

# starters for Sunday

## **Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**6 July 2014**

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Tom Gordon, Retired Chaplain of Marie Curie Hospice, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

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## Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

### [Genesis 24: 34 - 38, 42 - 49, 58 - 67](#)

To make it easier to follow the explorations of this passage as they unfold below – especially with some sections of the chapter omitted - it is laid out here in its complete form (New International Version – UK).

<sup>34</sup> So he said, 'I am Abraham's servant. <sup>35</sup> The LORD has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys. <sup>36</sup> My master's wife Sarah has borne him a son in her old age, and he has given him everything he owns. <sup>37</sup> And my master made me swear an oath, and said, "You must not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live, <sup>38</sup> but go to my father's family and to my own clan, and get a wife for my son."

<sup>42</sup> 'When I came to the spring today, I said, "LORD, God of my master Abraham, if you will, please grant success to the journey on which I have come. <sup>43</sup> See, I am standing beside this spring. If a young woman comes out to draw water and I say to her, 'Please let me drink a little water from your jar,' <sup>44</sup> and if she says to me, 'Drink, and I'll draw water for your camels too,' let her be the one the LORD has chosen for my master's son." <sup>45</sup> 'Before I finished praying in my heart, Rebekah came out, with her jar on her shoulder. She went down to the spring and drew water, and I said to her, "Please give me a drink." <sup>46</sup> 'She quickly lowered her jar from her shoulder and said, "Drink, and I'll water your camels too." So I drank, and she watered the camels also. <sup>47</sup> 'I asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" 'She said, "The daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor, whom Milkah bore to him." 'Then I put the ring in her nose and the bracelets on her arms,

<sup>48</sup> and I bowed down and worshipped the LORD. I praised the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me on the right road to get the granddaughter of my master's brother for his son. <sup>49</sup> Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn.'



<sup>58</sup> So they called Rebekah and asked her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ ‘I will go,’ she said. <sup>59</sup> So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way, along with her nurse and Abraham’s servant and his men. <sup>60</sup> And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, ‘Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies.’ <sup>61</sup> Then Rebekah and her attendants got ready and mounted the camels and went back with the man. So the servant took Rebekah and left. <sup>62</sup> Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. <sup>63</sup> He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. <sup>64</sup> Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel <sup>65</sup> and asked the servant, ‘Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?’ ‘He is my master,’ the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself. <sup>66</sup> Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. <sup>67</sup> Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

## **Genesis 24**

Background to the early part of the chapter. It will be useful to have the background to the full chapter in order to understand the context of the reading.

This chapter is about a romance. It is a romance of human love, and shows how two people can ‘live happily ever after’ when they fall in love and their relationship works out. But it is also a spiritual romance, in which a faithful servant trusts in God and knows God’s guiding hand down to the smallest detail.

‘Abraham was now old and well advanced in years’, probably around 140, which makes Isaac about 40 years old. Abraham knows his son will have to get married, and he wants this to happen before he dies. He has seen enough moral decadence in Canaan to know that for Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman would be a disaster. Rev John Schultz suggests:

If we are correct in the assumption that Lot had married a girl from that land and Abraham had heard what happened to Lot after the destruction of Sodom, Abraham must have had ample reason for his decision.

[www.bible-commentaries.com/source/johnschultz/genesis/24.html](http://www.bible-commentaries.com/source/johnschultz/genesis/24.html)



The custom of the time laid a responsibility on a father's shoulders to ensure that his son married well. Abraham, therefore, has to act – promptly and well. So he calls his trusted servant, 'Eliezer of Damascus.' Eliezer has been head-servant for over 60 years and Abraham has complete confidence in him. They both have a deep trust in the ways of God.

Eliezer is given an important task by Abraham and has to take an oath. This is accompanied by a rather unusual act: the laying of his hand under Abraham's thigh. According to one school of thought the place euphemistically indicates the male organ. But, for me, this incident adds little to our overall understanding of the events though others may take a different view. (The only other place in Scripture where we find this gesture accompanying an oath is in Genesis 47:29, where Jacob requests Joseph to do the same.) Eliezer has to get a wife for Isaac from Abraham's family living in Aram Naharim (Mesopotamia). There should be no problem finding a woman who wants to marry a rich man, but whether she would be willing to leave her country and her family is another matter. Eliezer is wise enough to know what lay at the heart of a good marriage. He also knows that under no condition should Isaac be enticed to return to the place from which his father was delivered. John Shultz (*op cit*) puts it this way:

*Abraham had an experience Isaac had not had. Isaac was 'a second generation Christian'. He lacked the experience of being brought out of darkness into God's light. The faith of his parents has profoundly influenced him, and he must have come to a place of personal faith and surrender because he did give himself without any obvious struggle to become a sacrifice himself. But he never knew the horrors of idolatry firsthand as his father had. Canaan was full of idol worship, probably more so than Haran. But Abraham lived here as a stranger, and it was not difficult to distance himself. In Haran their own family practiced idolatry. For Abraham his leaving his country, his people and his father's household had been final. It had been a way of no return. It is very important to burn your bridges behind you when following the Lord.*

Was Abraham conscious of the fact that Isaac was to be the one through whom the Messiah was to come who would be the blessing for the whole earth? If so, then the choice of a wife had to be put against the background of this promise. The line would have to be kept pure. Abraham was learning to leave things in the hands of God. He had learned this lesson when he put Isaac on the altar and took up the knife to kill him. So here, too, he foresees the possibility that Isaac



will not marry the way Abraham had planned it; and he keeps the possibility open for Eliezer to be free from his oath – another act of faith.

So Eliezer (v9) swears the oath. He sets out for Aram Naharaim. The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible says this:

*Aram of the Rivers - referring either to the Euphrates and Tigris, or, more probably, to the Euphrates and Khabur. It is commonly believed that in this region Paddan-Aram, was situated. (Genesis 28:5; 24:10). This is the Aram where the Patriarchs dwelt before they went to Canaan, where the ancient cities of Haran and Nisibis stood, where later Edessa, the noted seat of Syrian culture, arose; the Aram which the Hebrews speak of as, 'Beyond the River' (II Samuel 10:16).*

Eliezer stops at the outskirts of the town of Nahor at the well where the women come to draw water late in the afternoon after the heat of the day. And he prays (vv 12-15). We don't know if Eliezer was in the habit of praying, because he doesn't address God as his personal God but as the God of his master Abraham. But his prayer is very practical and to the point. He wants God to show kindness to Abraham, not necessarily to himself. And he gets more than he asks for. 'May it be that when I say to a girl, "Please let down your jar that I may have a drink," and she says, "Drink, and I'll water your camels too" - let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.' (v14).

Clearly Eliezer believes in the divine purpose of this trip, and, so, he expects an immediate answer. He is not disappointed. His prayer is answered. Enter Rebekah, a most beautiful girl, who fulfils all the requirements of the prayer. She gives a drink to Eliezer and then waters the camels. Without saying a word, Eliezer watches her closely. Has the LORD made his journey successful (v21)? Is this too good to be true? When Rebekah is done, Eliezer produces his first gifts: a golden nose ring and two bracelets, the weights of which are given as 'beka' and 'ten shekels' – expensive gifts. Only then Eliezer finds out that he is talking to Isaac's niece, the grand-daughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. This brings him to an act of worship. The prayer he utters was probably and audible one, in contrast to the one prior to Rebekah's arrival. 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and



faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey to the house of my master's relatives.' (v27)

Rebekah runs home and tells her mother, and soon the men find out too. And Laban, Rebekah's brother - who was most likely the interested party in any bride price-deal - hurries to the place where Rebekah met Eliezer (encouraged by the sight of the nose ring and the bracelets?) As later chapters unfold we find that Laban is a cunning schemer. But here he appears very accommodating and gracious. Hospitality was a common virtue in those days. Even without the expensive gifts Eliezer would not have had trouble finding a place to stay overnight. But the fact that he is connected to the family gives considerable weight to the matter. They have to take him in. How conscientious a man Eliezer is we see from his refusal to eat before he has discharged his commission. His priorities are spiritual, and he knows that nothing can detract so much from things that have spiritual importance as food and comfort.

