Opening the Scriptures

LENT COURSE 2020

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INTRODUCTION

'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us.'

(Luke 24.32)

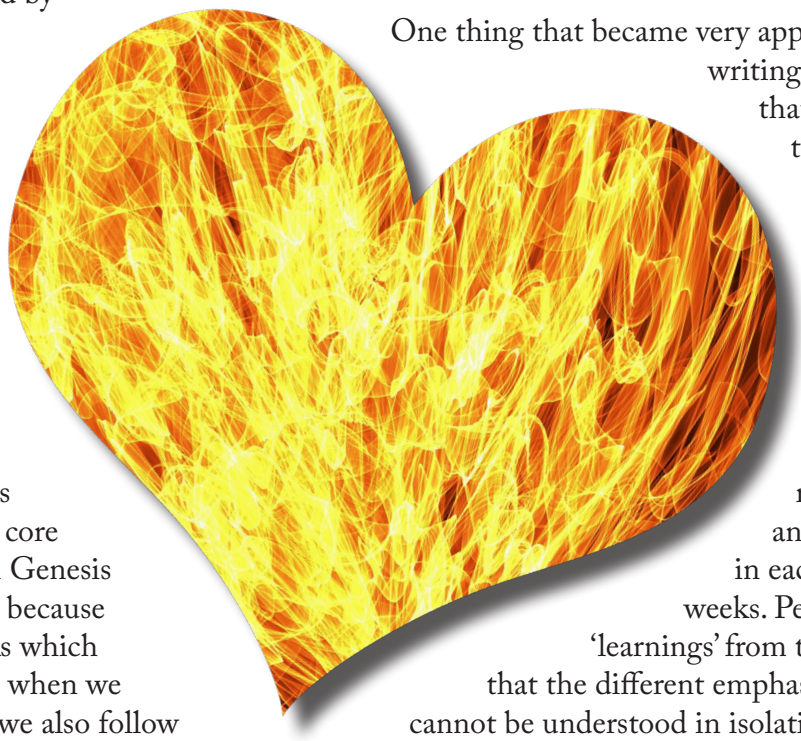
What are the parts of the Bible that set your heart on fire? What texts or passages or stories in scripture make your heart burn within you?

The encounter between the resurrected Jesus and two disciples on the road to Emmaus (*Luke 24.13-35*) is itself one of the most cherished episodes of Christian scripture. It has been described as 'a parable of the life of the post-Easter Church, walking with Christ down the long road of history and knowing him in the Word and in the breaking of bread.'[1] We can view it as a microcosm of each individual Christian life. The story speaks to us in so many ways: about joy and grief, exhilaration and weariness, failure and success, about memory of the past and hope for the future. It attracts us by its strangeness and sense of the numinous, yet at the same time the climax comes as the result of a simple and practical act of hospitality and welcome to a mysterious stranger. It confronts the questions of suffering and death, those age old dilemmas that have dominated human existence and spirituality for as long as we have been sentient beings. It encourages us to tread thoughtfully through the story of God's relationship with God's people in the Old Testament so that we can begin to tip-toe into the transforming power of the resurrection. This Lent study course will in fact also offer a meditation which might be used in Holy Week and then continue for a post-Easter week, in which we will look in more detail at that crucial resurrection experience on the Emmaus Road, using it to help us pull together the threads we will have explored during the five weeks of Lent.

But that question that the two disciples address to themselves when they realise that they have had the risen Lord among them, 'Were not our hearts burning within us?' is also the question around which this entire course will revolve. It is telling that the disciples' immediate spoken reaction to the opening of their eyes is to reflect on Jesus Christ both as an interpreter of Scripture and as its interpretation. Word and word belong together.

2020 is being kept as 'the Year of the Word' in a number of churches and church related organisations in Britain and Ireland. There will be a focus on 'The God who Speaks' to us through the

Bible. The course intentionally bears this in mind as it seeks to encourage participants to discover the Bible with their 'hearts', as well as their minds and souls and strength. Scripture, especially when read with our hearts on fire, can provide a series of vital entry points through which the great themes and the different yet interlocking aspects of the relationship between God and human beings can be explored, the threads drawn together, leading potentially to our own change and transfiguration. This divine-human relationship is one which, for those of us who call ourselves Christian, finds its consummation in the events of Passiontide and the Easter season. So we deliberately focus around a number of 'heart-burning' passages of Scripture complemented by music, and art and poetry on our journey through Lent into the heart of God's love.[2] Each week through Lent our initial exploration is of an Old Testament passage – for of course it was the interpretation of what we Christians call Old Testament scripture that led to those burning hearts on the Emmaus road. The core passages come either from Genesis or Exodus – appropriately because these are the biblical books which literally we first encounter when we 'open the scriptures.' But we also follow this by drawing attention to passages from the New Testament which resonate with the theme for the week. The core passages have been chosen because they reflect either directly or obliquely fundamental biblical themes and motifs – which also find their echo in the story of Emmaus.



As part of our preparation we have asked a number of Christian friends, from various walks of life and church, what text/passage/story in scripture makes their heart burn. The responses have been fascinating. Sometimes people have wanted to explain why such a passage is so important to them. Sometimes they prefer simply to refer to the passage itself. We give a number of these responses in the material that follows. We suggest that this is also a question that you might want to explore in your study groups week by week. There is opportunity incorporated into the material from the second session of the course onwards, for a couple of people on each occasion to be invited to share what biblical passage speaks to them especially powerfully and personally. To respond to this question can make people feel quite vulnerable, for they are being encouraged to expose something quite deep within themselves. So it is important that the invitation to share is made with sensitivity rather than in what might feel a coercive way, and perhaps allowing those who feel more comfortable with such a question to be the first responders.

One thing that became very apparent during the writing of this course is that it is impossible to separate out neatly the different biblical themes and motifs which we touch on. For example, though 'love' is a special focus in Week Five, it actually resonates with ideas and images explored in each of the other weeks. Perhaps one of the 'learnings' from the course is the way that the different emphases within scripture cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Indeed the reflection that is offered for Holy Week (to be used either in by individuals or in a group context) suggests that there is a profound link between drawing together these different strands and the meaning of the passion of Jesus Christ.

The starting-point of this course is the story of Jesus' journey to Emmaus. It will also be the end point as the course concludes by returning to it in the week after Easter. In preparation for the course (or as part of Week One) it might be helpful if people read through this biblical passage (Luke 24.13-35) which has been the literal inspiration for this year's CTBI Lent course.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Amos, who wrote this Lent course at the invitation of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), found her own heart first 'burned' by scripture many, many years ago. After studying theology at Cambridge University, she was privileged to spend two years learning at the École Biblique et Archéologique Francaise Jerusalem. An Anglican by church affiliation, Clare was fortunate enough to be awarded an ecumenical scholarship to study at the École Biblique, which has played a significant role in the development of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship.

Her years at the École Biblique were Clare's entry point into a life-path that not only has involved teaching biblical studies in Jerusalem, Beirut, Cambridge, South London and Kent, and guest lecturing in Africa, Asia, Australia and America, but also initiated her abiding commitment to the Middle East, to the world church and to ecumenism. Her working life has specifically included periods working for the Methodist Church of Britain, and for the Cambridge Ecumenical Theological Federation. Clare's final full time position before retirement in 2018 was to have responsibility for the interreligious desk at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In 2012 Clare was honoured to be awarded a Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity by Archbishop Rowan Williams. The citation at that time referred to Clare's commitment to sharing the fruits of biblical scholarship as widely as possible among the people of God, which is what this Lent course seeks to do.

USING THE MATERIAL EACH WEEK

We hope that the material will be used by a wide variety of groups in a number of different contexts. With this is mind there is offered in each week probably more material than any one particular group may need. The 'core' of the material is the encouragement each week to explore one key biblical passage chosen both for its 'heart-burning' nature and its importance as part of the biblical story of our faith. To aid that reflection a picture has been selected for each week – each different in artistic style, which between them represent a range of cultures and religious expressions. An introductory exploration of the biblical material is offered – which, depending on the nature of the group, might either be presented by a group leader having worked through it in advance and sharing the ideas in their own words, or looked at together by the group as a whole. Reading the scripture, drawing from the biblical reflection offered, exploring questions that arise from it, and encouraging participants to share their own favourite 'heart-burning' texts, is the 'core' of the material.

