule of a different emperor. But the Kingdom of Jesus continues to grow: 2,000 years and counting. The humble servant triumphs – with a towel around their waist.

Today, let’s give thanks for Jesus’ example. And let’s pray for all Christian leaders, that they might continue to live out the way of Christ – the Christ who loves us all ‘to the end.’

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 114 – John 13:6-11 ‘Unless I wash you...’

Many religions have washing rituals. We need water to make us physically clean – but water has often come to symbolise something deeper. Think of the millions who gather by the shore of the River Ganges each year for the famous Kumbh Mela ritual. Or the Mikveh bathing rituals which are an important part of the Jewish faith, and which Jesus’ mother Mary, for example, would have had to undergo in the synagogue in Nazareth after each menstrual cycle.

In the Christian faith, of course, we have baptism as the supreme symbol of coming to faith in Jesus Christ, a way of declaring that we are now joined with him in his death and resurrection to new life. This practice dates back to Pentecost, the birth of the church, and even before that to the baptism (literally ‘dipping’) for repentance initiated by John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. In all of these practices, physical ‘washing’ denotes a deeper reality.

The same is true, but for different reasons, in Jesus’ practice of foot-washing with the disciples. As we observed yesterday, the washing of feet was something usually only undertaken by a household servant, so perhaps it is not surprising the Peter objects to Jesus’ kneeling before them. Jesus, however, is unusually blunt: (v9) ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.’

What Jesus means is really three-fold: first, we need washing for salvation. ‘Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow,’ David cries out to God in Psalm 51. We all need to be washed i.e. cleansed of all that defiles us before God. This is supremely and wonderfully achieved through Jesus’ death on our behalf: in a striking image in Revelation, the angel tells John that the great multitude he sees ‘have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ (Rev 7:14)

Jesus is keen to stress, however, that foot-washing is not, in itself, a salvation ritual. ‘You are clean,’ he tells his bemused disciples: (v10) ‘Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet.’ Which brings us to the primary reason for this particular act of Jesus: we also need washing for surrender. To have your feet washed is a powerfully humbling act, and in receiving it, we choose to receive all that Jesus has for us. We accept that we cannot make ourselves right before God, we need Jesus to ‘serve’ us and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Peter wanted to do so much for God; but first, he needed to surrender. To allow Jesus to do for him, what he could not achieve purely through his enthusiasm or his activism.

Finally, we need washing for service. We’ll look at this tomorrow, so hold that thought!

But today, as we reflect on Jesus’ call for Peter to surrender his pride, we can see the same sort of stubborn resistance in ourselves. This is why Jesus is so insistent that Peter must agree to having his feet washed; in the same way, surrender to Jesus is a daily choice for us, too. May the Lord grant us all grace to make that choice, today and every day. Jesus, in loving response, will make all grace available to us, to live out that choice. It is the path to life.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 115 – John 13:12-17 ‘Wash one another’s feet’

Over the years, I have taken part in a few foot-washing ceremonies – both as the washer and the one being washed. Without doubt, they are some of the most powerful and moving spiritual experiences I’ve had. I still remember my first such experience, many years ago. The pastors at our church were offering it to anyone who wished to participate. I went to the front with no great expectations – but found myself fighting back tears throughout the process.

It’s interesting to reflect that of the many commands of Jesus which we interpret literally, foot-washing isn’t one of them. Nearly every church baptises new believers, as Jesus commanded. Nearly every church shares bread and wine (or equivalent), as Jesus commanded. Only some churches practise foot-washing, and even those that do only practise it once a year – on Maundy Thursday, with only the priest or pastor washing feet.

No church that I am aware of gets *everyone washing each other’s feet* – just as Jesus directly commands in this passage, twice: (vv14-15) ‘Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.’

Why is that? Why do we treat this as a metaphor, rather than an actual practice? Is it just too humbling, too extreme? Or just too culturally specific? Answers on a postcard, please!

That said, we must acknowledge that, even if the literal practice is rare, the idea isn’t. The global church does agree that humble service is the way of Jesus. As he has given to us, so we then pass on to others. We may do any number of simple tasks to bless people – quiet, unglamorous, unheralded, but all true reflections of our foot-washing Saviour. As the saying goes: don’t pay it back, pay it *forward*.

And as we do them, Jesus makes us a promise: (v17) ‘You will be blessed if you do them.’ God always repays. God blesses those who bless others – not always in the way we expect, but somehow.

Today, let’s give thanks for those whose humble service has blessed us. And let’s pray for grace to be ‘foot-washers’ for others – whatever that may look like today, or this week.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 116 – John 13:18-30 ‘And it was night’

Today we come to one of the most sobering stories in scripture – Jesus’ betrayal by Judas Iscariot. The story is so famous it has entered our culture: we still use the name ‘Judas’ as a generic term for betrayal. Indeed, the identification of Judas with betrayal is so strong that the two other ‘good’ Judases in the New Testament are given different names to differentiate them: so, the second disciple called Judas is usually called ‘Thaddeus’, and Jesus’ half-brother Judas who wrote the last New Testament letter (just before Revelation) is called ‘Jude’. They can’t be called their actual name, in case we associate them with the Judas of this story!

John’s account of Judas’ betrayal largely accords with the other gospel writers, although he does add the unique detail that Judas’ disillusionment with Jesus had a partly personal motive (see John 12:6). It wasn’t just that Jesus proved not to be the kind of Messiah Judas wanted or expected; he was also stealing money and (presumably) Jesus knew of his deceit.

But in other respects, we see the same main elements: Judas had already decided to betray Jesus before the Last Supper (v2), and Jesus knew he had done so (v11). Judas’ betrayal is also a fulfilment of prophecy: (v18, quoting Psalm 41:9) ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me.’

It begs the question: did Judas have a choice? Was he just the unlucky one pre-determined to do this? I think we have to say that people always have a choice. It is true that the scriptural prophecy that someone would betray the Son of Man did have to come true – but Judas did not have to be that person. He chose to steal. He chose to take money for information. Even at the table, he chose to do ‘what you are about to do’ (v27). He was not a robot or a stooge – he made his own choices.

John’s last words in today’s text are poetic and chilling: (v30) ‘And it was night.’ Night in the physical sense; but also night in the spiritual sense. Darkness had overtaken Judas, and was shortly to do the same to Jesus, albeit only with his full acceptance.

The story of Judas is a sobering but healthy reminder of all our little betrayals. All the more important, then, to cast ourselves on the boundless grace of our Saviour. To remind ourselves that he came to save people just like us. His healing makes all things new. ‘Whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.’ Whoever. No-one is beyond his love. Thanks be to God!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 117 – John 13:31-35 ‘Love one another’

‘Love each other dearly always. There is scarcely anything else in the world but that: to love one another.’ So says Jean Valjean on his deathbed to Marius and Cosette, in Victor Hugo’s great novel *Les Misérables*. It’s a clear re-enactment of this scene in the gospels, as the hero, facing his own death, passes a final, vital instruction onto those closest to him.

Jean Valjean is himself transformed by an act of grace. Arrested for stealing silver from a bishop, the bishops ‘saves’ Jean by declaring that he gave Valjean the silver and even some candlesticks as well. He then urges Valjean to take the second chance he has been offered and use the silver to make a new way in life. Valjean does, but is still relentlessly pursued by Inspector Javert; ultimately, though, he never forgets what he learned from the bishop, as his parting words testify.