### [Genesis 24: 34 - 38](#)

Probably for the first time Laban and Bethuel hear about Abraham's circumstances. Eliezer starts out by briefly sketching Abraham's wealth in (v35). Isaac's miraculous birth is mentioned (v36). And then Eliezer tells the story of his oath (v37), emphasising the willingness of Isaac's bride-to-be to come and live in Canaan.

### [Genesis 24: 42 - 49](#)

He then unfolds the story of his prayer and God's response in giving him Rebekah. The repetition of what happened at the well shows there is a spiritual part to everything.

### [Genesis 24: 58 - 61](#)

When Eliezer receives the formal consent of the family for the wedding he makes an eloquent gesture of worship by bowing down in a wordless prayer (too overwhelmed for words?) So Rebekah gives herself – willingly – to the marriage arrangement. She is not left out of the decision-making. Her immediate consent leaves no doubt about her feelings. So she goes with Eliezer. 'So they sent their sister Rebekah on her way' (v59), and she goes with this beautiful blessing:



*Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies.*

The next thing we know is that the caravan arrives at Beer Lahai Roi (v62). This was the name Hagar gave to the place where she met the Lord the first time, when she fled from Sarah some fifty or more years before. Abraham has moved out of the picture at this point, so this is the beginning of Isaac's story. He appears a quiet, reflective man (v63), going out in the field in the evening to meditate.

### [Genesis 24: 62 - 67](#)

So to the climax of the story. 'And as [Isaac] looked up, he saw camels approaching' (v63) and 'Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac.' (v64) They are too far off for their eyes to meet, but the chemistry seems to reveal itself already. The attraction is there. Rebekah does the cultural thing. When she finds out who the man is who is approaching she puts on her veil (v65). Isaac is not supposed to see her until they are married. Eliezer tells Isaac what he has done to fulfil his oath (v66). He knows the hand of God is in Rebekah's coming to Canaan. 'Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah' (v67) (which meant that she was put in the position that Sarah had occupied; she became the mistress of the house) and he married Rebekah.' (This probably refers to the ceremony that took place; there was an official wedding). 'So she became his wife,' (the honeymoon – the consummation of the marriage) 'and he loved her' (the deep and lasting emotional involvement).

### **Some lessons from the passage**

- The last sentence of the reading offers a deep insight into human nature. Marriage, as with all relationships, has a human dimension, but true love is a gift from God.
- The story of Eliezer's search for a bride for Isaac is a spiritual one. The story can be seen as an image of the Holy Spirit's searching for a bride of Christ.
- If Isaac had not married Rebekah, Christ would not have been born into this world. Their romance has a key place in God's plan of redemption.



## An interesting critique

Bob Deffinbaugh offers us this critique of this passage. (For convenience I include his reflections here in full, but they can also be found at: <https://bible.org/seriespage/how-find-godly-wife-genesis-241-67>).

Ann Landers received a letter from a reader that went like this:

*Dear Ann Landers:*

*Why would any husband adore a lazy, messy, addlebrained wife? Her house looks as if they'd moved in yesterday. She never cooks a meal. Everything is in cans or frozen. Her kids eat sent-in food. Yet this slob's husband treats her like a Dresden doll. He calls her "Popsie" and "Pet," and covers the telephone with a blanket when he goes to work so she can get her rest. On weekends he does the laundry and the marketing.*

*I get up at 6 a.m. and fix my husband's breakfast. I make his shirts because the ones in the stores "don't fit right." If my husband ever emptied a wastebasket, I'd faint. Once when I phoned him at work and asked him to pick up a loaf of bread on his way home, he swore at me for five minutes. The more you do for a man, the less he appreciates you. I feel like an unpaid housekeeper, not a wife. What goes on anyway?*

*The Moose (That's what he calls me.)*

Ann's response is classic. She responded:

*A marriage license is not a guarantee that the marriage is going to work, any more than a fishing license assures that you'll catch fish. It merely gives you the legal right to try. (Ann Landers, Men vs. Women - and Vice Versa Reader's Digest, March 69, p. 59.)*

I share this bit of sage wisdom with you because it surfaces a very pertinent caution as we approach Genesis 24. We all know that this chapter, the longest in the book of Genesis, is devoted to a description of the process of finding a wife for Isaac. Finding the right woman is absolutely essential. But as important as this is, finding the right person does not insure a godly marriage. As Ann Landers put it, "It only gives us the right to try."

Excessive emphasis on finding the right wife or husband can have some disastrous effects for those already married. It is possible for someone to conclude that they have married the wrong



person. I know of one well-known preacher who strongly implies that if you have not married the right person, you should get a divorce and try again.

We who are married need to study this passage for what it teaches us on the subject of servanthood and seeking the will of God. When it comes to the subject of marriage, there is much here to instruct us as parents who wish to prepare our children for marriage. But so far as our own partners are concerned, we need to place far more emphasis upon the matter of being the right partner rather than upon finding the right partner. The thrust of our study, then, will be to study the search for Isaac's wife within its cultural and historical setting and then to look into the implications of this passage for servanthood, seeking God's will, and marriage.

First and foremost, Abraham's actions were based upon revelation. God had promised to make Abraham a great nation and to bless all nations through him. It was not difficult to conclude that Abraham's son must himself marry and bear children. Thus, while not a specific command, it was the will of God for Isaac to marry. Furthermore, it was determined that Isaac must remain in the land of Canaan. God had promised "this land" (v7) to Abraham and his offspring.

In addition, Abraham instructed his servant to seek out a wife for his son with the assurance that God would give divine guidance. "His angel" would be sent on ahead to prepare the way for the servant. Abraham thus acted upon revelation he had previously received, assured that additional guidance would be granted when needed. His faith was not presumption, however, for he allowed for the possibility that this mission might not be God's means of securing a godly wife for Isaac: "... But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there"

What a wonderful example of faith in God as One Who guides His people. Abraham sent his servant, assured that God had led by His Word. Abraham sought a wife for his son, assured that God had prepared the way and would make that way clear. Abraham also allowed for the fact that God might not provide a wife in the way he had planned to procure her and thus made allowance for divine intervention in some other way. Genesis 24 is a chapter that is rich in lessons for our lives, but I would like to focus upon three avenues of truth contained in our text: Servanthood, Guidance, and Marriage.



## Servanthood

Some have seen in Genesis 24 a type of the Trinity. Abraham is a type of the Father, Isaac of the Son, and the servant of the Holy Spirit. While this may be a good devotional thought, it does not seem to me to be the heart of the message for Christians today. Also, the analogy seems to break down frequently.

Rather than seeing him as a type of the Spirit, I see the servant as a model for every Christian, for servanthood is one of the fundamental characteristics of Christian service:

“But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44).

The servant of Abraham was marked by his eager obedience and his attention to the instructions given him. He diligently pursued his task, not eating or resting until it was completed. There was a sense of urgency, perhaps a realization that his master believed there might not be much time left. At least he was convinced that his master felt the matter was one of urgency. The servant’s diplomacy was evident in his dealings with Rebekah and her relatives. Perhaps the two most striking features of this servant are his wisdom and devotion. Abraham had obviously given this man great authority, for he was in control of all he possessed (24:2). In this task he was also given a great deal of freedom to use his own discretion in finding a godly wife. Only two lines of boundary were drawn: he could not take a wife from the Canaanites, and he could not take Isaac back to Mesopotamia. The plan which the servant devised to determine the character of the women at the spring was a masterpiece.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all was his devotion to his master and to his master’s Master. Prayer and worship marked this man out as being head and shoulders above his peers. He was a man with a personal trust in God and who gave God the glory. This godly servant leaves us with an example in servanthood surpassed only by the “suffering servant,” the Messiah, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

## Guidance

Most of us have already found the mate for our married lives. As a result we should consider this passage in the broader context of the guidance which God gives to His children. Perhaps no Old



Testament passage illustrates the guiding hand of God as well as this portion in the book of Genesis.