However we hope that many groups will want to go further. The Bible and scriptural themes have been the source of inspiration for many writers and musicians over the centuries. So each week we also offer some 'words' and 'music' that link to that week's emphasis and which also feel inspiring and heart-burning in themselves. A wide range of both words and music is offered: it is not intended (certainly as regards the music) that all should be drawn on by each group every week: whoever is leading the group on a particular week should choose one or two examples that will be helpful in their context, though we also hope that you may discover some treasures that are new to you. Unless the words of a song or hymn are very well-known we have, whenever possible, given an internet link to its lyrics. We have also given a number of links to especially beautiful performances of the music which are available on the internet and are well worth listening to. So you do not need a musician and an instrument to draw on the musical

suggestions – a laptop computer and an internet connection will suffice.

Although there are a few discussion questions offered each week, it may well be that questions and discussion also arise through people sharing their own favourite biblical texts, or by hearing some of the words and music that is offered. That is all to the good! There is absolutely no intention that each group needs to do or use everything each week.

In the material most of the biblical quotations have been drawn from the NRSV translation of the Bible – in part because this is very widely used in the ecumenical movement. When other translations are used this is indicated. However it can be really helpful if members of the group have to hand a variety of translations as that sometimes enables people to discover new and different insights into the biblical text. So do encourage people to bring and share whatever version of the Bible they feel most comfortable with.

THANKS

I want to offer thanks to a number of people who have helped as I have worked on this material. The senior staff of CTBI who were brave enough to ask me to write this course; Jonty Brawn, an intern in the Diocese in Europe 2018-2019, who actually inspired the idea of focusing the course on the 'heart-burning' qualities of the Bible and the story of the road to Emmaus; my 'Facebook friends' who responded to my question about which biblical passage set their own hearts on fire, or offered musical suggestions that I had not been aware of; those, including Bishop Michael Ipgrave, Canon Alan Amos, and others who have read through and commented on earlier drafts. It has been a privilege to work on this material, and discover in the course of doing so ideas, music and words which have inspired me and opened my own eyes.

[1] Maria Boulding, Gateway to Resurrection, p.45

[2] A definition of discipleship given on the former website of 'Fresh Expressions' is 'A journey into the heart of Gods love.'

THE FIRE AND THE NAME

FOCAL READING: EXODUS 3.1–15

Our exploration of 'burning hearts' begins appropriately by looking in this session at this biblical passage, fundamental to the story of our redemption, in which God is made known through 'fire'. Alongside this we reflect on the mysterious name of God, revealed in the same chapter of the Book of Exodus. Both the fire and the name encourage us to reflect on the 'holiness' and the uncontrollable nature of God.

SYMBOL

A candle or other form of lit flame.

OPENING MEDITATION

Unless the eye catch fire
The God will not be seen.

Unless the ear catch fire
The God will not be heard.

Unless the tongue catch fire
The God will not be named.

Unless the heart catch fire
The God will not be loved.

Unless the mind catch fire,
The God will not be known.

(William Blake)

STARTING OUT

What does it mean for 'your heart to burn within you'? It is something that perhaps we know by

WEEK 1

instinct rather than by conscious deliberation. Are you willing to share within the group what this phrase signifies for you? Have you ever experienced such a feeling? What caused it? There is no 'one' right answer! Sometimes the most basic – yet important – aspects of human life can prompt such a response. The birth of a longed for baby? A reunion with long-lost friends? An especially powerful time of worship? A song sung beautifully?

Here are two short and contrasting examples of such a feeling – one influential example from the Christian past, the other from much more recent days.

PIVOTAL MOMENT

On 24 May 1738 John Wesley was attending a meeting of Moravian Christians in Aldersgate, London. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. 'while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.' Wesley considered it the pivotal moment in his life, and it profoundly influenced his later ministry.

WHAT MOVES YOU?

When interviewing candidates for admission as a theological college tutor I used to ask, 'What moves you?'. It was a question intended to help discover the real person underneath the facade that might have been carefully adopted for the interview. Thirty years later I still do not forget the response made by one candidate: 'Beautiful music, high mountains, the faces of old men and women waiting to die, and people homeless on the streets of London.' I could in turn genuinely say that I was deeply moved by this answer! And I recall it whenever I look at the heart-stopping beauty of the Alps close to where I now live.

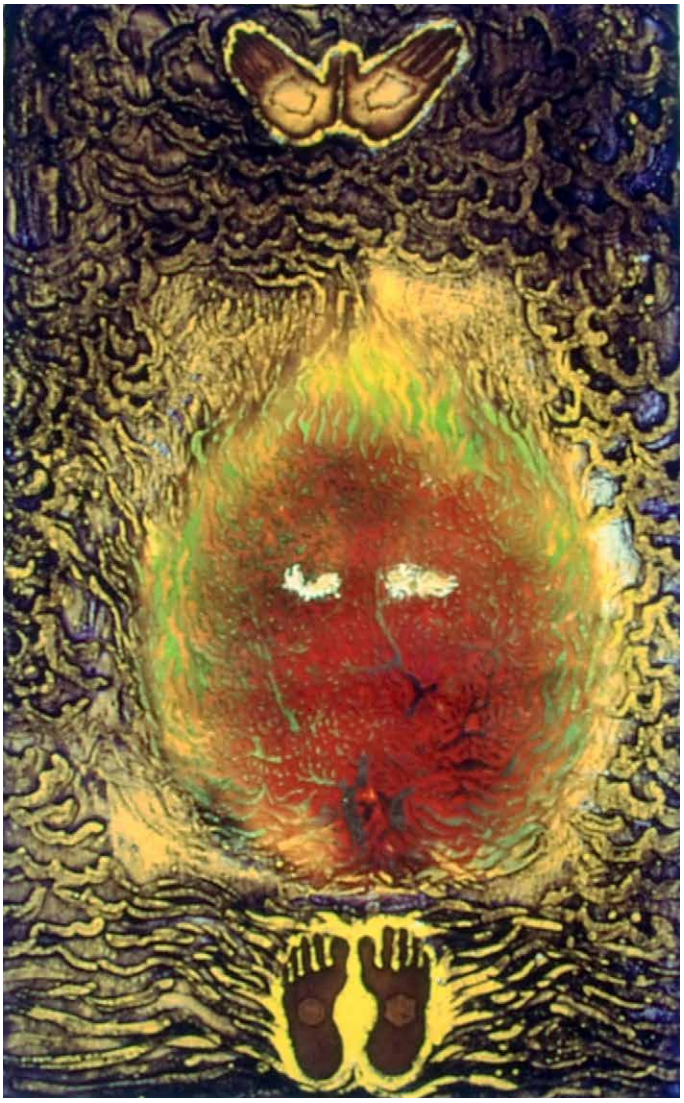
EXODUS 3.1-15

Each week the focal biblical passage will be illustrated by a picture. Depending on the nature of your group you may want to look together and reflect on the picture before or after looking at the written reflection.

Read the biblical passage and then ponder this reflection:

Is this the moment when the biblical story of God's redemption first begins? Such a redemption is alluded to in the Emmaus Road conversation (*Luke 24.21*), and the motif of God as redeemer will resonate frequently during the story of the Old Testament. If so, the language and images which accompany God's meeting and commissioning of Moses – the burning bush and the revelation of the name of God – offer a challenging starting point for exploring the relationship between God and God's people. Taken together they seem to emphasise the elusiveness of God, God's uncontrollability. They speak to us profoundly of a divine strangeness, which is both attractive and fearsome, but which we instinctively know is a necessary part of our faith – and which we sometimes seek to define when we use the word 'holy'. Our own hearts certainly can burn within us in those moments when we meet God in the symbol of fire.

The picture on this page – the 'Burning Bush' created by the Indian Christian artist Paul Koli – portrays something of the attractiveness and the elusiveness of the biblical scene. The bare feet



Burning Bush - Paul Koli

remind us of the command to Moses to remove his shoes because he was standing on 'holy ground'. There is the hint – no more – of a face in the midst of the flames. Does it represent God? Or God's people? There is a modern Jewish tradition which suggests that when Moses looked into the flames he saw in them the suffering of his spiritual descendants, including the multitudes of Jewish people being consumed by the flames of the gas ovens of Auschwitz and Belsen. Such an interpretation resonates with the emphasis in the biblical text itself that God had heard and seen the suffering of his people in Egypt, and has taken this initiative with Moses in order to deliver them.

Why then does God make himself known in this way?

Fire speaks to us of the presence of God but in a way that means we cannot capture or possess it.

'Fire tells us that neither God nor God's creation can be tamed. Fire leads us to the depths before it leads us to the heights. It burns up banal theologies of God and keeps us from the temptations of Christian triteness.' (*Christopher Lewis*). Fire can be life-giving – human civilisation is only possible because of fire. Yet is it also dangerous. It will not leave us untouched. It forces our response.