It’s a great illustration of our passage for today – and, I think, a useful one, because there’s a risk of complacency. These words of Jesus are so familiar, it’s easy to forget how revolutionary they were at the time. This is a completely new definition of love. The Greek language already had three words: *eros*, meaning physical love; *philia*, meaning a liking kind of love; and *storge*, meaning kindred or family affection. But the early Christians recognised that none of these adequately captured what Jesus meant by love – so, when John came to render Jesus’ Aramaic instruction to his friends into Greek, he used the new word which Christians had invented for love: *agape*.

Agape means humble, selfless service, and the context makes clear why John understood this was the right way to render Jesus’ instruction: Jesus had just washed his friends’ feet, and told them to do likewise. What better illustration of the sort of love to which Jesus was referring?

And, knowing that he was about to leave them, Jesus must have felt a keen sense that he needed to reinforce his most important teaching. The foot-washing example was powerful, but having just been disturbed by Judas’ exit into the night, he realised the lesson needed repeating: ‘As I have loved you, so you must love one another.’

There’s a further reason for his command, too: not just Jesus’ own example, but the credibility of our witness to the world: ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ It’s a healthy reminder that people will notice our lives, and potentially judge our message in the light of them.

As we commit our day to the Lord, may He grant us all grace to treasure His unfailing love in our hearts; and may that empower us thereby to live out this command, as best we can. As we observed a few days ago, we can never pay His love back; but we can pay it forward – today, and every day.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

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Day 118 – John 13:33-38 ‘You cannot follow now’

Today we get to the famous conversation between Jesus and Peter – it’s one that touches most of us deeply, not least because we all know how easy it is to do: to make a bold promise in the heat of the moment, which we can’t deliver on when it really matters.

There’ll be plenty of time to reflect on what happens to Peter later in the gospel story; today, though, let’s think about the effect on Jesus. It’s possible to overlook what a traumatic effect the last few minutes must have been for him: to know that he is about to be let down by two of his closest friends – first Judas, then Peter.

It’s one thing to know that the scriptures must be fulfilled; quite another to experience the personal impact of that: betrayal and cowardice from people you love. And yet, it is very much part of the plan, one which Jesus is fully aware of, and which necessarily involves his complete isolation from his family and friends: (v33) ‘Just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come.’

The effect of this statement was so dramatic that the disciples appear to ignore one of the most famous commands in the whole bible – ‘Love one another’ – to get straight back to what Jesus had just said before that: (v36) ‘Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?”’ Another detail it’s easy to miss! But it testifies to the huge impact Jesus’ words must have had upon them, thundering so loudly into their souls that nothing else, not even life-changing teaching, could be heard.

At this point, Jesus clarifies his first statement a little: (v36) ‘Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.’ The irony is that, if the disciples had really understood what this clarification meant, i.e. the suffering they would experience later, they might not have wanted to ask the question at this point! Peter certainly learned very quickly the harsh reality of what it meant – something which led to Jesus’ famous reply: (v38) ‘Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times!’ Be careful what you wish for, my dear friend Peter.

It’s hard to imagine everything that must have been whizzing through Jesus’ mind at this point. All the more remarkable then, that, in the midst of chaos and despair, he can call them to ‘love one another,’ a love he had modelled to them throughout, and is about to model to its utmost. Praise God that, where he went, we could not follow – for it means our salvation. And as that thought lifts our hearts, so may it also cause us to pray for those who are called to follow the way of the suffering Saviour – may the Lord grant them all grace to do so today, and may the joy of the Lord be their strength.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 119 – John 14:1-3 ‘I will come back’

Many people who would never go near a church will be familiar with this passage – it is a much-loved choice for funerals, and you can see why. In a few short verses, Jesus packs in so many wonderful promises: first, a word of comfort to all who feel in distress – as the disciples must surely have felt, after he has told them he is going away, and that where he is going, they cannot come: (v1) ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled.... believe...in me.’ Jesus is the source of peace for all troubled hearts – a wonderful promise we’ll come back to in a few days’ time.

Next there is the promise that there is plenty of room in heaven: (v2) ‘My Father’s house has many rooms.’ In the old translation, it was ‘mansions,’ but is probably best rendered as ‘dwelling places.’ In keeping with the whole message of his ministry, eternal life through him is available to all – and heaven is big enough to have a home for everyone.

Alongside this, he also reassures his friends that what he is about to do is intimately connected with preparing a place for them in this wonderful new eternal home. At this point, they can’t possibly understand how that might work; but, of course, looking back, they could ‘join the dots’ – as, indeed, can we. Jesus’ death and resurrection ‘opens up the gates of heaven and beckons us in,’ to use the words of a lovely modern song.

But what the disciples most needed to hear at this point is arguably the bit we focus on least – certainly in a traditional funeral service. It’s verse 3: ‘I will come back.’ And not just return to resume life as it is now: ‘I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.’

To grief-stricken friends who have just learned that Jesus is going away, the word they most needed to hear is that this is *not* the end, they will see him again. Or, as the old saying goes, it is not goodbye, but *au revoir*. And when they do see him again, their union will be permanent. From that point, they will always be where Jesus is.

2,000 years later, we still await Jesus’ final ‘coming back’; but the promise remains as true today as it was for the disciples. Jesus has prepared a place for all of us, and he is sure to return and take us to be with him, forever. Much as it’s right to focus on Jesus’ presence with us now – constantly, in this life – it’s good to remind ourselves that this is only part of the good news. There is a final home for all of us, of unspeakable joy, unfathomable peace and inexhaustible love. In the meantime, let’s live every day for the Lord until this glorious future is our eternal reality. Thanks be to God!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 120 – John 14:4-6 ‘The Way, Truth and Life’

The Alpha Course has been the world’s most popular evangelistic course of the last 30 years or so. At last count, approximately 28 million people had attended one, in every kind of church, right across the globe. Its opening session poses the provocative question: ‘Christianity: boring, untrue, irrelevant?’

The answer lies in the famous verse we encounter in this passage. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To those who think that the Christian faith is boring, he is the Life; to those who think it untrue, he is the Truth; and to those who think it is simply irrelevant, he is the Way.

This last great description of Jesus is particularly important: the earliest followers of Jesus were known as ‘followers of the Way’. Before we coined the name Christian or Christianity, it was simply called ‘the Way.’

And what is so revolutionary about this statement of Jesus is that all of this is found directly *in him*. He doesn’t say, ‘this is the way;’ he says ‘I am the Way.’ He doesn’t say, ‘this is the truth,’ but ‘I am the Truth.’ He doesn’t say this is the kind of life God wants, but ‘I am the Life.’ It’s all found in him. It’s not religion at all, really, it’s relationship.

Imagine being the disciples first hearing this. I must confess I feel a bit sorry for them, as Jesus tells them: (v4) ‘You know the way to the place where I am going.’ Knowing what they did at the time, I think I would be asking exactly the same question as Thomas: (v5) ‘how can we know the way?’ We don’t even know where you’re going!