First, we see that God directs men to get under way through the Scriptures. Nowhere is Abraham given a direct imperative to seek a wife for his son, but he does act on the basis of a clear inference from revelation. Abraham was to become a mighty nation through his son Isaac. Obviously Isaac must have children, and this necessitated a wife. Since his offspring would need to be faithful to God and to keep His covenant (cf. 18:19), the wife would need to be a godly woman. This implied that she could not be a Canaanite. Also, since God had promised “this land,” Isaac must not return to Mesopotamia.

Second, we see that God guides His children once under way by “his angel” (24:7). I believe that all true Christians are led by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14). He prepares the way for us to walk in His will and to sense His leading. We must proceed in faith just as Abraham did, knowing that God does guide.

Third, the will of God was discerned through prayer. The servant submitted a plan to God whereby the woman who was to be Isaac’s wife would become evident. This was no fleece but rather a test of character. The servant could thereby determine the character of the women he would meet. God providentially (through circumstances) brought the right woman to the servant, and by her generous act of watering the camels she evidenced that she was His choice for Isaac’s wife.

Finally, the will of God was discerned through wisdom. No doubt Abraham sent this servant, his oldest and most trusted employee, because of his discernment. He obediently went to the “city of Nahor” and stationed himself beside the well where all the women of the city must come daily. Humbly he prayed for guidance, but wisely he proposed a plan which would test the character of the women he would encounter. There was no spectacular revelation, nor did there need to be. Wisdom could discern a woman of great worth.

## **Marriage**

For those of us who are not married or who are and have children who must face this choice, a number of principles undergird this story of the selection of a godly wife for Isaac.



**First, a godly mate should be sought only when it is certain that marriage will achieve the purposes God has for our lives.**

Isaac needed a wife because he must become a husband and father to fulfill his part in the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant. While it is the norm for men to marry, let us not forget that the Bible informs us that it is sometimes God's purpose to keep some of His servants single (I Corinthians 7:8-24). Marriage should only be sought for those who will achieve God's purpose by having a mate and, perhaps, a family.

**Second, if we would have a godly mate we must wait for God's time.**

How often I have witnessed men and women marrying hastily, fearing that the time for marriage was quickly passing them by. They married those who were unbelievers or uncommitted because they concluded that anyone was better than no one. Isaac was 40 years old when he married. By some standards that was about 10 years late (cf. Genesis 11:14,18,22). It is well worth waiting for the mate of God's choice.

**Third, if we would have a godly mate we must look in the right place.**

Abraham instructed his servant not to look for a wife among the Canaanites. He knew that his relatives feared God and that their offspring would share a common faith. That is where the servant went to look, no matter if it were many dusty miles distant.

I do not know why Christians think they will find a godly mate in a singles bar or some other such place. I do not fault any Christian for attending a Christian college or attending a church group with the hope of finding a marriage partner there. If we wish a godly mate, let us look where godly Christians should be. If God does not provide one in this way, He can certainly do so in His own sovereign way.

**Fourth, if you would have a godly mate you must seek godly qualities.**

I notice that Abraham's servant did not evaluate Rebekah on the basis of her physical appearance. If he had she would have passed with flying colours (cf. 24:16). To the servant beauty was a desirable thing, but it was not fundamental. The woman he sought must be one who trusted in the God of Abraham and who had maintained sexual purity. Fundamentally, she must be a woman who manifested Christian character as reflected in her response to the request for water. This servant knew from experience and wisdom the qualities which are most



important to a successful marriage. Just being a woman who believed in the God of Abraham was not sufficient. Just because one is a Christian does not make them a good candidate for marriage.

**Fifth, he who would find a godly mate should be willing to heed the counsel of older and wiser Christians.**

Do you notice how little Isaac had to do with the process of finding a wife? Isaac, if left to himself, may never have found Rebekah. The first pretty girl or the first woman to profess a faith in God might have seemed adequate. The servant was unwilling to settle for second rate. Not only were Abraham and his servant a part of the process, but Rebekah's family also had to be convinced of God's leading. Anyone who fails to heed the counsel of godly Christians who are older and wiser is on the path to heartache.

**Finally, he who would have a godly mate must be willing to put emotional feelings last. Look again with me at verse 67:**

Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death (Genesis 24:67).

Do you notice that love came last, not first, in this chapter? Isaac learned to love his wife in time. Love came after marriage, not before it. That leads me to a principle which many Christian counsellors often stress: ROMANTIC LOVE IS NEVER THE BASIS FOR MARRIAGE—MARRIAGE IS THE BASIS FOR ROMANTIC LOVE.

Here we see a good reason for a Christian making the decision never to date an unbeliever. A Christian should carefully screen any person before he or she would even consider going out on a date with them. Dating frequently leads to emotional involvement and physical attraction. Romantic love is a wonderful emotional feeling, but it will never sustain a marriage. Do not put yourself in a situation where romantic love can grow until you are certain that you want it to grow. Everything in our culture runs contrary to this principle. Romantic feelings are exploited by Madison Avenue and are continually set before us in an exciting light on the television screen. Love is a wonderful thing, a gift from God, but let love come last, not first, if we would find a godly mate.



I believe that God has a special person chosen from eternity past as a mate for those for whom He has purposed marriage. I believe that God will surely guide us to that mate by using Scripture, prayer, counsel, wisdom, and providential intervention. I believe that we will be able to recognize this person, convinced most of all by the fact that they have manifested a godly character. May God help us to encourage our children and our friends to trust God and obey Him in the selection of a mate. For those of us who are married, may God enable us to be the godly mate that His Word says we should be.

### [Matthew 11: 16 - 19, 25 - 30](#)

The 'contrary' nature of humanity. (Matthew 11:16-19)

Professor William Barclay in his commentary on this passage (Gospel of St Mathew, Volume 2, 'Daily Study Bible') says:

*Jesus was saddened by the sheer perversity of human nature. To him [people] seemed to be like children playing in the village square. One group said to the other, "Come on, let us play at weddings," and the others said, "We don't feel like being happy today." Then the first group said, "All right; come on, and let's play at funerals," and the others said, "We don't feel like being sad today." They were what the Scots call contrary [phonetically it is pronounced as con-tray-ree]. No matter what was suggested, they did not want to do it; and no matter what was offered, they could find a fault in it.*

Taking this contrary theme further (the word perverse offers a similar insight) Jesus is at pains to point out that the people are not happy, no matter what obvious goodness is placed in front of them. John the Baptist is an ascetic, living in the desert, separating himself from all that had the potential to tempt or corrupt him, anything that would make him deviate from his true path of devotion and holiness. He fasted and lived in isolation in order to preserve his purity. 'He's a demon,' the people said. 'He must be mad to cut himself off from all that we know and enjoy in our society.' Jesus, on the other hand, lived a life fully immersed in the lives of the people of his day, spurning asceticism, engaging with people where he found them. And the people said, 'He's a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of all those who have the potential to corrupt, people like tax-collectors, every kind of sinner.'



In modern parlance, Jesus – I suspect with a wry smile on his face – asks, ‘What are you like?’ And he continues, ‘You call John mad. You say the Son of Man lives an immoral life. The truth is, you are never happy. You will find ground for criticism no matter what!’

‘So, what are we to learn from this?’ Jesus probes further. There is another way, better than your contrary nature. ‘Wisdom is shown to be right [is vindicated by] her deeds,’ he concludes. What is right and good will never be shown by the perverse nature which is so evident in society, but by events. John might be criticised for his strange ways, but look at what he achieved. He had caused people to turn to God in ways that hadn’t been seen for generations. And the obvious point which Jesus is emphasising is this: the people might criticise Jesus for mixing too much in ordinary life and with ordinary people (and therefore, by implication, miss the whole point of the Incarnation) but in him, in this living presence of God among them, people were finding a new Way, and new Truth and a new Life, life in all its fullness, and a new way of living in God’s love as they ought to.