TS Eliot spoke of how human beings are presented with the dilemma of choosing whether to be cleansed or consumed by 'fire or fire', given the dual reality that fire can both warm and destroy.
http://biblicalworship.com/wqotw/2016/1/13/eliot-on-the-dove-descending

Exodus 3.1-15 then moves to the moment where the name of God is revealed. It happens as a result of a plea by Moses to enable him to carry out the mission on which he is being sent. Names are significant. If we know someone's name, we know something very important about them. It can make them vulnerable. In the ancient world it was believed that to know the name of a god enabled you to control the deity. There is a thread that runs through the Bible – certainly through the Old Testament – which suggests that partly for that reason God was very unwilling to disclose his name to human beings, as it risked turning God into a sort of puppet. To reveal his name is therefore a risk for God. Yet if God had not done so here the people would have remained forever slaves in Egypt.

For the sake of this people, God is therefore willing to make himself vulnerable by sharing the name with human beings. Yet intriguingly the name that is disclosed – and the explanation which is given for it – continues to reinforce a sense of mystery. The four Hebrew consonants YHWH that make up the divine name seem to be linked in some way to the Hebrew verb 'to be'. And 'being' is a notoriously fluid concept – it is not something we can easily pin down, indeed there have been many very different efforts to seek to interpret it. So the name YHWH, especially when 'explained' as 'I am who I am' – a phrase which seems to conceal as much as to reveal – preserves God's sovereign freedom even while God is promising to Moses, 'I will be with you'.

Though the 'withness' of God will be at the heart of the divine-human relationship in much of the rest of scripture, and is a thread which we explore further in following weeks, it is good to pause first and remember this other vital aspect of God's nature. In some of his hymns the poet Brian Wren looks at what it might mean to speak of 'God with an uncompleted name', and as 'Name Unnamed'. (The technical term for this kind of language and thinking is 'apophatic'[3].) To speak of God in this way offers a vital thread to understanding the spirituality of the Old Testament, in which God refuses to be confined in the 'images' that human beings try and restrict him. Such 'images' can be physical – what are sometimes called 'graven images'. But they can also be moral and metaphorical: for example human beings can try and confine God in a glib equation which makes a direct connection between moral conduct and prosperity. The Book of Job is the ultimate challenge provided by the Old Testament to a way of thinking that seeks to turn God into the simple guarantor of human expectations.

In the New Testament a sense of divine elusiveness continues. Jesus confounds his disciples' expectations by striking actions which seem to provoke questions rather than provide easy answers, 'Who then is this that wind and sea obey him?' (*Mark 4.41*) they ask as he stills the storm. A couple of chapters later the disciples' puzzlement is compounded when Jesus comes to them across the water, introducing himself with an enigmatic, 'I am'. Perhaps especially in the Gospel of Mark Jesus appears as a figure who generates amazement, incomprehension and fear. 'They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.' (*Mark 10.32*) Yet the ultimate twist in the Gospel of Mark comes in the words – the only words – which according to this Gospel Jesus himself speaks on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (*Mark 15.34*) in which God's apparent absence and Jesus' own vulnerability coalesce to bring about redemption. Later the cross will turn into resurrection and soon afterwards lead to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the eventual 'fulfilment' of the Gospel, at which once again the dangerous symbol of fire will be prominent.

A God who is mysterious, elusive, uncontrollable, mysterious, free, dangerous – yet also vulnerable. These are some of the insights that the fire and the

name of Exodus 3 offer to us near the beginning of the biblical story. They will be complemented by – and resonate with – other perceptions in the coming weeks. It is of course interesting to notice that the figure who is encountered on the road to Emmaus could also be described as elusive, mysterious and perhaps even vulnerable.

What is the response that this understanding of God requires of us as God's people? Perhaps that Lent may be a time for stripping and purging, a 'burning' of the dross which we use to cloak ourselves from the dangerous insistence of the mystery of God. We could speak of a metaphorical 'walking into the wilderness'. Lent is of course the time when Christians mark Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness: that later desert is foreshadowed by the 'wilderness' (*Exodus 3.1*) in which Moses discovered a bush that was burning.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

(several of which were explicitly mentioned by individuals)

Our God is a consuming fire.
(Hebrews 12.29)

I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled
(Luke 12.49)

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
…It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
(Song of Songs 8.6)

Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire? They answered the king, 'True, O king,' He replied, 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the fourth has the appearance of a son of the gods.'
(Daniel 3.24-25)

Before Abraham was I am
(John 8.58)

When he [Jesus] saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the lake. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I (literally 'I am'); do not be afraid.' Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded.
(Mark 6.48-51)

SOME WORDS FOR REFLECTION

I see mystery not as something you cannot understand; rather, it is something that you can endlessly understand! There is no point at which you can say, 'I've got it.' Always and forever, mystery gets you! In the same way, you don't hold God in your pocket; rather, God holds you and knows your deepest identity.
(Richard Rohr)

'He'll [Aslan] be coming and going' he had said. 'One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down--and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.'
(CS Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe)

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.
(RS Thomas)[4]

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too: but miss the reflection.
(RS Thomas: Via Negativa)[5]

SOME SONGS TO LISTEN TO AND SHARE

(Youtube videos of these are widely available)

O thou who camest from above, the pure celestial fire to impart.

Be still for the presence of the Lord, the holy one is here.

Come down O Love divine.

Shine, Jesus, shine.

SOME QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Our scripture passage is often referred to as an example of 'the numinous', that is the spine-tingling religious experience of mystery and awe (Rudolf Otto). Have there been moments when you have felt 'over-awed' in the presence of the divine?

What does 'holiness' mean for you ? Where do you personally 'locate' the experience of holiness: in places, nature, in worship, in people?

How important do you think it is that we have a God who is both known and unknown?

The Holy Spirit can be thought of as 'divine fire.' What would you like to see purged away by the activity of the Spirit ? What needs to be destroyed, and what needs to be refined?

If Moses had not turned aside 'to look' – would the whole story of God's saving and redeeming work with humanity have been different?

SOMETHING TO PRAY

Lord Christ, set me on fire
Burn from me all that dims your light.
Kindle an answering flame in lives around:
That darkness may be driven back
And glory stream into this world,
Transforming it with love.
(Ann Lewin)[6]

SOMETHING TO TAKE AWAY

'Some day, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world we shall have discovered fire.'
(Teilhard de Chardin)

[3] The word 'apophatic' refers to speaking about God using language and concepts which suggests that God cannot be confined or totally understood in such terms, in other words that God is more than human thought and words can imagine!

[4] Bright Field from Collected Poems 1945-1990 by RS Thomas. Published by The Orion Publishing Group

[5] from Collected Poems 1945-1990 by RS Thomas. Published by The Orion Publishing Group.

[6] Extract from 'Candlemas Prayer' by Ann Lewin is © Ann Lewin 2004. Published by Canterbury Press. Used by permission. rights@hymnsam.co.uk.'

AND ALL THE EARTH SHALL CRY GLORY

FOCAL READING: GENESIS 1.1–2.4

WEEK 2

If last week we reflected on the uncontrollability of God – perhaps even God's absence, this week we explore the contrasting pole of biblical spirituality – God's presence in our world, God's profound involvement with, and 'consecration' of, the beauty of life and creation, and God's willingness to be present 'with' human beings.

SYMBOL

A flower in a simple container

OPENING MEDITATION

But what do I love when I love you? Not grace of bodies, nor the beauty of the seasons, nor the brightness of the light, so lovely to look at; nor inexhaustible melodies of sweet song, nor the fragrant smell of flowers, ointments and spices, manna and honey, nor limbs which welcome the embraces of the flesh. It is not these that I love when I love my God: and yet I love a kind of light, of melody and of fragrance, a kind of food, and a kind of embrace, when I love my God; … This is what I love when I love my God…

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said, 'It is not I': and whatever was in it said the same (*Job 28.12f*). I asked the sea and the deeps, and all that lives, swimming or creeping, in them, and they answered 'We are not your God, seek above us'… I asked the heavens, sun, moon and stars, 'Nor (say they) are we the God you are looking for'. And I spoke again to all these things which are so close to the gateways of my senses, 'You have told me that you are not my God: tell me something about him'. And with a great voice they all cried together, 'He made us' (*Psalm 99.3*). My questioning them was my mind's desire, and their beauty was their answer.