Jesus’ answer is both altogether easier and more mysterious at the same time. On the one hand, he is the Way, so the solution is right there in front of them. On the other, how can a person be the Way? This, of course, is the heart of our good news. Jesus achieves on our behalf what we cannot do for ourselves. When we follow him, all of this is given to us, and thereafter we have the great privilege of being with him, becoming like him, and, ultimately, doing what he did. The Way is Jesus’ very self: his presence, his character, his vision for life.

Today, give thanks that this Way is open to us. And may the Lord grant us all grace to practise the Way, in faith, hope and abiding love.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 121 – John 14:5-11 ‘Seeing the Father’

‘I only wish I could see God – and then I would believe!’ I’m sure many of us have heard this line expressed (or something like it) by people we know and love. They want concrete proof of God’s existence: ‘if only I could see for myself...’

Today’s passage gives us a surprising answer. Humanity *can* see God, and thousands of people *did* see God, here on this earth, albeit many, many years ago. God’s name was – is – Jesus.

‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.’ This is Jesus’ extraordinary reply (v9) to Philip’s question: ‘Lord, show us the Father!’ (v8). It’s an even blunter answer than the one Jesus gave to the crowds a few days previously after his arrival in Jerusalem (12:45). Here, in the intimate setting of the Upper Room with his friends, he is completely open and candid. And, in case they didn’t absorb the message first time, he immediately repeats it: (v10) ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me.’

This is the true response to all our loved ones who long for proof: it is right here, in the life of Jesus. Jesus himself points to two specific categories of evidence to back up his claim. First, his *words*: (v10) ‘The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.’ Jesus taught like no teacher in the whole of human history: before, or since. Such teaching could only be divinely inspired – the words of the Father, living among us.

Second, the *works*: ‘Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.’ Jesus didn’t just preach, he practised what he preached, and confirmed his word with miraculous works – demonstrations of his divinity.

His words and his works – they all point to the Father. We can see God, and his name is Jesus.

This allows us to receive the hard word about no-one coming to the Father except through Jesus (v6). It sounds ‘exclusive’ – but if Jesus is the only true, complete and real manifestation of Almighty God who has ever lived here on earth, then he *must* be the way to the Father. And that Way is big enough, wide enough, to draw all people to himself. People from across the world: different cultures, different backgrounds, and even from different religious worldviews, have found true life, and met the true Lord of all, in Jesus. He is the pinnacle of all religious thought, and the summation of all human searching for meaning. The Way, the Truth and the Life.

As we begin our week, give thanks that we *can* see God, through the pages of scripture and in the depths of our hearts. And may the words and the works of the Son dwell in us, and be manifested through us, today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 122 – John 14:8-14 ‘Whatever you ask in my name’

The annual State Opening of Parliament takes place every year, usually in May. It's an ancient ceremony, when the monarch presents the legislative proposals for the year. As part of the ceremony, once King Charles is seated in the House of Lords, a gentleman known as the Black Rod will go to the House of Commons, where the door is slammed in his face! (Thus signifying the independence of MPs.) At this point, Black Rod invokes the name of the King and invites the MPs to come and listen to the King's Speech. This they do. The door opens and many walk across to the chamber of the House of Lords, in order to listen to the king.

Nowadays it may seem to be a quaint ritual, but the point is: the name of the monarch opens doors. Things happen when the king's name is declared.

And what is true in this world is also true in the world to come. The name of Jesus matters. The name of Jesus opens doors in the heavenly realms.

Names, in fact, are vitally important in biblical theology. One of primary ways that human beings bear the image of God is that they *name* things. One of Adam's first jobs is to name the animals. Thereafter humanity names its offspring – and usually these names convey meaning and purpose. When Moses meets God, he asks God for his name, so that the Israelites' 'door would open' to him. God replies: 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "Yahweh has sent me to you."' (Exodus 3:14) God has a unique name – usually translated 'I am' or 'I am who I am'.

As Jesus is about to leave his disciples, he also wants to remind them of the power of his name. In fact, great as Jesus' works have been, from this point his followers will do even greater things, 'because I am going to the Father' (v12). In other words, Jesus will not be limited by his human body. His Spirit will enable great things to be done by the Body of Christ everywhere, across the world.

These great things will be done *in his name*. And it's quite a promise, isn't it: (v13) 'I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.' Whatever we ask. It sounds too good to be true. And Jesus knows this, which is why he repeats it, immediately: (v14) 'you may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.' *Anything*. Wow!

The key, of course, is that it has to be something which Jesus can put his name to. We can't pray in Jesus' name for things that would harm us or others – because Jesus couldn't put his name to it. That said, there is still a mystery to this. Some of you may feel that you have asked for good things in Jesus' name and they haven't happened. We have to trust that this is because we don't know the whole picture – that Jesus knows about bad outcomes to what seemed like good prayers.

But for all that, it's good not to overthink it. Jesus promises to act, to change situations, to open doors when we pray 'in his name'. Why not take Jesus at his word – what do you want to pray 'in his name' today?

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 123 – John 14:15-17 ‘The Divine Advocate’

I must confess that I love watching legal dramas. There’s something about the intense atmosphere of a courtroom that draws you in. Something too about how truth is disclosed (or avoided), how arguments are massaged and presented, and ultimately, whether justice is served. Although many such dramas nowadays focus large amounts of time away from the courtroom – the preparations, the police interviews with witnesses, the personal lives of the protagonists – the key moment remains that time when the barrister (or advocate, to use another name for the role) gets to her or his feet, rustles their papers and addresses the witness. This is the moment when those of us watching at home sit forward on our chairs and draw a sharp intake of breath...

People need advocates. They need them in the justice system; but there are also other times when we might need them: to fight our corner, to defend those who can’t defend themselves. One of our good friends in London used to attend bankruptcy hearings with those being pursued for debt repayments, and his expert advocacy rescued dozens from destitution. An advocate is the sort of friend we need: full of energy, wise advice, and above all committed to us and our wellbeing.

There are lots of images for the Holy Spirit in the Bible, of which the most popular would be: wind, fire, and water. The dove is also well-known, as shown at Jesus’ baptism or (by implication) in the famous story of Noah. But this passage gives us another unique image, and one which is particularly important because it is given by Jesus himself. How does Jesus describe the Holy Spirit? Here, as our Divine Advocate – in fact he’s so keen we absorb it that he tells his disciples twice – v16 in our passage today, and then again in v26.

Sometimes this word is translated ‘helper’ but that’s a bit cosy, the word is a little more dynamic than that. In the original Greek it’s *parakletos*, which is where traditional churches get the name ‘Paraklete’ to describe the Holy Spirit. (An old minister friend of mine grew up thinking that the priest kept saying ‘parakeet’ and spent his time as a child in church looking for a parrot flying round the building!) It literally means ‘one who comes alongside’.

Hence the modern translation of Advocate. The force of the meaning is of just the sort of good advocate we have described: energetic, wise and committed to us. And, uniquely, this Advocate does not just walk alongside us, but actually dwells in us (v17). The Spirit’s heart speaks directly to ours, if I may put it like that. It is *Jesus himself with us, by his Spirit*.

We often talk in church about whether we’re committed to Jesus. But this passage reminds us that the more important truth is that *Jesus is intensely, eternally, absolutely committed to us*. Just let that sink in for a while... What a thought to kickstart our day! And may the Lord grant us all grace to sense the presence of our loving, divine Advocate, throughout our day. Amen, hallelujah!