And the conclusion? Stop being contrary, and see and accept what is obvious – God is with you, here and now.

### **The prayer of Jesus ([Matthew 11: 25 - 27](#))**

Here we have a few verses which appear to be an odd intrusion into Matthew’s narrative. It may be it was included in this discourse as a prayer, but this seems unlikely. It is more probable that it was recalled from a different time and place, and included here because it fitted the tone and content of what is around it. In any event, it is a significant prayer.

Look at what Jesus is saying:

1. (v 25) **‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants.’** The contrary people are never going to grasp these things. Jesus was speaking from experience. The tradition of the Rabbis was to debate, to intellectualise God’s Word and Truth. But clearly, the intellectuals - the apparently wise and intelligent - had no use for Jesus, while the ordinary people – the metaphorical infants – saw a truth in him that was obscured by Rabbis. This is a condemnation of intellectual pride, of purity of dogma. This is a call for openness and wonder, as in the trust of a growing, developing, questioning, absorbing child. It is not



cleverness per se that is the problem. It is the stultifying of the Gospel by intellectual rigour that is unhelpful. The bottom line is this: The Gospel is of the heart and not of the head. While the head can clarify, it cannot hold the Gospel on its own. Jesus is understood through the innocence of the childlike heart.

2. (v26) **'Yes, Father, this is what you really wanted.'** (New Century Version). There is a yearning at the heart of God for the trusting acceptance of his grace by the people he made in his own image. 'You clutter your acceptance of my love with all kinds of complications,' God says. 'It really is very simple. Give yourself to me in innocence and acceptance and you will find love and fullness beyond all measure.'
3. (v27) **'All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father. No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'** (NIV) You wonder how I know all of this, Jesus is asking. I know it because I am God's Son. You will know it too if you believe in me and trust what I say. Here is a powerful echo of Jesus' words to Nicodemus In John 3:16 – 'For God loved the world [and all the people created in His image] so much that he gave His only Son [this Messiah who is now in your midst] so that whoever believes in Him [and finds God's love through Him] will not perish but will have everlasting [fullness of] life.'

### The ultimate words of comfort ([Matthew 11: 28-30](#))

Here are words so powerful in their message and so graphic in their imagery that they need little interpretation.

*I worked with a Nun when I was a hospice chaplain. She was old and frail, and died with great dignity and at peace with herself and with her Saviour. She was attentively cared for by the Mother Superior of her Order, along with two of her Sisters. The room in which she died was one of the holiest places I have ever experienced. Round this dying woman there was the constancy of prayer and love, and three 'mantras' were recited over and over again – the words of the Rosary; the words of the Lord's Prayer; and the words of Matthew 11:28-30 –*

*'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in*



*heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'*

*words I had learned myself as a child and could repeat with them over and over again.*

Tom Gordon, 2014

For here is the ultimate reassurance from Jesus that if we move on from being contrary to being the accepting children God looks for, then we will know the peace which Jesus promises. When we are exhausted and weighed down by our burdens ([see illustrative material](#)) we have the promise of rest – because our weight is carried on the shoulders of Christ.

Jesus spoke to people who were desperately trying to find God, more keen than most to do good, and who were, paradoxically, weighed down by their own intellect and sense of failure to know and understand everything, and, therefore, to live an exemplary life.

W B Yeats, the wonderful Irish poet and mystic, wrote, 'Can one reach God by toil? He gives himself to the pure in heart. He asks nothing but our attention.' (An entry in Yeats' diary for 22nd September 1919).

## [Romans 7: 15 - 25a](#)

### **Being Human**

The Epistle reading from Romans 7 admirably complements Jesus theme in the Gospel reading from Matthew. For here Paul is focussing on the human situation, just as Jesus was doing. Having outlined what is possible in the new relationship with Christ earlier in chapter 7 (vv 1-16) and explored the nature of our sinfulness (in very complex language and imagery) and its relation to the law (vv 7-13), he goes on to look at our humanity and how the very nature of our fallen human condition creates barriers between us and God.

To do so he does three things:

1. He bares his own soul. Paul tells us of an experience which is at the heart of the human condition. He outlines what the NIV entitles 'The war within us.' 'I do now understand the things I do,' Paul writes. (v15). 'I don't do the good things I want to do, and I do all the things I hate.' Paul knew what it was right to do. He was steeped in the law, and knew every pathway, through the law, to righteousness. So why did he still sin? It's the 'split-



personality’ of every Christian. We are all pulled in different ways. (Doesn’t ‘Oor Wullie in ‘The Sunday Post’ regularly sit on his up-turned bucket and ponder his options – with a little devil on one shoulder and a little angel on the other?)

2. He points to what his Jewish hearers and readers would already know. The Jews had defined the issue by saying that in every man there were two natures – what they called Yester hatob and Yester hara. Professor William Barclay (‘The letter to the Romans, page 101, ‘The Daily Study Bible’) puts it this way.

*It was the Jewish conviction that God had made men like that, that all men had a good impulse and an evil impulse inside them ... But the Jew was equally clear, in theory, that no man need ever succumb to that evil impulse. To the Jew it was a matter of choice.*

Well, fine, Paul is saying. You and I know that’s what we are like. We have the law to give us that choice. If we follow the law, all will be well. But why, then, when I do follow the law to the nth degree do I still do what I shouldn’t be doing? So the law cannot always protect me from my own human failings. I will not be saved by the law but only by Christ.

3. When evil attacks, wisdom and reason cannot defeat it.

Here is the echo of the Gospel reading. Our contrary nature cannot be overcome by intellect and rule-following. No matter how great our human knowledge, it will always remain inadequate. No matter how clear our analysis of what we are and how we should live, we shall always fail. No matter how strong our resolve to do good, we shall always fall short.

## Illustrative material

On the theme of ‘**The need have to see beyond the practical/human to the spiritual**’.

### Seeing

Mrs Green just couldn’t see it. It was always the same – change, change and more change. If it wasn’t enough that she had to put up with the demise of the corner-shop and the arrival of the supermarket; the students in her stair in place of nice families and retired couples; the terrible



programmes on the television instead of decent stuff; and the Tories who'd lost the council elections.

As if that wasn't enough ... and now the church was changing too. They had a woman minister for one thing; a new hymn book; guitars; and there was talk of chairs replacing the pews. Mrs Green just couldn't see it. Surely the church could stay the same when everything else was changing. Surely ... Mrs Green wasn't sure she'd go to church any more. She just couldn't see it.

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Reuben just couldn't see it. It was always the same – the Palestinians were getting all the positive publicity. People's opinions were beginning to change. His mate had given up his job to go to spend time as a volunteer in an aid programme in the West Bank. He was full of the plight of the Palestinian people. All talk ...

Reuben had to cope with the distress of his father too. It was what being Jewish was about, at least for his father. Not that Reuben bothered too much about his Jewishness. He never attended the Synagogue. He wasn't sure about the God bit at all. But what still mattered was his roots, and his family, and his father's distress. A Palestinian homeland? He just couldn't see it.

\*\*\*

Constable Jimmy Summers just couldn't see it. It was always the same – all that work put in to giving the local kids a better chance; the programmes and the youth clubs; the educational opportunities and the detached youth workers; the time and energy offered by community policemen like himself. Time and time again, a kid would be on the brink of making something of themselves, and then fall by the wayside.

Jimmy Summers was getting round to wondering why be bothered. Maybe he should just keep to nicking rogues – just like his sergeant always reminded him. Maybe it would just be easier to 'lock 'em up and throw away the key' if the 'softly, softly' approaches weren't working. Why didn't the kids catch on? He just couldn't see it.