(Augustine, Confessions, X.vi, translation of Robert Bridges, slightly modernised and adapted)

STARTING OUT

- Does the beauty of creation help you to feel closer to God?
- Invite a couple of members of the group to share what particular biblical passages make their hearts burn within them

GENESIS 1.1–2.4

Read the biblical passage and then ponder this reflection:

One of the unforgettable moments of twentieth-century human history took place on December 24 1968. It was made possible because of the development of rocket technology, visual broadcasting, and the courage and adventurousness

of the human beings who participated in it. It was the day when human beings first orbited the moon, and from space those three men in Apollo 8 saw 'Earthrise'. Although later overshadowed by the moon landings of the following year, that first sight of the Earth again beamed back to us as the spaceship completed its orbit conveyed a glory and a beauty that was at least as powerful as Neil Armstrong's later 'small step'. Perhaps because of the date on which this happened, it was accompanied by the astronauts' reading of a biblical passage: the first ten verses of Genesis 1. (It is possible to see Earthrise and listen to their reading at: https://www.nasa.gov/topics/history/features/apollo_8.html.)

There was a deep rightness to their choice, not only because Genesis 1 speaks of 'heavens and earth', but also because the first chapters of Genesis are an inheritance which belong to humanity as a whole, even those people would not consider themselves to be overtly religious. It was 'heart burning' to hear those verses read in that time and place and before such a vista.

One thing that was notable – even in the comparatively few verses from Genesis 1 that were read that day, was the repetition, 'And God saw that it was good', culminating on the sixth day with the emphatic 'very good'. Genesis speaks powerfully of the 'goodness' of creation, and the goodness of God's actions in bringing it into being. In the world in which early Christianity came into being, that was not an automatic way of thinking: often the world and the material and physical creation were regarded as evil and dirty – and the goal of 'salvation' was to escape from this world into a spiritual and heavenly realm. Because of this some Christians of the period – Marcion is the most famous example – argued that Christians should rid themselves of the Old Testament altogether in part because it affirmed this goodness of creation. It was notable however that Marcion's efforts to eliminate the Old Testament eventually resulted in him feeling the need to also dispense with over half the New! Marcion was firmly declared to be a heretic, and indeed the first efforts to gather together the biblical New Testament 'canon' came about in reaction to him. This accurately reflects the reality that it is difficult, actually impossible, to understand the Gospels and the rest of the

Photo: NASA

New Testament without taking into account what Christians today call 'the Old Testament', but which for the earliest Christians was what they simply called 'the scriptures'. At times Christians have sometimes been inclined to focus on 'other worldly' aspects of their faith: the Old Testament acts as a corrective to this. Indeed by beginning the Bible with Genesis' great account of creation, the story of redemption which will start in Exodus is set within a wider frame and we are ultimately reminded of God's care for all. There is a beautiful reflection by the Old Testament teacher Walther Zimmerli setting out the debt of the Christian church to the Old Testament because its affirmation of a God who works in and with this world:

'The Church is always in danger of fashioning for herself a Christ who rules in a spiritual remoteness, and who experiences his true veneration in the church building or in theological discussions. But when the gospel of Christ is explained in terms of the Old Testament, then we see clearly that it is sent into the world, to the humble and to the suffering, as also to those in power and responsible for the laws of the state and of society; and so it becomes clear that God, the Lord and creator of the whole world, will not be venerated in the world as the one who is beyond at an awesome distance, but will be loved again as the one who has come to the world in love.'[7]

We have chosen for reflection this week the picture that accompanies the text of Genesis 1 in the *The Saint John's Bible* (see box). The beauty of the artwork in this illustration is underpinned by the interpretive hints it offers us to deepen our understanding of this biblical passage. The passage moves from left to right marking out the seven days of creation. The dark jagged edges on the left recall the primordial chaos, the 'formless void' upon which God's creative work was imprinted. The Hebrew words *tohu-wa-bohu* inscribed in

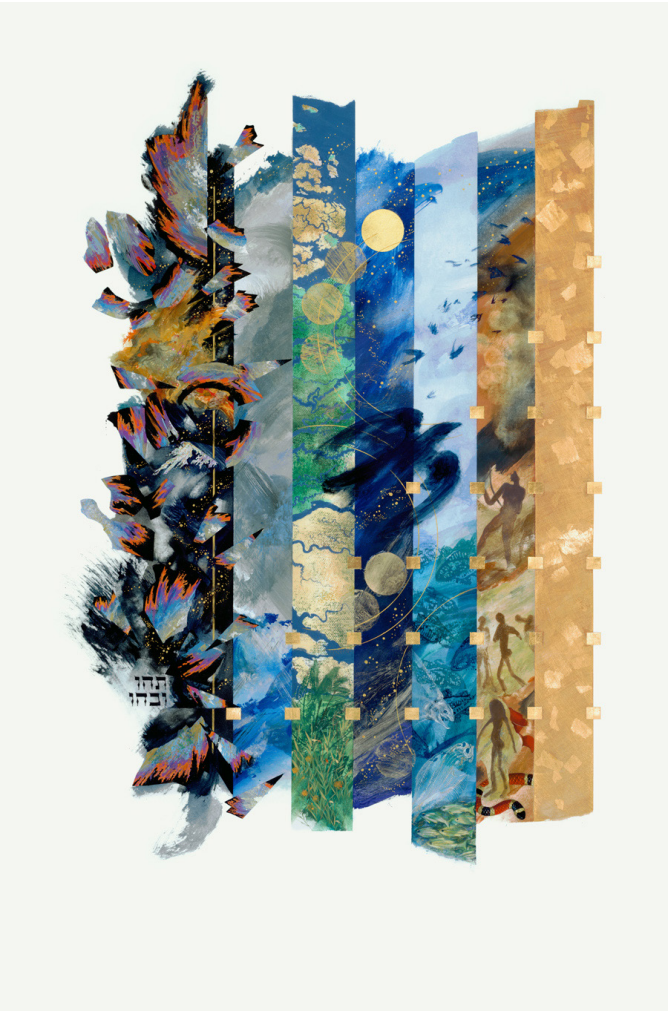
this dark area can be translated as 'waste and void' (*Genesis 1.2*). Gradually as the illustration moves from left to right, each 'day' of creation unfolds. The 'illumination uses gold throughout to symbolize God's intervention in the chaos and his ordering of the universe and its elements. Hence the gold squares are applied geometrically, starting with day one and expanding progressively outwards and upwards in influence until reaching the serenity and simplicity of the Sabbath.' The bird soaring across the picture recalls the spirit of God which 'brooded' over the waters as the creative process began.

One of the features of Genesis 1 is the importance the biblical text gives to certain key numbers – especially seven and ten. For many biblical writers, numbers helped to symbolise God's ordering of reality, and generated confidence in creation. [8]

Although the culmination of God's creative work is the inauguration of the Sabbath on the seventh day, the creation of human beings as the climax of the sixth day is also told in ways that make clear its significance.

It is introduced by God's plural of majesty 'Let us'… and then we hear emphatically that human beings, both male and female, are created 'in the image of God' (*Genesis 1.27*). It is often forgotten what a revolutionary idea this is, yet this biblical understanding that we human beings are privileged to be made 'in the image of God', has been a fundamental underpinning of biblical, and especially Christian, theology and ethics. For example modern Christian reflection on human rights is fundamentally underpinned by the belief in human dignity that stems from this language of Genesis 1.

The word 'glory' does not actually appear in Genesis itself, but many Old Testament texts celebrate creation as being a sign of God's glory, 'The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (*Psalm 19.1*). The very word 'glory' has a sort-of heart-burning sparkly frisson about itself! The Hebrew noun translated as 'glory' originally comes from a word meaning 'weight' or 'heavy'. A person's 'glory' was what gave him or her their 'weight' or 'importance'.



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THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

To mark the importance of the year 2000 in Christian history, Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, USA commissioned a hand-written hand-illuminated Bible. The biblical text of the NRSV translation is accompanied by a series of beautiful art works which both enhance and offer an implicit commentary on the accompanying text. The picture used for this week's reflection is of course the first illumination in the Bible. Donald Jackson, the Welsh calligrapher who was the artistic director for the project, spoke of the impact that it made on him: 'The continuous process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart on a crafted page is the closest I have ever come to God.' You can find out more about *The Saint John's Bible* at: https://www.saintjohnsbible.org/

When the word was linked to God it eventually came to refer to God's 'visible presence'. So the beauty of creation can point us to God's visible presence among us, as St Augustine suggested in the introductory meditation. 'Glory' helps to reinforce the biblical understanding of the 'goodness' of the created world, and resonates with the deeply held conviction of many Christians that physical and material objects – like bread, wine and water – can themselves become vehicles of God's presence. An awareness of God's glory can help us develop a spirit of thankfulness: indeed it is no accident that the basic meaning of the very word 'Eucharist', used by many Christians to describe the central sacramental act of Christian worship, is 'to give thanks'.