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 124 – John 14:15-21 ‘The presence of Jesus’

In our previous reflection, we looked at Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit as the divine Advocate. This is indeed a precious gift which Jesus promised to us – but what does the work of this Advocate look like? We already know that He will not just be with us, but *in* us. This is the presence of Jesus in our lives, abiding with us day by day. But in today’s passage, we get some more detail about what that looks like:

First, the Advocate helps us to know God as Father: (v18) ‘I will not leave you as orphans,’ Jesus promises; ‘I will come to you.’ Later, he reinforces this: (v21) ‘The one who loves me will be loved by my Father.’

We worship a three-dimensional God: Father, Son and Spirit. The Spirit is not just the presence of Son with (and in) us, but also draws us into the love of the Father. Our Advocate is a permanent reminder and encourager that we are God’s children. We have security in our identity.

Second, the Advocate helps us to see Jesus: (v19) ‘Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me.’ If we’re tempted to think that this relates only to Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, Jesus broadens it out to every follower of Jesus in v21: ‘I too will love them and *show myself* to them.’

So, this ‘seeing’ is not physical sight; rather, it is spiritual revelation – we see Jesus’ love in our lives, we have insight into his ways, we are guided to make the right choices. These are all forms of spiritual sight – and they light our darkness.

Finally, the presence of the Advocate brings life: (v19) ‘Because I live, you also will live.’ Jesus is the author of life – so when he sends his Encourager to us, in the form of his Spirit, this imparts life. It’s a given: He can’t do otherwise! The Advocate enables us to enjoy the abundant life which Jesus promises.

Security, sight, abundant life. Perhaps we may not feel any of these things currently – but they are true, and real. Let’s pray for faith to claim them: as children of God, loved by Jesus, filled with his life. This is the work of our divine Advocate/Encourager. May we sense his presence throughout our day.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 125 – John 14:22-26 ‘Loving obedience’

‘But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?’

Judas’ question is a good one, isn’t it? Do certain people get special treatment by God? Wouldn’t it be better to reveal yourself to as many people as possible?

Jesus’ answer makes it clear that this isn’t just favouritism. There is a link between revelation and obedience. Let’s be clear, this is not about earning your way to God’s favour: be really good and get brownie points from God! But Jesus is absolutely right to reflect that our obedience is a good test of our love. And those who love Jesus are naturally going to experience the greatest sense of his presence. Jesus comes where he’s invited: ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock.’ He doesn’t force himself in where he’s not wanted. He always respects our free will, our freedom to choose.

If this is more challenging to hear, there are at least two bits of good news in this passage. The first is that we do this in relationship with Jesus, hand-in-hand with him, if you like: ‘Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.’ It’s a beautiful image, isn’t it? God comes to make his home with us. Just take a moment to let that thought sink in. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are at home with God – right now.

Second, we’re not left to fathom out obedience on our own: ‘The Advocate... will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you.’ The Holy Spirit helps us to see what we need to do. Put these two ideas together and what we learn is that Jesus is not a stern schoolmaster with a beady eye watching our every move, enforcing obedience through fear. He is at home with us, encouraging us into life-giving choices, through the wisdom of his Holy Spirit which dwells in us.

Obedience is still hard. But it’s not impossible. God has made his home with us – filled with his presence, may we have grace to live in joyful obedience today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 126 – John 14:27-31 ‘Peace I leave with you’

This has been a tumultuous fifteen minutes or so for the disciples. Imagine hearing that your best friend is going away – you’ve heard it before, but this time it is said with such conviction that you have to believe it.

In response, Jesus has given them some of the most beautiful and profound encouragement – which keeps on coming in the next three chapters, by the way. But for all that, your overwhelming emotion at this point is anxiety. What will happen after Jesus is gone? How will we manage? What do we need?

As Jesus wraps up this section, he reminds them of the basic truths he has imparted over the conversation to this point: first, he is going, yes, but he is also coming back (v28). Second, the devil is going to have his time, but he has no authority over Jesus – Jesus will triumph (v30). Third, as a result, the world will see Jesus’ obedience (v31). He doesn’t specify directly in this passage what that will mean, but he has done so numerous times already. (Thankfully, we also know the end of this story!)

Ultimately, though, there is one emotion he wants his disciples to know, to experience – the one they most need at present: (v27) ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.’

Do not let your hearts be troubled – it was how Jesus began this chapter; it’s also how he ends it. But to experience this peace, he is very clear that it is not something we can manufacture. It is a gift of grace: ‘I do not give as the world gives.’ Later in his letter to Philippi, St Paul describes this as the peace ‘that transcends understanding.’

Over the years, millions of Christians have known this to be true. By God’s grace, even in the midst of trial, we experience a peace that by rights we shouldn’t have. But we do. It is a wonderful gift.

If you are in a season of trial at the moment, take heart. Pray with faith for this peace – it is not of this world. But it is real, and it is available, through the Holy of Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. May the Lord grant us all the peace that transcends understanding today, and may it guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 127 – John 15:1-2 ‘I am the true vine’

In April 2013 we had a week’s holiday near Toulouse in the South of France. It was bitterly cold – that freak winter which didn’t really end until later in April – and the landscape was striking. Field after field was full of rows of small stumps, hacked down to little over a foot above the ground. Initially we were not sure what they were – then we realised that they were thousands upon thousands of vines.

It seemed almost impossible that these little stumps could produce anything at all; but later in the week we went on a tour of a vineyard and the owner told us that this is what they do every year. To get the best fruit, the vine has to be pared back to practically a stump. But sure enough, come the spring and summer, it grows like crazy and produces beautiful grapes to make fabulous wine. The severe pruning is necessary for growth and health.

This is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today’s passage. It’s an iconic image – one those 7 ‘I am’ statements in John, indeed the very last of them: Jesus as the Vine. In biblical terms, the vineyard is traditionally a picture of Israel – see Isaiah 5:1-7 – here, Jesus co-opts it, to tell his friends that he is the true Vine. Where Old Testament Israel’s vineyard had failed to produce fruit, Jesus promises those who are grafted into his vine will bear much fruit (v5; more on that tomorrow).

And part of this fruit-bearing process is pruning: the spiritual equivalent of what we saw in those fields of vineyards in southern France. The word used for ‘prunes’ here also means ‘cleans’, which helps us to identify the sorts of things Jesus means when he talks about our spiritual lives being ‘pruned’ (cleansed): it’s anything that hinders or blocks our growth as followers of Jesus. That could be distractions, bad habits, wrong attitudes, or secret sins. It could also be things which are not bad in themselves, but act as a sort of ‘worldly security’ which stops us trusting God. It could even be a ‘wilderness’ time – a season when God seems hidden and the spiritual ground seems bare.

The point is that this kind of pruning is not cruel or unnecessary – quite the reverse: (v2) ‘Every branch that does bear fruit [my Father] prunes, so that it will become even more fruitful.’ Pruning is for our long-term health and growth. It is so that we might become even more like Jesus, more fruitful in our faith.