\*\*\*

Colonel Douglas (Rtd, Household Cavalry) got his eyes opened. It was the minister who did it. Or maybe it was the young people from the church youth club who'd really opened his eyes. It had



all happened when he'd been away. He didn't want to be away, of course. He was prepared to stick with things for as long as he could. But he was a proud man, and stubborn too. The army had taught him that. So he wasn't going to give in and ask for help.

It was the fall that had taken him away from his home. Three months he'd been in hospital, various hospitals, indeed; a pin in his hip; rehabilitation; home-care being organised. He never expected his overgrown garden to be transformed while he was away. But it was. He couldn't believe it when he got home. 'The minister' and the 'youth club lot' he'd been told. He wasn't bothered who it was. He just knew he'd got his eyes opened.

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Joseph Gold got his eyes opened. He knew it would happen at some stage, but he never expected it this way. It was when he had to defend a Muslim on a terrorist charge that his perspective changed. It wasn't mainstream, not a big publicity-generating affair- just a young, naive guy, the son of a local shopkeeper, who'd been associating with a bad crowd. It was the first time he'd really have anything to do with anyone from an Islamic background.

The young man reminded him of his own son, trying to hold himself together in a society full of prejudices – real and perceived; overt and hidden. The charge was dropped, thankfully – and rightly, Joseph reckoned - but not before Joseph had got to know his client a lot better. And he just knew he'd got his eyes opened.

\*\*\*

Martin Miller got his eyes opened. No matter how hard he tried, he despaired about some of the kids in his care. Well, 'care' was a bit of a misnomer. Being a teacher in the local high school made you a teacher and not a carer, didn't it? But then, Martin Miller did care, especially when he saw kids who had little or no chance of breaking out of their social circumstances.

It was reading the Review Section from the Sunday paper that gave him hope. 'A new band', the article said, 'breaking new ground ... the freshest on the scene ... going to make it ... talented singer-songwriter ... Andy Welsh ... local lad ...' That couldn't be the same Andy Welsh who'd been in a Young Offenders' Institution, could it? The Andy Welsh that Martin had worked so



hard with, only to be let down so many times? If it was ... then Martin Miller just knew he'd got his eyes opened.

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### **Amazing grace**

*This could also be used as a prayer/reflection as part of worship, and could possibly follow the singing of 'Amazing Grace'. It might also be usefully shared by more than one voice. It might also be used in a meditative form with a soloist or choir or whole congregation singing the first verse of 'Amazing Grace' at the beginning and end and as a response to each stanza of the prayer.*

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

When I am blinded by things that are different,

save me by a grace that opens my eyes

to truths that are new.

When I am blinded by my own prejudices,

save me by a grace that opens my eyes

to the goodness of others.

When I am blinded by despair and hopelessness,

save me by a grace that opens my eyes

to hope and new possibilities.

When I am blinded by the rightness of my cause,

save me by a grace that opens my eyes

to different points of view.

When I am blinded by my own failures,

save me by a grace that opens my eyes



to forgiveness and beginning again.

When I am blinded by not knowing or believing,  
save me by a grace that opens my eyes  
to what is beyond my seeing.

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The Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit. I want to run all the way with the flame of my torch still lit for Him.

*J Stowell, 'Fan the Flame', Moody, 1986*

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One spring our family was driving from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa, Florida. As far as the eye could see, orange trees were loaded with fruit. When we stopped for breakfast, I ordered orange juice with my eggs. "I'm sorry," the waitress said. "I can't bring you orange juice. Our machine is broken." At first I was dumbfounded. We were surrounded by millions of oranges, and I knew they had oranges in the kitchen--orange slices garnished our plates. What was the problem? No juice? Hardly. We were surrounded by thousands of gallons of juice. The problem was they had become dependent on a machine to get it.

Christians are sometimes like that. They may be surrounded by Bibles in their homes, but if something should happen to the Sunday morning preaching service, they would have no nourishment for their souls. The problem is not a lack of spiritual food--but that many Christians haven't grown enough to know how to get it for themselves.

*Leroy Eims, 'The Lost Art of Disciple Making'*

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On the theme of **'The nature of marriage and love'**

### **The Wedding Day**

Colin was very fond of Annie Black. She was one of these lovely old ladies he and the rest of the team in the Home just loved looking after. Dignified, uncomplaining, grateful, funny, and much more besides, people like Annie Black were the ones who made nursing worthwhile for Colin. 'If only they were all like that,' the nurses often commented.

Geriatric nursing wasn't easy. Some shifts were long and arduous. Maybe that's why Colin and Annie got on so well. Annie needed Colin and the other nurses. But they all needed Annie too, even if it was just to make sense of the rest of the stuff. Yes indeed, Colin was very fond of Annie Black.

That's probably why he was so affected by the news that Annie's husband had died. It wasn't unexpected, and there was certain to be a sense of relief at his passing. For Annie's husband had had no real quality of life for many years. Willie Black had been suffering from Alzheimer's for a long while, and, in recent times, it had become so bad that he knew nobody, not even his beloved Annie.

He'd been in long-term care for several years and Annie had visited him regularly. But now that she was in long-term geriatric care herself, she was dependent on staff taking her on periodic visits. Not that there was much point, Colin had remarked one day after he'd taken Annie on her visit, for she no longer appeared to be special to Willie Black. He remembered how tearful Annie was on the way back to the Home.

Colin was distressed at the news of Willie's death, but he was even more concerned when he learned that Annie had taken poorly herself, and that, on the doctor's advice, she wasn't going to be able to get to her husband's funeral. That's why he'd responded readily to a request from Annie's sister. 'I was wondering...' she'd said, 'You know... Willie's funeral is on Thursday at two o'clock... well... if you're working on Thursday... well... you know... I was wondering... could you sit with Annie when the funeral's on? I think she'd like that...' And that's why Colin found himself sitting with Annie on the following Thursday, just before two, in the corner of the one of the lounges. To be honest, he didn't know what he was supposed to do. So he did what he thought best... and made them both a cup of tea.



It was just on two o'clock and he was offering Annie a digestive biscuit, when, simply to make conversation, he asked, 'How long were you and Willie married, Annie?' 'Fifty-four years, son,' she replied before taking a mouthful of digestive. And before taking a biscuit of his own, Colin found himself continuing – and to this day he doesn't know why – 'I'll bet you can remember your wedding day as if it was yesterday!' Annie smiled and carefully placed the remains of her digestive in her saucer. 'I can that,' she grinned. 'D'you want to hear about it?' 'I certainly do,' said Colin. And so the story of Annie and Willie's wedding began.

'It was in the minister's hoose, in his front room,' Annie began, 'wi' me and ma man, his brither and ma sister as the witnesses, an' his folks and mine tae mak' sure it was a' in order.' 'Not a church wedding, then?' Colin enquired. 'Naw, son. Big, fancy weddin's were no for the likes o' us. An' then it was back tae ma mither and faither's hoose for steak-pie and peas, a flagon o' beer, an' a fiddler in the corner for the entertainment.'

Colin listened in wrapt attention. 'Did you have a honeymoon after it was all over?' he asked – at a convenient point when Annie had paused for breath. 'Honeymoon? Naw, son. We didnae dae that in ma day. Nae money for the likes o' that,' she laughed. 'So what did you do after the celebrations?' Colin probed, mirroring Annie's smile. 'Well, you see,' Annie continued, with a twinkle in her eye, 'me an' Willie had a room at ma sister's hoose, so we went up there, just him and me.'