In the New Testament the language of God's creative presence is intensified and focused in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John hints at how the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is inaugurating a new creation. This Gospel begins by echoing the first chapter of Genesis, and the final words spoken by Jesus on the Cross are 'It is finished', re-calling the words of Genesis 2.2, which spoke of God's finishing of creation. And it is telling that the resurrected Jesus first appears to his disciples in a garden… A fundamental assertion of the 'goodness' of the material creation reverberates through John 1.14, 'The Word became flesh and has dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory'… The verb 'dwell' used here, recalls the Old Testament language of God dwelling with God's people in a tent or tabernacle: but now the divine Word becomes 'flesh' to dwell with us, in spite of all the connotations of materiality, weakness and dirt the word 'flesh' held for many for whom John wrote his Gospel. It is the paradox of the 'incarnation' (= 'enfleshing') that is at the heart of Christianity.

But John has still more challenges to offer his readers, and us today. For as the Gospel progresses the truth is gradually unfurled to us that the supreme moment of Christ's glory – the point when God is most visibly present in him – takes place at that time of apparent supreme weakness when he hangs dying on the Cross. 'Now is the hour come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (*John 12.23*). The glory of God is to be seen in weakness and vulnerability rather than power and strength. Or perhaps rather we are being encouraged to discover that true power can be found in apparent weakness.

And on that journey to Emmaus, what does it say to us that it is when Jesus breaks and shares bread, that most material of substances, that his fellow travellers suddenly realise who their journeying companion has been?

Lent therefore is a time in which we are also called to celebrate God as the giver of life, through honouring the goodness of creation.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

Supposing him to be the gardener
(John 20.15)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory
(John 1.14)

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
The Creator of the ends of the earth;
He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable…
Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength
They shall mount up with wings like eagles
They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.
(Isaiah 40.28-31)

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.
(Deuteronomy 30.19)

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.
(Jeremiah 4.23-26)

These things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and believing have life in his name.
(John 20.31)

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
(Psalm 8.3-4)

Let justice roll down like waters, and right-eousness like an everflowing stream
(Amos 5.24)

Were you there when the morning stars sang together and the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
(Job 38.7)

SOME WORDS FOR REFLECTION

The glory of God is humanity alive, and the life of humanity is the vision of God
(Irenaeus)

And in this he showed me a little thing, the size of a hazel nut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked upon it with mind's eye, and I thought, 'What can this be?' And answer came 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled that it could last, for I thought it might have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. And the answer came into my mind: It lasts and ever shall, because God loves it. And all things have being through the love of God. In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. And the third, that God looks after it.
(Julian of Norwich)

Creation is the music of God
(Indian proverb)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
(Gerald Manley Hopkins)

I still believe in a beauty worth beholding, a truth worth speaking and a love worth finding
(Calen Gayle)

For Christians, who believe they are created in the image of God, it is the Godhead, diversity in unity and the three-in-oneness of God, which we and all creation reflect
(Desmond Tutu)

SOME SONGS TO LISTEN TO AND SHARE

The spacious firmament on high
(Beautifully sung by the choir of Trinity College Cambridge at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrEraKffwYQ

All creatures of our God and King

The Servant King (especially the line 'Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered')

All people that on earth do dwell

Thou whose almighty word

Word that formed creation, earth and sea and sky;
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmhobeup0oI

God who gives to life its goodness
https://hymnary.org/text/god_who_gives_to_life_its_goodness

Creation sings the Father's song
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkvQsz7_Ui8

Wind upon the waters, voice upon the deep;
rouse your sons and daughters, wake us from our sleep.
Breathing life into all flesh, breathing love into all hearts,
Living wind upon the waters of my soul. [9]
https://youtu.be/-0vwR5LqLz0

SOME QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

How does art speak to you of God? For some people it is visual art, for others music, or poetry, what is it for you? (Donald Jackson's comment above might be interesting to help you reflect on this.)

The island of Iona has been described as a 'thin place' – where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially transparent. Are there some places where you feel that God is particularly close to you?

What do you think the Russian writer Dostoevsky meant when he said 'Beauty will save the world'?

What implications do you draw from the biblical understanding that humanity has been created in the image of God?

Can our reflections this week offer us any wisdom as we wrestle with the ecological crisis of our time?

SOMETHING TO PRAY

Holy Spirit, Enlivener,
Breathe on us, fill us with life anew,
In your new creation, already upon us,
Breaking through, groaning and travailing,
But already breaking through, breathe upon us.

Till that day when night and autumn vanish
And lambs grown sheep are no more slaughtered
And even the thorn shall fade
And the whole earth cry glory at the marriage feast of the lamb
In this new creation, already upon us,
Fill us with life anew.

(George Macleod) [10]

SOMETHING TO TAKE AWAY

As suggested above, numbers were important for the biblical writers because they helped to affirm the order and stability of creation. Recent biblical study indicates that a play on numbers may have been worked into the structure of some of the psalms to help to reinforce their meaning. A good example is Psalm 23. There are 26 words which lead to the three words at the heart of the psalm, and there are then 26 more words after this three word centre. (This of course only works if you are reading the psalm in Hebrew!) What is special about 26? Well, each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value, and it so happens that the numerical value of the letters YHWH (the name of God) comes to 26. The three words at the centre are (in Hebrew) *ki ata imadi* – which mean 'for you are with me'. So the number play of the psalm helps to reinforce the central message that YHWH is with me!

[7] Walther Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World, SPCK, 1976, p.150

[8] https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/26-april/faith/faith-features/divine-numerology

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FACE TO FACE

FOCAL READING: GENESIS 32.22 – 33.10

Following on the themes of absence and presence explored during the previous two weeks, we now bring them into discussion with each other by drawing on the idiom of 'face' which appears frequently and powerfully in the Bible. It helps us to explore the intrinsic interconnection between our relationship with God and our mutual relationships with other human beings. We discover that 'face' can become a visual marker for fear and forgiveness, acceptance and welcome, and it underlines the way that change and transfiguration is a central biblical theme.

SYMBOL

A mirror.

OPENING MEDITATION

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind ungrateful?Ah my dear
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.

WEEK 3

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

(George Herbert)

STARTING OUT

- Invite a couple of members of the group to share what particular biblical passages make their hearts burn within them.
- Using the opening meditation as a starting point, explore briefly people's own experiences of occasions when it has been difficult to look at – or be looked at by - another. How did they respond?

GENESIS 32.22-33.10

Read the biblical passage and then ponder this reflection:

Perhaps appropriately, I first came across the modern icon called 'Christ is our reconciliation', our focus illustration for this week, at the church of St Ethelburga's in central London. Having been very badly damaged by an IRA bomb in 1993, the then Bishop of London was determined to restore the building, and give it a specific focus as a centre for work on peace and reconciliation. The icon itself had

Pax Christi Icon of Peace.
It is possible to book the Icon to host in your parish, community or school. See:
http://paxchristi.org.uk/resources/pax-christi-icon-of-peace/

been commissioned by Pax Christi International, and was created shortly before the turn of the millennium at a Greek Catholic monastery in the Holy Land. [11]

Using a range of characters and scenes, some biblical, some relating to the tradition and history of the Church, it seeks to speak to the need for, and fruit of, reconciliation in a variety of contexts; between the various peoples of the Holy Land, between the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, between Eastern and Western Christianity and even between men and women. As well as English, which is used to name the various characters which appear on the icon; in the centre of the icon the words 'Christ is our reconciliation' appear in Greek, and Latin and Hebrew. (Presumably these languages were chosen as the three languages written on Christ's cross.) At the centre bottom of the icon, underneath the scene of Jesus Christ teaching his disciples, the Lord's Prayer is written out in Syriac. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language that it is believed that Jesus himself spoke, and it is the ancient and sacred language of many of the Christian churches in the Middle East, especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Do explore the various scenes on the icon as your time allows: this reflection is going to focus particularly on the central scene, which depicts the meeting of Jacob and Esau, as related in Genesis 33.10. One of the aspects of the picture which at first sight looks out of place is the ladder in the background. This recalls the ladder which appears much earlier in the story of Jacob – at that time twenty years earlier when he had fled from his brother's anger and by night at Bethel had seen the ladder stretching up into heaven (*Genesis 28.12*).