You may feel in need of some ‘pruning’ at the moment; or you may feel that you already are, and you’re not sure if it’s good news or not; or you’ve come out of such a season, thankful you can see its benefits. Wherever you find yourself at present, give thanks that the Lord is our true Vine, and that his purposes are always good and kind – that we might be as fruitful as possible. And pray for grace for yourself or others to embrace whatever pruning we experience, trusting that it is always for our good. The Divine Gardener knows what He’s doing.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 128 – John 15:3-8 ‘Remain in the vine’

Over the winter I've been clearing a lot of dead ivy off the trees in my garden. Ivy is an incredibly efficient plant. It seems to be able to grow at will, usually quickly, and it wraps itself around whatever other objects – be they trees, shrubs, posts or walls – are at hand. But this ivy had all died. Why? The tree surgeon came last summer and cut off the ivy at the roots. Over the winter, all the rootless branches died. Now they can find their way into my green bin!

No matter how healthy or productive the plant, if a branch gets cut off it usually dies. Branches need to remain connected to the main plant to live. This is the image Jesus uses here to describe our spiritual lives: only this time, he is the vine and we are the branches (v5) – ‘If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing.’

It's always tempting to do things our own way, in our own strength. It becomes a particular temptation as we get older and seemingly more mature in the spiritual life. As young apprentices, we knew we needed Rabbi Jesus' help with everything; but as time passes, we can find ourselves forgetting. We start to rely on our historic walk with the Lord, our essential competence as Christians. Maybe we even feel that we should somehow be more self-reliant as we mature in faith.

It's a dangerous temptation. We might be more resilient, yes; but we can never be self-reliant – we remain as God-reliant as ever. Jesus' words are blunt: (vv4-5) we ‘must remain in the vine.... apart from me, you can do nothing.’

The good news is that there is a flip side; if cutting ourselves off from the vine is spiritual death, then remaining in the vine brings life. As the abundant life of the true Vine flows into our ‘branches’, then we bear much fruit – something Jesus is keen to share with his friends, so much so that he repeats it (v5, v8). We can even ask him for anything, ‘and it will be done for you.’ Of course, that presumes that Jesus' words sit deep in our hearts (v7), so that what we ask of Jesus flows naturally out of a life in tune with the divine will. But it's a striking promise nonetheless, which both demonstrates our apprenticeship and brings glory to God (v8).

We often sing the great old hymn ‘Abide with me’ at funerals – the line is taken direct from this passage, where in older translations ‘remain’ is rendered as ‘abide’. And at one level it's a line we can sing at all stages of life; but this image is really meant more for our *lives* than our deaths. We are to abide/remain in Jesus day-by-day, experiencing his life flowing into ours. May that be our reality today – and may the Lord grant us all grace to ‘bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.’ Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 129 – John 15:9-13 ‘No greater love than this’

Some things are so important they need to be repeated. As Jesus talks with his disciples on the night before he dies, he shares deeply about many vital, life-changing things. If you were to read chapters 13-17 in one sitting (or listen, as the disciples did), it's clear that this extraordinary teaching revolves around a few simple themes and commands, which get shared repeatedly in slightly different ways: the presence of Jesus, the gift of the Spirit, boldness in prayer, not to fear the world or the future, and, here, the primacy of love.

Love one another.

Arguably the most basic, foundational command of all. And yet, it's so easy to forget, to overcomplicate. Jesus knows this, he knows our frailty and forgetfulness, so he returns to this theme once more.

He reminds them that love is not an abstract emotion, it is primarily communicated through example: 'Love each other *as I have loved you.*' The disciples have just received an illustration of this with the foot-washing episode – this time, however, Jesus goes further: (v13) 'Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

As we read this famous verse today, we know how the story unfolds from this point; the disciples did not, although they were about to find out. In the next 24 hours they were to see a literal embodiment of this love, as Jesus gave himself for them – and for us – on the cross.

Nowadays we tend to soften this teaching, translating 'laying down our lives' into any form of sacrificial service – which is fine, we can live this command in figurative terms. But it's important not to lose the visceral power of what Jesus is saying, and to remind ourselves that not every Christian gets to interpret this saying figuratively. Today, we can pray for those whose laying down of life is a daily threat, or even reality.

As we absorb the sheer beauty and power of this simple command, let's also remember that this kind of love does not 'come from nowhere' – we receive it from the Lord. The Trinity is a community of love – as Jesus reminds his friends (vv9-10): the Father loves the Son, the Son loves them. To be a follower of Jesus is to be drawn into this eternal community of divine love. This love enables us to be obedient to this command to self-giving love.

As we begin this week, let's open our hearts again to receive this gift of divine love. And may that gift take root and flourish, enabling us to love each other, as Jesus has loved us. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 130 – John 15:12-17 ‘Friends of Jesus’

‘I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.’ (v15)

Just take a moment to let that sink in. The Almighty Creator of the universe calls *you* his friend. No other religious worldview contains this idea. We are servants, subjects, vessels – but not friends.

For followers of Jesus, however, we have this unique, wonderful privilege. It doesn’t happen by accident – it is Jesus’ choice (v16). A choice is an act of will – Jesus *wants* us to be his friends. Do we want to be friends with him? Can we imagine relating to God in that way? I hope so!

This friendship is signified by the extraordinary access we have: ‘everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.’ We can know the mind of God, through the teaching and wisdom of Jesus. He holds nothing back, to those who earnestly seek him. We have the pages of scripture, and the divine Advocate, the Holy Spirit, ‘teaching us all things’ (14:25).

This access is reciprocal: (v16) ‘whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.’ As we observed previously, this promise rests on the assumption that Jesus can put his name to it – something that comes naturally to those who, through Jesus’ teaching, know the divine will.

Finally, this friendship is not just Jesus’ choice, it is Jesus’ purpose: (v16) ‘I... appointed you so that you may go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.’ As we become like our rabbi and friend, we have the kind of transformative impact he had, and still has. Maybe on a smaller scale, but powerful nonetheless.

You are a friend of Jesus. Take a few moments today to reflect on that amazing truth. How will you enjoy this day, sustained by his friendship?

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 131 – John 15:18-25 ‘They hated me first’

In January every year, the charity Open Doors publishes the World Watch List: a list of the 50 countries where persecution of Christians is most severe. If 50 sounds like a large number, bear in mind that the Bible is restricted, banned, or heavily controlled in at least 52 countries. An estimated 400 million Christians live with persecution for their faith.

This makes Christianity the most persecuted faith group in the world, by some distance. However, as today’s passage indicates, this is nothing new. Indeed, it goes right back to Jesus himself. He is soberingly candid about the reality of being his apprentices: (v18, v21) ‘If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.’

In fact, in this passage, Jesus gives two more specific reasons why his followers will face opposition. The first is that he has chosen them out of the world: (v19) ‘If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own... but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.’ It’s much easier to swim with the tide. If we simply follow along with the ways of the world, we can avoid all kinds of difficulties. But this is not the Jesus way.

Second, and leading directly from this first observation, Jesus’ teaching is the flashpoint for opposition: (v20) ‘If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.’ Jesus’ teaching is the greatest wisdom the world has ever known – but it is also a dividing line. People obey it, or refuse it (and even hate it). It shines a light into the darkness, not just in a general sense, but also into the dark corners of our lives and our souls. We can choose to come into the light, or stay in the darkness. (This formed part of the famous discussion with Nicodemus in chapter 3.)