By now, Annie Black was grinning from ear to ear. 'Is that so?' Colin grinned back 'Well, I don't think I should hear any more, for I have a funny feeling I'll just get embarrassed.' 'Och, away wi' ye, laddie. Fur I'll tell you that bit an' a'...' Colin was conscious of his cheeks reddening. 'Well, when we got there – tae ma sister's hoose, ye ken - I got the kettle tae mak' me an' Willie a cup-o'-tea. An' when we wis waitin' for the tea, I sat on his knee an' I stroked his hair.' 'Stroked his hair? Is that all?' Colin asked, with a twinkle in his own eye now. 'Weel, laddie, whit mair wis I to be aboot? For I had just turned seventeen, an' I didnae ken onything aboot onything. So I stoked his hair. For Willie wis a fairmer's laddie, and his lang hair wis bleached blonde wi' the sun. An' that's why I'd fallen fur him. So I sat on his knee, for ages and ages, an' a stroked his hair, an' efter that we drank oor tea.' 'And then?' an intrigued Colin asked. 'An' then...' Annie responded, 'an' then...' She paused for what seemed like an age. Then her wrinkled old face broke into the



widest grin Colin had ever seen on Annie Black's face. 'An' then... we finished oor tea, tidied up, an' went back tae ma mither an' faither's for the rest o' the party!'

Annie sank back in her chair and started to laugh, a deep, croaky, old lady's laugh. She took hold of Colin's hand, and as he moved his hand more comfortably towards hers Colin caught sight of his wristwatch. It showed 2.30. The funeral service would be over. But through it all, Annie Black, bereaved of her husband, had remembered her wedding day, and had been a teenage bride again, and had been very, very close to a young, blonde-haired farmer's boy called Willie Black.

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### **You made the whole world sing**

When we were newly one, we took the time

To nurture love in joyful, carefree days,

To live one life and share each other's ways...

When we were good, each moment was sublime.

When we were young at heart, we made the choice

To venture forth and drink the best of wine,

And find that place where heaven and earth combine...

When we were one, we made the world rejoice.

When we could trust our love, we joined the dance

That leads to family life with children's cries,

And coped with sweet hellos and sad goodbyes...

When we were right, we offered life the chance.

When we were in our prime, we valued more

Of what was deep and lasting in our years,

And found a different love in joy and tears...

When we grew old, we had our treasure store.



When we were older yet, in each embrace  
 We found we'd saved the best of wine till last,  
 A love so rich it could not be surpassed...  
 When we are one, we're ever blessed by grace.

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Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour - act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.

C S Lewis, 'Mere Christianity'

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During the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sentenced a soldier to be shot for his crimes. The execution was to take place at the ringing of the evening curfew bell. However, the bell did not sound. The soldier's fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the great clapper of the bell to prevent it from striking. When she was summoned by Cromwell to account for her actions, she wept as she showed him her bruised and bleeding hands. Cromwell's heart was touched and he said, "Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

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To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell.

C S Lewis, 'The Four Loves'



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On the theme of **‘The guidance of God and not the intellect of man’**

### **A better view**

James hated being stuck in traffic. But here he was again, stuck in the long line of stationary traffic that was the bane of every driver’s life - especially in the High Street. The High Street! The infernal High Street! A car-park most of the time rather than a moving thoroughfare through the centre of the town ... Everyone knew that you should avoid the High Street at all costs, even if it meant taking an extensive detour through the suburbs. But sometimes you just couldn’t, and negotiating the High Street was simply inevitable – and a total pain!

So this was one of those inevitable and painful times for James. He wasn’t in a rush. He didn’t have an appointment to get to. He wasn’t keeping anyone waiting. It’s just that he hated being stuck in traffic. It was such an unbelievable waste of time.

Today it was driving behind a bus that was the problem! The High Street was narrow as well as being permanently busy. So being stuck behind a bus was the worse thing of all. There were no designated parts of the High Street that would allow a bus to pull in and let the queue of traffic behind it pass with ease. So when the bus in front of James stopped, everything else had to stop too. And if you were right behind the bus, as James was now, right up close, you couldn’t see round the bus to find out if there was a break in the traffic coming the other way that would allow you to pull out and zoom off (temporarily, at least) on the rest of your journey.

So when the bus stopped, James stopped. And when the bus moved off slowly, James crawled behind it. And when the bus stopped again, James, close up behind it once more, had no chance to pull round it or even to see what was up ahead. So he had to stop too. It was one of those journeys up the infernal High Street.

That’s the way it had been since Katy had died too. Six months it was since he’d lost the love of his life, his beloved wife of forty-eight wonderful years. It was so slow adjusting to his loss, and if it was stop-start at all, the stopping was more common than the starting, and the starting never seemed to get him very far or very fast.



People said it would be like this. ‘It takes time,’ had been peoples’ mantra. ‘But how long, how much time?’ was James’s silent response. And so, stopped for the umpteenth time behind the bus, James felt as hopeless as he did on his journey of bereavement. And close up behind the bus was like still being so close to Katy’s death. Was it always going to be this slow? Was he never going to see the way ahead?

Stopped behind the bus once more, James mused on a vacation he and Katy had shared with friends in Salt Lake City in the USA, where the streets at the heart of a modern city were twice as wide as they needed to be – cars parked on both sides, and still room for cars, trucks and vans to pass each other in two wide lanes each way. ‘No need to be stuck behind a bus on these roads,’ he’d remarked to his friend, recalling the nightmare of negotiating the High Street back home.

‘The city streets were built this wide by the Mormons when they settled here,’ James had been told, ‘wide enough so that a horse and cart could do a complete U-turn without blocking the road.’

‘If you tried to turn a dog-cart in our High Street,’ James had commented, ‘you would cause a traffic-jam that would take a week and a half to disentangle.’

‘Why is our High Street not like the streets in Salt Lake City?’ James asked himself as he watched the bus in front disgorge another bunch of travellers. ‘Why is bereavement not like wide streets with plenty of space to travel, and turn around if you want to, or see the way ahead?’

In time – an inordinate length of time – James got to his destination, a small lane off the end of the High Street where he could find his favourite book shop. Larry’s Library had often been James’s salvation, even on the worst of days, when loss or traffic – or both - were hard to bear. Today was no different. Browsing the packed shelves, absorbing the familiar musty smell, and buying his usual out-of-print books, did their job. His spirits were lifted. Even the return journey back down the High Street could be faced with a renewed energy.

It was just as slow. James was stuck behind a bus again, so it was stop-start, stop-start, stop-start, as the traffic inched itself through the High Street bottle-neck. But this time James was half-a-dozen cars behind the bus, not hard on its tail. And at one stage, from his vantage point further back, he could actually see that the road ahead was absolutely clear. ‘Why’s nobody



moving?’ he muttered to himself. ‘Why’s that guy behind the bus not pulling out and getting on? The road’s clear. Can’t he see that?’

But of course, the guy behind the bus couldn’t see the clear road that James could see - because he was too close behind the bus, just as James had been an hour or so earlier. But now that he wasn’t so close himself, James could see better. Not being so close any more, he could see there was a way ahead.

James smiled to himself. ‘Looks like bereavement’s going to be like this?’ he said out loud. ‘Maybe it’s only when you’re not too close that you can see the road is clear ahead ...’ James smiled again as the traffic moved off once more, and he thought of Katy and his slow journey of loss.

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### **Stuck**

I hate being stuck,  
waiting,  
in a holding-bay,  
in the ante-room,  
before participating in the main event.

I hate not being in control,  
hanging about,  
in limbo,  
in the waiting-zone,  
before getting on with the business in hand.

I hate not knowing,  
being in the dark,  
uncertain,  
not having things clear,



before making decisions to go on.

Maybe I need to understand 'being stuck',  
and learn to wait,  
in a holding pattern,  
for a few minutes longer,  
before I can go on my way.

Maybe I need to let go of being in control,  
and enter into  
a limbo time  
with better grace,  
before getting frustrated about what's coming next.

Maybe I should understand that I'll not always know  
when a light will come,  
when I can be sure  
that everything is crystal clear,  
and know what tomorrow will bring.

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Elizabeth Elliot tells of two adventurers who stopped by to see her, loaded with equipment for the rain forest east of the Andes. They sought no advice, just a few phrases to converse with the Indians. She writes: "Sometimes we come to God as the two adventurers came to me - confident and, we think, well-informed and well equipped. But has it occurred to us that with all our accumulation of stuff, something is missing? She suggests that we often ask God for too little. We know what we need - a yes or no answer, please, to a simple question. Or perhaps a road sign. Something quick and easy to point the way. What we really ought to have is the Guide himself. Maps, road signs, a few useful phrases are things, but infinitely better is someone who has been there before and knows the way.