The key to understanding the story told in the icon are the words that Jacob uses when he meets his brother once again after so many years of alienation. Translated from the Hebrew as literally as possible they read: 'Your face is like the face of God to me, with such graciousness you have received me.' They hint – powerfully – that we need to read this morning-time encounter between the two brothers alongside the powerful and numinous tale of the night before told in the previous chapter, in which, at the ford of Jabbok, Jacob wrestled with a divine mysterious figure throughout the night and is eventually blessed and given a new name and a new identity. This is one of the most significant moments of the whole story of the Old Testament. The great German scholar Gerhard von Rad put it, 'there is charged to it something of the entire divine history into which Israel was drawn'. Jacob then names the place where this has happened as Peniel, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' (The name Peniel is drawn from two Hebrew words *pen* = 'face' and *el* = 'God'.) It is interesting to notice that the embrace of the two brothers in the icon itself portrays a feeling of 'wrestling'. What the story is suggesting to us is that there is an intrinsic

WHAT IS AN ICON?

This week's chosen picture is a modern icon, 'Christ is our reconciliation'. Though created only about 20 years ago, it is designed to reflect the classical tradition of icon-painting in Christianity, which is especially important in the Orthodox churches. As hinted at in the words of Elias Chacour (above) there is a close connection between 'icons' and the biblical understanding that human beings have been created in the 'image' of God. (In fact the word used for 'image' in the Greek text of Genesis 1.27 was literally 'icon'.)

Through the work of the icon painter and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, an icon is intended to put the viewer in touch with the spiritual reality that it represents. It was the belief that we could see the face of God in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, (2 Corinthians 4.6), that led the early Church to value icons – affirming that what is physical and material can convey what is spiritual.

connection between our relationship with God, and our relationship with our human brothers and sisters. They cannot be separated. If we want to see the face of God we have to be prepared to recognise it in our fellow human beings – indeed we have to be prepared to look them 'in the face' and see the image of God reflected in them. This is why that ladder appears in the icon: it is only when brothers are reconciled in this way that the ladder really can stretch between earth and heaven. This is one of the profoundest insights of biblical spirituality.

Last week, in looking at the account of the creation of humanity as the 'image of God' in Genesis 1, we were reflecting on God's presence with us. This week we are building on that insight as we use the language of 'face' to discover that God's presence is essentially relational. Indeed Karl Barth, one of the theological giants of the twentieth century, suggested that our capacity for building relationships is what marks out humanity as being 'in the image of God'. It is not surprising that such insights focus on the language of 'face' – for it is our faces which are the windows into who each of us really are and what each of us really feels. It is through our faces that we respond to others with joy, grief, repentance and acceptance. Faces are also transformational – by really looking at the face of another, or by being looked at by them, our own faces can be changed. That can sometimes feel dangerous: so it is no wonder that the Bible suggests that it can be very dangerous to look on the face of God! The Old Testament wrestles with this insight over and over again, sometimes in an almost contradictory way. So for example in Exodus 33, in verse 11 we read 'Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend', yet only a few verses further on in the chapter we are told ' "But," said the Lord, "You cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live".' Yet somehow both insights have a deep truth about them.

It is probably not accidental that the Hebrew word for *see* (r'h) and the Hebrew word for *fear* (i r') look very similar, and indeed there are occasions in the Old Testament when it is not quite clear which of these two words is meant. It was indeed felt to be a fearful thing to look on God.

It is also interesting to note that because Hebrew is a very concrete language the preposition 'before' in Hebrew (*lpnei*) is literally made up of two Hebrew words which mean 'to the face of'. It can give a new resonance to our relationships both with God and with our fellow human beings if we remember that when we speak of standing 'before' someone, we are actually talking about standing 'to their face'.

Central to the New Testament is the profound insight that we can see the face of God in Jesus Christ. Sometimes – as Peter must have felt after he denied Jesus three times and as Luke's Gospel explicitly suggests in Luke 22.61 ('the Lord turned and looked at Peter') – that face may look on us with sorrow – and we find it difficult to gaze on it in return; more often that face offers us acceptance and invites us to reconciliation, both with God and with one another.

This is explicitly stated in 2 Corinthians 4.6: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness", who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' The New Testament account of the transfiguration of Christ, that great moment of illumination at the centre of the Gospels, expresses the same truth in a narrative form. Indeed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke the story of the

transfiguration is told in a way that emphasises how it is the 'face' of Jesus which has been changed. Earlier in 2 Corinthians Paul seems to draw out the important implication that seeing the face of Christ must change us too. Indeed unless we are willing to be changed ourselves by this experience perhaps it is indeed too dangerous to look on the face of God in Christ. 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.' (*2 Corinthians 3.18*).

There is a wonderful reflection by Jane Williams which draws out the implication of this: 'Jesus's face is what ours is supposed to look like, if only we could be as human as God. Our faces are a series of masks that we try on and discard, always searching for the real "me", always looking for the face that will make others love us or fear us, and all the time getting further and further away from the face we were made to mirror, the face of Jesus… How many different masks we seem to think we need – masks that make us powerful, invulnerable, beautiful, feared, acceptable, some that we have so deeply internalized that we don't even know that they are just masks. But the irony is that, without these masks, we are made in the image of God.' [12]

We need to learn to cherish our own 'real' face, as well as really cherishing the faces of others – perhaps particularly those from whom we are somehow instinctively alienated. One of the most contentious 'issues' of our time is the situation in Israel and Palestine (which is of course alluded to in the icon 'Christ is our Reconciliation'). In my experience of having worked in this area and in the field of interreligious dialogue over several decades I find that it is all too easy for protagonists in this conflict to begin to 'dehumanise' one another. It is a temptation also for those of us from 'outside' who are interested in and who work in this field and who sometimes can so identify with the justice and the pains of one or other party that we fail to realise the human needs of the other. There is a wonderful short reflection by the Palestinian Christian Elias Chacour, formerly Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee. Many years ago (before he was an Archbishop!) Chacour took a mixed group of young people, both Jews and Arabs, for a meeting and discussion on Mount Tabor which is the traditional site of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. This comment by him was drawn out of his experience at that time:

> The true icon is your neighbour, the human being who has been created in the image and with the likeness of God. How beautiful it is when our eyes are transfigured and we see that our neighbour is the icon of God, and that you, and you, and I – we are all the icons of God. How serious it is when we hate the image of God, whoever that may be, whether a Jew or a Palestinian. How serious it is when we cannot go and say, 'I am sorry about the icon of God who was hurt by my behaviour.' We all need to be transfigured so we can recognise the glory of God in one another. [13]

What about the 'face' during that journey to Emmaus? One of the intriguing aspects of the story is the fact that somehow the face of Jesus seems to have been hidden from the sight, or at least the understanding, of his companions as they walked the road together. Pictures of the story offer different ways of suggesting this. For example a well known painting by the Chinese artist He Qi shows us Jesus' back rather than his face:
https://www.heqiart.com/store/p176/44_The-Road-to-Emmaus_Limited_Edition.html

The change in the disciples' perception comes about not because of Jesus explicitly telling them who he is, but as a result of the 'opening of their eyes' when watching him blessing and breaking the bread. Is this the way that God chooses to effect change in us? Not by great dramatic and powerful interventions, but by drawing alongside (often using the 'faces' of other people) and inviting us to look at our lives in a new light?

Lent is a season for change, and for transfiguration.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

Esau said to Jacob 'I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself…' *(Genesis 33.9)*

Just as you did to one of the least of those who are members of my family you did it to me.
(Matthew 25.40)

At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.'
(Luke 22.60-61)

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.
(Luke 15.20)

Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend… But,' said the Lord, 'You cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live.'
(Exodus 33.11, 20)

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.
(1 John 3.2)

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3.18)

Fear not, for I am with you
(Many places!)

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.
(Ephesians 1.17-18)

Israel said to Joseph 'Now I can die, now that I have seen you again, and seen you still alive.'
(Genesis 46.30)

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.
(Matthew 18.10)

Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly.
(Psalm 102.2 NIV)

SOME WORDS – AND ART – FOR REFLECTION

Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of
men's faces
(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Sometimes faith confidently and easily interprets experience as from God; sometimes only slowly and after much argument with itself and life. And sometimes it simply has to hold on, like the troubled wrestler by the dark river, trusting that when the light breaks it will appear that the imagined enemy was Love all the time.
(J Neville Ward)

Christian mission is offering the hospitality of the face of Christ
(David Ford)

Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.
(Mark Twain)

There is a powerful painting by Rembrandt of Jacob wrestling with the angel. See https://www.artbible.info/art/large/89.html. In it, the angel is forcing Jacob's head around so that he has to look at the divine figure 'face to face'. Up to this point Jacob has always been a 'behind' sort of person – his very name means 'heel' (the back of the foot!) If he is to change he will need to be willing to look to the face of the angel – and eventually his brother.