For those who prefer the darkness, not even Jesus’ amazing signs and miracles will sway them (v24). No wonder he quotes the psalms: (v25) ‘They hated me without reason.’

But if it is perverse, it is also real. And many millions of Jesus’ followers pay a daily cost for that. Most of the rest of us may not, but we still face milder forms of marginalisation or ridicule. Today, let’s firstly take heart that Jesus knows and understands: he has walked this way before us, and he has indeed ‘chosen us out of this world.’ Hallelujah! But let’s also pray for our precious sisters and brothers around the world, who have to live this passage as their reality. May they know the true peace of Christ which passes understanding, and may the joy of the Lord be their strength. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 132 – John 15:26-16:7 ‘Testify’

‘Crucify, torture, condemn, crush us. For the proof of our innocence is found in your injustice. It is on this account that God suffers us to suffer this... Yet no cruelty of yours, though each were to exceed the last in its exquisite refinement, profits you in the least; but forms rather an attraction to our sect. We spring up in greater numbers as often as we are mown down by you: *the blood of the Christians is a seed.*’

This famous quote was written by the great church leader and writer Tertullian at the end of the second century, in the face of severe, ongoing persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. It is usually paraphrased as ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’, but it’s worth sharing this longer portion, to set the quote in context. It comes at the end of his long defence of our faith (*Apologeticus* – from where we get the word apologetics), and the details he includes in his text are often harrowing.

It’s a good reminder that Jesus’ words in today’s passage, foretelling the trials that would come to his followers (v2), are not exaggerated. Indeed, the word we translate as ‘witness’ in today’s bibles, is *martus* – from which we also get the word ‘martyr’. Such was the persecution the early Christians faced that the two ideas became synonymous – to witness was to suffer.

And yet, this apparently powerless (in human terms), persecuted group went from 120 souls on the Day of Pentecost, to an estimated 20 million by the time of the Emperor Constantine’s conversion in 312AD. Why? It’s not just the impact of human testimony, although Jesus’ disciples were outstanding in giving courageous voice, just as Jesus commanded (v27).

It is due to another power, a divine power, a strength beyond our strength, one that could only come when Jesus left this earth (v7): the power of the Holy Spirit, who will testify about Jesus (v26). Our divine Advocate is sent by the Father to bear witness to Jesus. Indeed, everything the Holy Spirit does points to Jesus – we’ll look at this in more detail tomorrow.

When we think about the suffering of our sisters and brothers, it naturally fills us with grief (v6). But we are not left on our own. The Holy Spirit has the power to keep us (v1) and anoint us, for the glory of God. Today, let’s give thanks for all martyrs, all who have paid the ultimate cost for their love of the Lord. Truly their sacrifice is the seed of the church. Let’s also pray for all those who witness powerfully in our age, and for our small acts of witness, that they too may testify to the One in whose wonderful name they are done.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 133 – John 16:7-11 ‘Deep conviction’

July 25th 1982. Just a normal Sunday. I went to church with my family, to (what we then called) the Family Service. My Dad was giving the talk, about Jesus meeting Nicodemus in John chapter 3. It was the days of Overhead Projectors (OHPs – remember them?!), and he showed this acetate of a wooden cross. When he got to the text, ‘Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness,’ he overlaid a second acetate with a picture of a snake, which was now wrapped around the cross. Then he completed the verse: ‘so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.’

At this point, he removed the snake and instead placed a third acetate over the cross – this time of Jesus. And suddenly I understood. Jesus had died for *me*. Not just for the world, for me. I was no more or less religiously-minded than most children; the chief attraction of church on Sundays was playing football in the church hall after the service! But at that moment, just before my tenth birthday, I knew something profound had happened. I prayed directly to Jesus, I think perhaps for the first time; and I made a mental note to remember that day, because on that day my life changed.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since then, but I still remember that family service from over forty years ago. And what I experienced is what countless others have through the ages, and what Jesus speaks about in today’s passage. I came under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Conviction is more than just revelation. The modern NIV translation renders it ‘prove the world to be in the wrong,’ but that doesn’t quite cut it either. Conviction is revelation which fundamentally touches our hearts and changes our mind. It compels us to change. What others experience as ‘just words’ seem to be given specifically and directly to us, to transform our lives immediately.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. In particular, the Holy Spirit will convict people in regard to ‘sin and righteousness and judgement’ (v8). If this sounds negative – where’s the love of Jesus, or the peace that comes from knowing him, you might be thinking? – then we should never forget that we need a Saviour. Without sin there’s no grace. Without grace, there’s no gospel, no good news. We only truly understand the love of Jesus when we know what he has saved us from. We only truly know the peace of Jesus when we fully grasp that, because of Jesus, God’s just judgement has been fulfilled and ‘the prince of this world now stands condemned’ (v11). Whatever we face in this life, our future is secure.

I can’t explain why it was that day in 1982 when the Holy Spirit first deeply convicted me. I’m sure people were praying! But this I know – it was real, and true, and good. It’s what the Holy Spirit does, and is still doing, all around the world, every day, every minute. Today, let’s give thanks for our own journeys, those moments of conviction in our lives. And let’s also pray with faith for that same conviction to be at work in those we love, and those we’ll never meet. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 134 – John 16:12-15 ‘Guided into all truth’

When I first came to Christ in 1982, I didn't know very much at all – I wasn't quite ten years old. I had attended church every Sunday (not very enthusiastically, as I admitted yesterday), and all I really knew was that Jesus loved me and died for me. As I write this reflection more than forty years later, I hope I've learned a bit more since then. Not as much as I might have done, no doubt – but some things.

If, after that service, my Dad had tried to help me to understand the Trinity, or different atonement models, or good answers to the question of suffering, or how Jesus related to politics, or a biblical understanding of the environment, or how to help persecuted Christians, or any one of a hundred other things, I wouldn't have had a clue what he was going on about. Jesus loved me and died for me, and that was enough for a nearly-ten year old. (It's still my foundation now!)

Jesus faces a dilemma with his disciples on the night of the last supper. He knows this is his last chance to teach them before he dies, and there's so much he could say, so much he must have desperately wanted to say. But, like all of us, there's only so much they could hear, and even less they could understand. Worst of all, there was probably only a tiny fraction they could actually *bear* (v12). So, when does he stop? What does he leave out?

Today's passage is such a valuable one, because it reminds us that our journey of growth, in faith and understanding, is lifelong. The Holy Spirit will guide us, and continue to guide us, into all the truth (v13). This text is sometimes abused to indicate that there is some sort of 'special knowledge' that comes later, but that is to misunderstand what Jesus is saying. We have what we need in scripture – but it takes us a lifetime to really grasp it. There's always more we can learn, new ways to grow. The supply of Jesus' wisdom never runs out.

What an encouragement! What is God teaching you at the moment? What eternal truth are you being guided into?

There's also a lovely image of God as Trinity in this passage. The Father gives everything to the Son. The Son communicates everything through his Spirit. The Spirit brings glory to the Son. The Son completes the mission of the Father. A community of divine love, blessing the world.