*Elizabeth Elliot, 'A slow and certain light'*



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Trust Him when dark doubts assail thee,  
 Trust Him when thy strength is small,  
 Trust Him when to simply trust Him  
 Seems the hardest thing of all.  
 Trust Him, He is ever faithful,  
 Trust Him, for his will is best,  
 Trust Him, for the heart of Jesus  
 Is the only place of rest.                      *Anonymous*

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I gave a little tea party  
 This afternoon, at three.  
 ‘Twas very small, three guests in all –  
 I, myself, and me.  
 Myself ate all the sandwiches  
 While I drank all the tea.  
 ‘Twas also I who ate the pie  
 And passed the cake to me.                      *Traditional*

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In his book *Sit, Walk, Stand*, Watchman Nee describes a preaching mission to an island off the South China coast. There were seven in the ministering group, including a sixteen-year-old new convert whom he calls Brother Wu. The island was fairly large, containing about 6,000 homes. Nee had a contact there, an old schoolmate of his who was headmaster of the village school, but he refused to house the group when he discovered they had come to preach the Gospel. Finally, they found lodging with a Chinese herbalist, who became their first convert. Preaching seemed quite fruitless on the island, and Nee discovered it was because of the dedication of the people there to an idol they called Ta-wang. They were convinced of his power because on the day of his festival and parade each year the weather was always near perfect.



"When is the procession this year?" young Wu asked a group that had gathered to hear them preach.

"It is fixed for January 11th at 8 in the morning," was the reply.

"Then," said the new convert, "I promise you that it will certainly rain on the 11th."

At that there was an outburst of cries from the crowd: "That is enough! We don't want to hear any more preaching. If there is rain on the 11th, then your God is God!"

Watchman Nee had been elsewhere in the village when this confrontation had taken place. Upon being informed about it, he saw that the situation was serious and called the group to prayer. On the morning of the 11th, there was not a cloud in the sky, but during grace for breakfast, sprinkles began to fall and these were followed by heavy rain. Worshipers of the idol Ta-wang were so upset that they placed it in a sedan chair and carried it outdoors, hoping this would stop the rain. Then the rain increased. After only a short distance, the carriers of the idol stumbled and fell, dropping the idol and fracturing its jaw and left arm.

A number of young people turned to Christ as a result of the rain coming in answer to prayer, but the elders of the village made divination and said that the wrong day had been chosen. The proper day of the procession, they said, should have been the 14th. When Nee and his friends heard this, they again went to prayer, asking for rain on the 14th and for clear days for preaching until then. That afternoon the sky cleared and on the good days that followed there were thirty converts. Of the crucial test day, Nee says: The 14th broke, another perfect day, and we had good meetings. As the evening approached we met again at the appointed hour. We quietly brought the matter to the Lord's remembrance. Not a minute late, His answer came with torrential rain and floods as before.

The power of the idol over the islanders was broken; the enemy was defeated. Believing prayer had brought a great victory. Conversions followed. And the impact upon the servants of God who had witnessed His power would continue to enrich their Christian service from that time on.

*Roger F Campbell, 'You Can Win!' 1985*



## Possible sermon – “Too heavy for me”

**Text:** ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

You might remember this ... If you’re a product of sixties music it will be very familiar to you. If you’re not, rush out and find a copy of this right away. It won’t fail to make you smile. It’s a song from 1962. Don’t worry, I’m not going to sing it to you. I don’t want to empty the place. And anyway, who could sing it better than the original artist – the great Bernard Cribbins. Ready?

*Right said Fred, both of us together, one each end and steady as we go*

*Tried to shift it, couldn't even lift it, we was getting nowhere*

*And so, we, had a cup of tea*

*Right said Fred, give a shout to Charlie, up comes Charlie from the floor below*

*After straining, heaving and complaining, we was getting nowhere*

*And so, we, had a cup of tea*

*Charlie had a think and he thought we ought, to take off all the handles*

*And the things that hold the candles, but it did no good, well I never thought it would*

*Right said Fred, have to take the feet off, to get them feet off wouldn't take a mo*

*Took its feet off, even with the seat off, should got us somewhere but no*

*So Fred said lets have another cup of tea and we said right-o*

*Right said Fred, have to take the door off, need more space to shift the so and so*

*Had bad twinges taking off the hinges, and it got us nowhere*

*And so, we, had a cup of tea*

*Right said Fred, have to take the wall down, that there wall is gonna have to go*

*Took the wall down, even with it all down, we was getting nowhere*

*And so, we, had a cup of tea*

*Charlie had a think and he said: Llook Fred, I've got a sort of feeling*

*If we remove the ceiling, with a rope or two we can drop the blighter though*



*Right said Fred, climbing up a ladder, with his crowbar gave a mighty blow  
 Was he in trouble, half a ton of rubble, landed on the top of his dome  
 So Charlie and me had another cup of tea and then we went home  
 I'll said to Charlie we'll just have to leave it standing on the landing that's all  
 You see the trouble with Fred is he's too hasty  
 Now you never get nowhere if you're too hasty.*

You remember that? If you do, you'll smile as I do as you hear Bernard Cribbins singing away in your head. If you're hearing it for the first time, you can picture the scene, and what a disaster it is. If you're of the younger generation, you'll probably know Bernard Cribbins from his role a few years ago as Doctor Who's sidekick, Wilfred Mott. Cribbins' first song was 'Hole in the ground', and the sequel, 'Right said Fred', was an equal success. It was written by the composer Ted Dicks and the lyricist Myles Rudge. The song was inspired by the difficulties Dicks experienced getting some workmen to move a piano.

In an interview for the Guardian with John Dennis in 2012, Bernard Cribbins tells the story of how the song came to be written:

*Ted Dicks was living on the second or third floor somewhere, and he moved to a basement flat in Islington. He'd ordered a grand piano from Harrods. He said to the removal men: 'It's just down these stairs.' 'Oh, I don't think so.' 'OK, what'll we do?' And they took it all to pieces! That became the lyrics from Myles Rudge. I recorded it at Abbey Road, at number three studio. It was like a little concert hall. This was just before the Beatles got in there – we warmed it up for them!*

Brilliant! Two men moving a piano, and getting nowhere. A cup of tea ... Get some help. Call for Charlie. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Take off the handles and the things that hold the candles. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Take the feet off. Take the seat off. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Take off the hinges. Take it to pieces. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Knock the wall down. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Take the ceiling down. Get a rope. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Half a ton of rubble. No joy. Have a cup of tea ... Leave it standing on the landing. That's all. No need to be too hasty...



All the human enterprise in the world, and the piano still isn't moved. All the human enterprise in the world, and the whole place is worse than it was when you started. Have you been there? I have. I've stood in those disasters when I thought I knew best. And I've felt them world come crashing down around my ears.

Keep that thought in your mind as you listen to this reflection. It comes from Tom Gordon's book, *Welcoming Each Wonder*, and he reflects in a different way on his experience of carrying a piano:

*I once helped carrying a piano ...*

*I don't know if you've ever tried to lift a piano,  
but, if you have, you'll know how heavy it is.*

*Well, I put my back out.*

*Not too clever, eh?*

*But then,*

*I was lifting it the wrong way,  
wasn't I?*

*And anyway,*

*me and my mate were too stubborn to ask for help,  
and too impatient to wait for it,  
even if it had been available.*

*So we tried to move the piano ourselves.*

*Bad decision!*

*So, while I was nursing my bad back,  
and not being allowed to lift anything at all,  
far less an awkward piano,*

*I got to thinking –*

*the obvious, really –*

*that when there's something heavy to carry,  
it's better to get things organised,*



*and not be too proud to ask for help.*

*That way,  
the piano gets moved properly,  
and everyone's happy;  
and I don't have a bad back;  
and I can try to help carry someone else's piano,  
some other time,  
when they need my help with the lifting.*

Tom Gordon calls that reflection, 'Too Heavy'. "Me and my mate were too stubborn to ask for help, and too impatient to wait for it, even if it had been available."