SOME SONGS TO LISTEN TO AND SHARE

Be thou my vision

Christ's is the world in which we move ('To the lost Christ shows his face')
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQCqNPZQASM

Come thou traveller unknown

Face to face with Christ my Saviour
https://hymnary.org/text/face_to_face_with_christ_my_savior

And can it be that I should gain ('Thine eye diffused a quickening ray')
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5n9HFIHp6jA

Here O my Lord I see thee face to face
https://hymnary.org/text/here_o_my_lord_i_see_thee_face_to_face

Love bade me welcome (set to music by Rhian Samuel and sung by the choir of New College, Oxford)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkZfpEJ8cXA

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face.

Father's eyes (Gary Chapman version)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3u5-TsAOejg

SOME QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

How does the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel speak to you? Does it inspire you? Puzzle you? Terrify you? What do you think we can learn from it?

What 'masks' do you put on, to hide yourself from others? (see the reflection by Jane Williams above)

What does the 'ministry of reconciliation' mean to you? Can you give an example from your own life or context?

Based on your own experience, why is it disagreements between 'brothers' are so often specially bitter and intense. How can they be healed?

Have you had experience of how fear can be destructive of personal and social relationships. How did Jesus in his ministry try to build trust through word and example?

SOMETHING TO PRAY

The shouts are too loud
they so often deafen my ears.
War, famine, destruction, death –
the sufferings of the world glide past my soul.
I have heard too much to care.

But then you, O God,
you stand in the midst of the world's woe,
and the shapes of those who suffer are no
longer faceless,
for you have bequeathed to them your own face,
their pain is etched with the lines of your passion.
And I shall proclaim:
I had heard, but now I see.

The people are too many,
They blur together in my imagination,
Races, colours, faiths and languages -
their shifting kaleidoscope dazzles my vision
I am made giddy by their infinite variety.

But then you, O God,
you are the still point round which all revolves,
in you both light and shadow find an equilibrium:
you paint into life our many-peopled world,
your love refracts us into a rainbow of hope:
And I shall proclaim:
I had heard but now I see.

SOMETHING TO TAKE AWAY

Skopje, North Macedonia, May 7, 2019: Pope Francis encouraged youth in North Macedonia Tuesday to follow Mother Teresa's example and make something beautiful out of their lives.

'Each of you is called, like Mother Teresa, to work with your hands, to take life seriously and make something beautiful of it,' Pope Francis said.

Pope Francis shared with the young people what he believes to be one of the greatest lessons he has learned in his life.

'Now at my age -- and I am not young -- do you want to know what I think was the best lesson I ever learned? It was how to talk to people "face-to-face,"' he said.

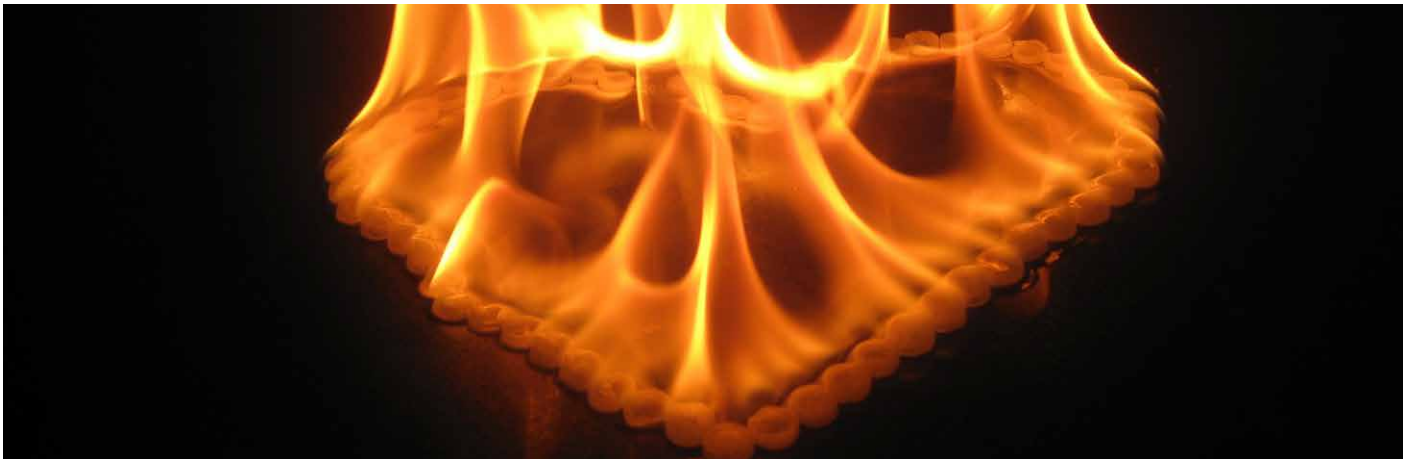
'We have entered into the digital age, but actually we know very little about communication. We are all "connected," but not really "involved" with one another. Getting involved requires life; it calls for being there and sharing the good times but also the not so good times,' Francis said.

[11] Postcard size copies of this icon are available from Pax Christi at a cost of £2.50 for 50 (plus postage): http://paxchristi.org.uk/resources/pax-christi-icon-of-peace/

[12] Jane Williams, The Human Face of God, BBC Radio 4 Lent talk 2003.

[13] Elias Chacour, We Belong to the Land, Collegeville: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, p.46-47.

HEART TO HEART: SORROW AND JOY



FOCAL READINGS: VARIOUS SHORT PASSAGES FROM THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND PSALM 22

WEEK 4

In the biblical world the 'heart' was seen as the seat of the emotions and feeling, our true 'centre.' The very fact that in the Emmaus story the disciples speak of their 'hearts' burning within them encourages us to explore the richness which the Bible offers to address the fundamental questions of human existence which are intertwined with our feelings – the reality of death, the longing for life, the emotions of sorrow and joy, and their physical expressions in weeping and laughter. Given that the fourth Sunday of Lent is kept as Mothering Sunday in some of our churches, we also reflect on the role of women and the feminine in expressing the deep wisdom of human existence.

STARTING OUT

- Invite some members of the group to offer their 'heart-burning' passages.
- Ask people to reflect on what makes them weep. Expressions of 'joy' are perhaps less easy to define – but have there been times when members of the group would want to use this word to express how they feel?

SYMBOL

Two bowls of water. A pile of salt.

Water is essential for life. Fresh water is used in the Scriptures as a symbol for eternal life. Salt water is also essential for life, although it is often associated with tears, and is used in the liturgy of Passover where it symbolises the tears and sweat of the ancestors in Egypt. Add the salt to one of the bowls and place the two bowls alongside each other.

OPENING MEDITATION

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.

2 Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.

3 You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.

4 Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life;
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.

5 Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.

6 Your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch makes sinners righteous.

7 Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;
in your love and tenderness remake us.

8 In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

(Common Worship © The Archbishops' Council 2005)

You may choose to read this together, perhaps sharing out the verses between individuals or groups. If you would prefer to listen to it set to music, it can be found at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZaNBmZuYYY
– the musical setting was composed by my husband Alan Amos.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

According to the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, one of the most dangerous things to happen to a person or to a people is to have a 'hardened heart' (see e.g. Exodus 9.12; Mark 8.17). Hearts can – and often should – be 'on fire' and 'burn within us'; sometimes they need to be 'broken and contrite' – but they must never be hardened.

Over the last decades and years the churches and those who minister in them have rightly needed to become 'more professional' in a number of ways, but they must never lose sight of the fact that our faith – certainly as expressed in our scriptures – affirms our emotions and feelings as part of our real humanity, and invites us to draw on them in our worship and our discipleship. There is a powerful strand of Christian spirituality, especially important in the Orthodox churches of the Middle East, which, for example, sees 'tears' as a visible and essential sign of our fidelity to and growth in longing for God.

Perhaps more contentious is the view that the God whom we worship might also experience suffering and what we call, in human terms, 'emotions'. Much of classic Christian theology has been formulated on the premise that God is unchangeable (Think of the hymn 'Immortal, invisible, God only wise' with its line, 'nought changeth Thee'!). Emotions change us, they can also make us vulnerable. In the Greek intellectual world in which Christianity grew in the first few centuries of the Christian era, 'divinity' was characterised as being far removed from any form of change and suffering, and such views did influence the development of Christian theology.