As we close this week, let's continue to trust that the Lord will lead us and guide us, even in these uncertain times. As Minnie Louise Haskins famously wrote: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.' May we, in faith, hope and love, go forth, and finding the Hand of God, tread gladly into not just the night, but also this day, and all that lies ahead.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 135 – John 16:16-24 ‘Your grief will turn to joy’

Lent is traditionally a season of self-denial. Many millions of Christians every year give things up, or make extra sacrifices. Why? Sadly, there is much misunderstanding of Lent’s true purpose. It’s not to earn brownie points with God – as if that would ever work! It is certainly to identify with Christ, in some very small way, on his journey to the cross. However, the other main reason is to increase our gratitude and joy. As we willingly forego things we might have come to see as ‘rights’, we remember again that most of them are privileges, blessings. We choose the path of ‘death’ in order to experience the joy of ‘resurrection.’ Our grief turns to joy.

Something similar is about to be experienced by the disciples in today’s passage. Jesus has already told them he is going away, but only temporarily (13:33, 14:18-19, 14:28), and he repeats this promise at the start of our text: (v16) ‘In a little while you will see me no longer, and then after a little while you will see me.’ He knows that this will cause them pain: (v20) ‘You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices.’

Their pain is partly born of confusion. We know the end of the story: after the cross comes the empty tomb. The disciples did not: (v18) ‘They kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.”’ Jesus has been their whole world for three years; it is impossible to imagine life without him.

This time, then, Jesus is much clearer about the certainty of their reunion: (v22) ‘Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again...’ Not only that, he is more definite about the effect of this reunion: ‘...and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.’

For the disciples, the primary outcome of the resurrection is joy. Sheer joy. Joy which no-one can take away, and which is also complete (v24). It is good for us to be reminded of that, too. The resurrection produces many things: the ultimate proof of Jesus’ divinity; the defeat of death; the Great Commission, followed by the ascension of Jesus to heaven; as well as the subsequent power of Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit. These all require Jesus’ resurrection to be effected, and praise God that they are! But let’s not forget the most simple outcome of all: joy. After the cross, the empty tomb. After death, resurrection. After grief, joy.

‘Your grief will turn to joy.’ Whatever season we are in at the moment, including whatever causes us to grieve, let’s receive again today the gift of resurrection joy. Jesus has defeated death and is with us always. ‘Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.’ Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 136 – John 16:25-33 ‘A time is coming’

And so this special conversation between Jesus and his disciples comes full circle. We began at the start of chapter 13, as the Passover Meal commenced: ‘Jesus knew that the hour had come...’ It is fitting that he concludes this conversation by repeating this phrase: ‘The hour is coming...’ (v25, v32) It’s often translated time, but the word ‘ora’ is the same in both passages.

But what time? What *ora*?

In a continuation of what Jesus said in yesterday’s text, it is a time first of trouble, then of joy. Jesus refers to the trouble last: (v32) ‘A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone.’ Jesus knows that the trials he is shortly to face will terrify the disciples, who will flee.

Yet this is not the end of the story. He will prevail, and once he has risen and sees them again, he will be able to teach them more about the God they will dedicate their lives to serve: (v25-26) ‘A time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name.’ This surely refers to their time together after Jesus’ resurrection, when, as Luke says, ‘he appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.’ (Acts 1:3)

Jesus is particularly keen to emphasise that, once he has risen, we will be able to seek the Lord directly in prayer, and not rely on Jesus to do it for us. Of course, Jesus is always praying for us – but the amazing promise here is that we are not somehow dependent on Jesus persuading his Father on our behalf – God the Father will be listening to us personally, a divine Parent who ‘loves you because you have loved me’ (v27).

There is one last great promise in this text, which concludes one of the greatest conversations ever to have taken place in human history: (v33) ‘I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’

Life is challenging. But Jesus has overcome! So we take heart, and can know peace.

What a summary of our journey of faith. And a good basis for our prayers today, or any day, which we can pray direct to our heavenly Father, just as Jesus encouraged. May the Lord grant us all grace to turn our troubles to him, to trust in his victory, and to find hope and peace in the loving arms of our Lord. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 137 – John 17:1-5 ‘Glorify your Son’

To read John 17 is to stand on holy ground. All scripture is God-breathed, of course, but when we read this chapter, we get a glimpse into the heavenly throne room, as the divine Son shares intimately with the heavenly Father. Imagine being John, listening to Jesus offering this remarkable prayer. No wonders he remembers it word-for-word decades later. It’s not a prayer any of us would be likely to forget.

After the Lord’s Prayer, this is probably the second most well-known prayer in the bible – and if the Lord’s Prayer was powerfully simple and direct, what is known as Jesus’ ‘High Priestly Prayer’ is gloriously deep and profound.

Gloriously being the operative word. The prayer begins with no less than five references to ‘glorify’ or ‘glory’. The word ‘glory’ in the bible literally means ‘weight’. It is the manifest, tangible presence of God. When this presence made itself known in the Old Testament, it was experienced as a literal weight: people fell on their faces in awe and wonder (see, for example, Leviticus 9:23-24).

As time went on, this sense of weight attached to ‘glory’ broadened into a more general sense of honour that is due to the Lord when his manifest presence is made known. This is how we use the word today – albeit not necessarily in reference to God – and this is how Jesus uses it here. As he faces the cross, the literal presence of God will be made manifest in the most extraordinary and powerful way. The world will see it as disgrace; but the Father and the Son see it as honour, as glory: (v1) ‘Father the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.’

Jesus has all the authority in the universe (v2). The incredible thing, as we observed before, is that this authority is demonstrated through the cross – what appears to be a terrible defeat is in fact the greatest victory. A victory that brings life to all who will receive it (v3).

In the coming days, we’ll see how Jesus prays for his friends, for the church and for the world. But today, he begins with his Father. He is about to complete the work the Father gave to him (v4); now he looks forward to once again enjoying the glory of heaven in the presence of his Father (v5). It’s not long now, and the thought of it must have sustained him through the trials to come.

Jesus is glorious. A glory revealed through the incarnation, the miracles, the teaching, the cross, the resurrection and the ascension. Those that lived with him got regular glimpses of that glory. By the Spirit, may the Lord grant us grace, too, to see just how glorious he is. And may that glory fill our hearts and our lives today.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 138 – John 17:6-10 ‘Yours’

Letter writing is increasingly a lost art. In our modern world of phones and computers, we use texts and emails, or don't use words at all, substituting them for pictures and emojis. Those of us old enough to remember the days when the letter formed a major part of our communication would have learned a set of protocols, particularly with regard to how we ended a letter. 'Yours sincerely' if the person was named, 'yours faithfully' if the addressee was unnamed ('Dear Sir/Madam'). These in themselves are effectively shorthand: go back further in time, and the sign-off was often far more florid. If you enjoy a good Victorian novel, you'll often find sign-offs like: 'Believe me, sir, that I remain humbly and affectionately yours...' – or *somesuch!*

In our consumer world, where possession is considered an absolute, we are uncomfortable with images of ownership. What does it mean when we tell someone we are 'theirs' – even in a letter? It is good to remind ourselves that scripture takes a far more positive view. As we see in today's passage, the idea of mutual dependence is rooted in the very personhood of God himself. The Father and the Son belong to each other, as Jesus prays: (v10) 'All I have is yours, and all you have is mine.' You could say that every communication between them is 'yours faithfully'.