It's not more than a baby-step from that to our desire to live a good Christian life and to ensure that we follow Christ's way as His true disciples. We know it is a hard load to carry. We know that it is a big task to fulfil. We know that we need to band together to ensure that the load is shared. We know that there is awkwardness and that often nothing is straightforward. We know that there are twists and turns to negotiate. We know about moving pianos for Jesus!

*This might be a useful space to reflect on any current issues of commitment, struggle, mission and service which will be known to the congregation.*

But we also know of the disasters we create when we think we can get it done ourselves. We know well enough of the pianos left on the landing by Fred and Charlie because, despite our best intentions, the human enterprise failed. Know well enough of the times we've put our backs out because "Me and my mate were too stubborn to ask for help, and too impatient to wait for it, even if it had been available."

In short, despite our commitment, despite our hard work, despite our willingness, any enterprise of faith which relies on human endeavour alone will be fraught with difficulties.



Look at the lessons from scripture today...

*Here reference can be made in different ways to any of the lessons which have been chosen for worship . It may be that some context could be given to the readings at this point, some of which could be taken from the background to the readings found above.*

In our Old Testament Lesson, Abraham sought a good wife for his son, Isaac. As a man of faith, he trusted his wise servant, Eliezer, also a man of faith, to go and seek a wife for Isaac. And so Eliezer goes, on a human enterprise. But before he takes the final step, he prays, and just at that moment, he sees Rebekah who will, in time, become a wife for Isaac. He prays, and when prayer is answered, he give thanks to God. A human enterprise, committed into God's care and seeking God's guidance. And in the end, it's not Eliezer who takes the glory but he gives thanks to the Lord his God.

In our Epistle Lesson, in that complex theological treatise that is Paul's letter to the Romans, we find Paul wrestling with the meaning and purpose of the Law. 'The good that I should do, I don't. And the bad that I shouldn't do, I keep doing. And that's with me keeping the law!' Rules and regulations, systems and structures, dogmas and doctrines, all the human frameworks in the world cannot stop the fallen-ness of the human condition. Living in the right way is a spiritual matter, not only a human one. Human enterprise and endeavour is not enough.

In our Gospel reading you have Jesus expressing his exasperation with the people of his day, the good people, the law-abiding people, the righteous people. For they were perverse. All the wisdom and intelligence, all the intellectual rigour and clarity of purpose wasn't enough. Religion had become a human enterprise, measured in human terms, bound by human rules, clarified by human dogma. Give yourselves to God as I have done, Jesus is saying. Rise above the human. Open yourself to the divine.

*"Me and my mate were too stubborn to ask for help, and too impatient to wait for it, even if it had been available."*

For Abraham and Eliezer, for Paul and the church in Rome, for Jesus and his hearers ... if you are too stubborn to ask for help ... if you are too impatient to wait for it ... if you trust only in the



human endeavour, in the human intellect, in the human skill, in the human ability, you may find the whole house crashing down round your ears.

Jesus said: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

What does that mean? It means that Jesus knows we have a heavy piano to lift, an awkward stair to negotiate, a fearsome struggle to get the job done. He does not say: 'Leave it to me and go and have a cup of tea with your feet up. I'll do it all for you.' He does not say: 'I want to you to have a bad back for my sake. Go and injure yourself, do yourself damage for my sake.' But he does say: 'Come to me with your piano. Ask me to bear your load with you. Call on me when your struggles threaten to overwhelm you. 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. Come to me when it's too heavy ... and I will give you rest.

*A conclusion, summary or piece of illustrative material might usefully be added here.*

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For further sermon ideas you could do worse than focussing on the Old Testament lesson, unfolding it as a story, and drawing illustrations from it as the episodes of the story go by.

If you would like to be more structured, Bob Deffinbaugh's piece above has some useful material in it. The themes of servanthood, guidance and marriage are worth exploring, as is the unfolding teaching on marriage which Bob Deffinbaugh offers.



## Prayers

### Collect

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbour: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

### Prayer of approach, confession and absolution

God of the morning, you come to greet us with the rising of the sun,  
offering your reluctant and sleep-eyed disciples a light to guide us,  
and your Spirit's warmth to strengthen us,  
and your Son's presence to call us forward to greet the day.

Help us to be stirred into a new awakening.

Help us to turn to your light,  
to respond to your presence  
and to walk with your Son,  
that this new day which is already yours  
will find your disciples waking to the challenge and joy,  
and working as your partners,  
in love, in service and in mission.

God of the noontide, we know we will become weary on the journey,  
because we are human ...  
uneasy with our lot, disgruntled with our responsibilities,  
weighed down by the burdens we carry  
and uncertain in our travelling.

Forgive us when we do not trust you in the heat of the day.

Forgive when we complain about our calling.

Forgive us when we try to go on in our own strength.



Forgive us for the uncertainty of our faith and the inadequacy of our service.

Assure us again of your promise, remind us of it again and again:

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy-laden,  
and I will give you rest,”

till find rest and renewal in your forgiving love.

God of the evening, let us rest in you,

and, when we lay it all down,

may we hear your voice whisper in our ear,

“Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Amen

### **Prayer of thanksgiving and intercession**

Loving God,

for all that is good, we praise you.

For all that is wonderful, we stand in awe.

For all that is mysterious, we trust you.

In all that is known, we see you.

In all that is right, we know you.

In all that is loving, we feel you.

Where there is service, we find you.

Where there is community, we meet you.

Where there is welcome, we embrace you.

When Christ’s name is spoken, we hear you.

When the Spirit’s call is heeded, we need you.

When God’s creation is yearning, we adore you.

*At the conclusion of each line that follows – if not all then a selected number – prayers which are appropriate to the theme of the service, the content of the sermon, the circumstances of the congregation and community or the events of the day can be included...)*



For all that threatens your goodness, we pray...

For all that takes wonder out of our lives we pray ...

Where knowledge shuts out mystery ...

Where the things the world become more important than the things of the Kingdom...

For those who seek to know you and struggle with their faith ...

For those who want to do right but find they do wrong ...

Where love should heal yet people still suffer from evil ...

Where serve to one another is threatened by war and hatred ...

For those we year for community yet live in isolation and loneliness ...

For those who are spurned and never embraced ...

Where Christ's name is a curse and not an exclamation of Grace ...

Where the Spirit moves and people turn their backs ...

And we rejoice in the Communion of Saints,

those travellers on the pilgrim way with whom we are always bound

in the ties of fellowship, in the relationships of the Christian Family,

in the bonds of human love

and in the eternal companionship of the one people of God.

Amen.



## Musical Suggestions

CH 555	Amazing Grace
CH4 548	Approach, my soul, the mercy seat
CH4 759	Come to me, come to me
CH4 455	I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art
CH 540	I heard the voice of Jesus say
CH4 493	It's me, it's me, O Lord
CH4 119	O God, thou art the Father
CH4 97	O God, you search me and you know me
CH 708	O Lord, the clouds are gathering
CH4 35	O send thy light forth and thy truth
CH4 99	Oh, hear my prayer, Lord, be open...
CH4 98	Oh, hear my prayer, Lord, unto me...
CH4 270	Put all your trust in God
CH4 221	Saviour, again to Thy dear name we raise
CH4 493	Standing in the need of prayer
CH4 547	What a friend we have in Jesus
CH4 96	You are before me, God, you are behind



## Additional Resources

### Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

### Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Pray Now 2013](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#). [Revealing Love](#) will be available to purchase from November 2013.



### Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music magazine [Different Voices](#).

### Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

### Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Tom Gordon for providing us with this Sunday's material.*

*Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.*