One of the great blessings of following Jesus is that we, too, are drawn into this community of mutual dependence, invited to be 'faithfully yours'. This is an ongoing privilege: Jesus prays for his friends, noting to his Father that 'they *were* yours' (v6), and also that 'they *are* yours' (v9). We can abide continually and eternally in this divine community of love; an abiding which brings glory to Jesus (v10).

What is our response to this extraordinary invitation? To believe in Jesus and his mission (v8) and to obey the word of God (v6). Believe and obey – not out of coercion or fear, but in hope and love.

And what Jesus declares is what can declare also. All we have is God's; and amazingly, all God has is ours: 'praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.' (Ephesians 1:3)

May the Lord grant us all grace to be 'faithfully and sincerely his' today – believing, obeying and abiding. And may that divine life flow out through us and into the lives of those we love and those we meet, that we may be 'faithfully theirs' too, for Jesus' glory. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 139 – John 17:11-19 ‘Not of the world’

In the world, but not of it. That brief summary – taken directly from vv15-16 in today’s passage – is a great way to understand our lives as followers of Jesus. We do not withdraw from society – we live out our faith where we are, among the people God has brought us alongside. At the same time, we have a dual citizenship: we are not just citizens of this world, we are also citizens of heaven – we serve a different Lord, a higher calling. We are no longer *of* this world.

It’s a hard balance to strike. Too much ‘in’, and our lives may look indistinguishable from everyone else’s; not enough ‘in’, and we become a holy huddle, insulating ourselves from the full impact we might have as Jesus’ followers, in a world which desperately needs his good news.

This dual citizenship is a spiritual fact (see, for example Ephesians 2:6-7), but also a challenge; it’s one reason why not everyone likes Christians (v14). Our lives attract many, and repel others. So, Jesus prays for his followers in this glorious text that we might be protected, by the power of God’s mighty name (v11). It’s a prayer focused specifically on his friends, but equally applicable to us as well.

And the prayer for protection has two dimensions: first for protection from the evil one (v15). It’s important to notice that Jesus doesn’t pray that we are taken out of the world – we continue to live out our real faith in our real, everyday life; rather, in this very life, he prays that we might be protected from spiritual attack. It’s a theme he’s addressed before, famously in the last line of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘deliver us from the evil one.’ It’s something many of us pray every day, and here Jesus testifies to its importance. The spiritual battle is real, and Jesus has won the war – but there are still skirmishes. Hence we pray for protection, in the name of Jesus.

It’s not just protection *from*, though – it’s also protection *for*: for unity: (v11) ‘protect them by the power of your name... that they may be one as we are one.’ We’ll return to this theme in more detail tomorrow, but it’s worth observing that, by praying in these terms, Jesus himself is testifying that the unity of the church is one of the great spiritual battlegrounds of history. Complete unity lies at the heart of the Godhead (‘as we are one’), so it must be at the heart of our calling as Jesus’ body, the Church, since we reflect the image of God. Our chronic dividedness is not just a practical obstacle but a sign of spiritual defeat – food for thought!

Jesus closes this part of the prayer with a lovely intercession: (v17) ‘Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.’ Sanctification – becoming holy – is a key element in our protection. And God’s word is intrinsic to that process of becoming holy. As we engage with these reflections day-by-day, it’s heartening to observe that immersing ourselves in God’s powerful word is helping us to become holy i.e. clean, set apart. May the Lord work his powerful word in us today. And may our precious Lord Jesus protect us by the power of his name – from evil, and for unity. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 140 – John 17:20-23 ‘That the world may believe’

Many years ago, I lived in a small town, which was blessed with numerous churches. In particular, there were three of the same denomination along the main street: one as you entered the town, one in the middle and one half a mile further along at the far end. It looked like effective mission had taken place – I later learned that the original one had divided over a theological issue and half of the congregation had moved up the road. Some years later, it happened again. A friend of mine who is a minister in that denomination joked with me recently: ‘We don’t plant churches; we just split them!’

Thankfully we worship a God who is able to redeem all things, even our flaws and foibles. Yet, it is a sad reflection of our capacity as humans to divide, to keep re-enacting the ‘curse of Babel’ in generation after generation. This is not God’s plan! In fact, quite the reverse: at the heart of the gospel is the recreation of a new, united humanity – ‘one, as God is one’ (v22). God is not just saving individuals, but a global community of people.

Yesterday we noted this striking prayer of Jesus that we would be protected, *for* unity; division is a sign of spiritual weakness, of not being fully whole in Christ. Today, Jesus takes that line of thinking further – unity is fundamental to our credibility in our mission to the world: (v21) ‘that the world may believe that you have sent me.’

This prayer is so important, Jesus actually prays it twice: (v23) ‘that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.’

Our unity as believers is not a nice add-on, or a sentimental hippy dream, it lies at the core of the gospel, and of our mission. We are to be one, as God is one – and as we reflect that intrinsic oneness, so people can grasp a vision of something better for this world: an interdependent community of truly selfless love and service, not riven by petty factions and rivalries, or by ‘us and them’ language and lifestyle. We are the body of Christ!

I thank God that the churches in our team try to reflect this unity, with many cultures and every generation represented. We have also seen that many people have joined us precisely because of this loving diversity. In other words, it really works! Just as Jesus prayed.

Today, let’s give thanks for all church communities who practise this kind of unity. Let’s also keep praying for deeper unity, that the more of the world might know that our heavenly Father sent Jesus, and loves them, even as he loves Jesus. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of John (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as 8 mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-10 / 11-12 / 13-14 / 15-17

Day 141 – John 17:24-26 ‘To be with me’

To be with Jesus. That’s the whole ball game, isn’t it? It’s what God made us for, it’s what was disrupted by the Fall (‘where are you?’), it’s what the prophets looked forward to (‘I myself will tend my sheep’), it’s what Jesus put at the heart of his relationship with his early followers: ‘that they might be with him’ (Mark 3:14).

And it’s where Jesus ends his remarkable prayer today: (v24) ‘Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.’

To be with Jesus. The means *and* the goal of the Christian life.

It’s a golden thread which runs throughout these amazing chapters (13-17) we’ve spent the last few weeks looking at. Jesus is leaving this world soon, and his ultimate plan is that we would be united with him eternally. That will finally be in heaven; until then, he sends his Spirit, his abiding presence, ‘that I myself may be in them’ (v26). This Spirit will empower us to live in the continual flow of the divine love which permeates the Trinity; in other words, ‘that the love you have for me may be in them’ (also v26). To be filled with the Spirit of Jesus is to be filled with his selfless, life-giving love: hence, at the end of his prayer, Jesus treats these two things as interchangeable.

To be with Jesus also leads to one other thing, another of the golden threads that run through this text: we will see his glory. In these last chapters, Jesus’ glory is supremely manifested through the cross. Here, however, Jesus is looking forward to his heavenly glory, ‘the glory you have given me before the creation of the world’ (v24). The first leads to the second: the cross to the crown.

Our destiny is laid out here in the simplest, but also the most beautiful, terms: to be with Jesus, and to see his glory. It’s a destiny we know in part, day by day, here in this world; it’s one we will know in full in the world to come.

As we draw this latest series in these wonderful chapters of John’s gospel to a close, let’s give thanks for the certainty of our future hope. And let’s also pray that this day, this week, this season, we would be with Jesus, and see his glory, maybe even in unexpected ways. Amen.