But the picture that we draw from the Bible itself feels rather different. God shares in human joys and sorrows: God delights for us and with us and grieves with and for us. 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents…' God weeps and God suffers in the suffering of God's people. There is one particularly powerful section of the Book of Jeremiah where in turn God, prophet and the people are described as weeping in a way that seems to bind all closely together in their grief (*Jeremiah 8.18-9.22*). It is a challenge – but a vital one – for Christians to find some way of holding in tension both the classical insight that God is self-existent and cannot be controlled by anything outside himself, and the biblical reality of God's compassion, which as the word itself suggests means that God may 'suffer with' his creation.[14]

One of the narratives in the Bible where an understanding of God's own willingness to become vulnerable can be helpful is the account of the flood which appears in Genesis 6-9. In spite of the fact that, due to the presence of rainbows and animals in the story, it is beloved of young people, in some ways this tale is one that is very difficult to reflect on. God's apparent decision to destroy the world because of his anger with his human creation is very hard to read, especially in these days when protagonists of religiously inspired violence sometimes draw on violent scriptural texts to justify their actions.

The Old Testament scholar and Anglican priest Trevor Dennis has commented that the only way he is able to preach on this text is by imagining that the ocean on which the Ark will float is an

ocean made up of God's own tears. It is however interesting to note the mention of the very word 'heart' at the beginning and end of the tale. In Genesis 6.5-6 we read that God saw that the 'every inclination of the thoughts of [human] hearts was only evil continually' and in response 'it grieved him [God] to the heart.' As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann aptly described it, 'this is indeed "heart to heart" between humankind and God.'[15] In these verses we are meeting a God who wishes to stand alongside his human creation rather than over against them in judgement. God is not detached from his decision. He is intimately caught up in it, as we all are when we take difficult and perhaps painful decisions which impact on those we love. However terrible the flood is – and there are no easy answers to the problems that the story poses for us – it is somehow easier to 'cope' with if we believe that God is not coldly detached from what is happening.

And what is more, it is important to discover how after the flood the God we meet in Genesis is different. For here is one of the points when our Bible tells us of a God who can, and does change – and perhaps even suffer in the process. So the God we meet after the flood, and who offers human beings the 'rainbow covenant' and a pledge that 'never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth' (*Gen. 9.11*), is a God who has begun this process of change. Not so human beings: the language used to describe their attitude after the flood is deliberately reflective of the words used to describe them beforehand. For in Genesis 8.21 which seems a deliberate echo of the earlier passage, we again have the double use of the word 'heart' employed in relation to both God and human beings. However though the heart of humanity may still be the same, 'the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth' but as God speaks to himself 'in his heart' we find that this heart has moved from regret to compassion. The flood 'has effected an irreversible change in God, who now will approach his creation with an unlimited patience and forbearance'.[16] God will continue to grieve over human wickedness, but has pledged himself to show forbearance. And this means that the promise that God offers to Noah and all creation is one which will be of great cost to God and which will necessitate divine suffering. There is a pathway which leads from this promise to the weeping of Christ which is alluded to in the Song of Anselm.

One result of the Bible's willingness to speak of God's responsiveness to human pain is that there is a form of prayer to God which appears widely in the Old Testament, perhaps especially the Book of Psalms, called 'lament'. Lament isn't exactly either confession or intercession – though it may have some links with both of these forms of prayer. Lament is telling God in no uncertain terms that there is something wrong with the world as I or we experience it, and demanding that God do something about it! Many Christians today – certainly in the western world – find 'lament' embarrassing and problematic. They don't think it is polite to speak to God in that way. It is the antithesis of the stiff British upper lip! Yet of course Jesus Christ himself, according to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, 'lamented' on the cross in the words of Psalm 22, perhaps the most powerful of all the psalms of lament (see box on *Psalm 22* below).

Perhaps the first person to lament in the Old Testament is Hagar; the Egyptian slave of Abraham

PSALM 22

One of the features of Psalm 22 is the way that it seems to divide sharply into two halves (though the first half is longer than the second). It exemplifies that sense of paradox which we have been discussing this week. The first half is a profound example of 'lament'; the second half of the psalm is an exuberant song of praise and thanksgiving to God. The shift comes at verse 21. One of the linked features of the psalm that is particularly interesting is the contrast between the sense of solitude, isolation and loneliness which dominates the first half, and the way that in the second half the psalmists calls upon an increasingly wider group of people to join him in the circle of praise. By the end of the psalm even those from the past and the future are being summoned to participate! What can we learn from this about the relationship between sorrow, isolation, joy and community?

and Sarah and the mother of Ishmael. She is certainly the first person in the Bible who is the subject of the verb 'weep' (*Genesis 21.16*). It is interesting that it should be this 'outsider' who is the first person to be described in this way. Cast out in the desert with her son, she weeps and laments as the water runs out and she waits for the boy to die. Eventually God hears her. Do we too need to recover the ability and willingness to 'lament' to God?

Weeping and lament though are not the end of the story, either in the Bible or for God's people today. In a deep way they form a pattern of life that will eventually lead on to 'joy'; those who mourn will one day be comforted. This is intrinsic to the rhythm of life that has been known through human history, expressed for example in the wonderful harvest Psalm 126, 'Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy'.

'Joy' and 'rejoicing' are the counterpoint of 'weeping'. What exactly is 'joy'? It is a word that is difficult to define – perhaps because 'joy' is in some ways undefinable! We know it when we experience it, but we are not always sure how we got there. It is certainly a word which is linked to 'burning hearts'. Joy is not exactly just happiness – though it may well include this. The 'Some Words for Reflection' section below includes a number of reflections on joy. Bishop Nick Baines of Leeds offers the following definition of joy: 'Joy comes when faith is alive, curiosity is inflamed and the mind is stretched.' In the 1980s Robert Runcie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, described joy as being the holding together in faith elements of human life that seem to be contrasting and paradoxical – discovering indeed that life can come through death – a real stretching of the mind and heart in faith. The Scottish theologian Donald Baillie once noted that 'paradox comes into all religious thought … because God cannot be comprehended in any human words or in any of the categories of our finite thought.' Somehow joy and paradox do belong together.

One of the points where 'joy' seems to be most clearly expressed in the New Testament is in the birth stories of Jesus and John the Baptist as told in the Gospel of Luke. There too paradox has a role

'The Dancing Madonna', Maureen Coatman

to play in the biblical story: an old woman, a virgin both about to become mothers . There is indeed a paradoxical quality to motherhood. It does involve both pain and joy, weeping and happiness. This is profoundly caught in the text of John 16.20-22 which is given below. There is also a paradoxical quality to Mothering Sunday – that day which is celebrated in many of our churches around this time. For some it is a day of profound happiness, for others an inevitable time of sorrow.

This year Mothering Sunday falls close in time to March 25, which many Christian churches keep as the Feast of the Annunciation, celebrating the announcing to Mary of the birth of Jesus (*Luke 1.26-38*). The 'Magnificat', Mary's song of celebration (*Luke 1.46-55*) which explicitly uses the verb 'rejoice', celebrates the changes and the contrasts that the birth of her son will inaugurate. Yet such joy must be set alongside the sorrow that is implied by the words of Simeon to Mary, when he greeted the infant Jesus in the Temple, 'a sword will pierce your own heart also'. (*Luke 2.35*)

One true way of describing Jesus is as 'The paradox of God' , that exquisitely painful and joyful holding

together of all contrasts: divine/human; death/life; weakness/power. It is a tension that is sometimes too great for many of us to bear, but it is a tension that becomes even more apparent as we draw near to the time of Jesus' cross.

Perhaps appropriately in this week there are two contrasting pictures for our reflection.

The first picture (p.27), 'the Dancing Madonna' is found at St Luke's church in Duston, Northamptonshire. It depicts a young Mary whirling her infant son around in a joyful dance. Its wonderful exuberance is life-giving and yet its history is also part of its meaning. It was sculpted in 1976 as a memorial to Julie Buchanan, the wife of the then vicar, a much-loved mother and cherished in the parish, who died at the age of 35 after a long period of illness.

The second picture (below) is unnamed and largely unknown. It is very personal to my husband and myself. It is a picture of an old woman of northern Cyprus, painted by a British artist living there in 1974. The old woman looks both wise and long-suffering. My husband Alan Amos, then living in Lebanon, bought the painting from the artist, John Corbidge, in Bellapais a village near Kyrenia in northern Cyprus during a visit to Cyprus in 1974. This was only a few weeks before the Turkish invasion of July-August that year, in which many people were killed in Bellapais and the surrounding villages. We will never know the fate of the old woman, the subject of the picture. The painting itself however travelled back to Beirut with Alan, and survived in our apartment during quite a number of years of the Lebanese civil war. When in August 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Alan and I came to leave Beirut, we manhandled the picture (and the rest of our worldly possessions!) over the rocks at Jounieh harbour as we eventually took a ship for Cyprus. The painting has been with us ever since and it speaks to us of the suffering of so many of the peoples of the Middle East, often borne most deeply by the women of the region.

Photo: *Anthony Blake Photography*

And Emmaus? How does Emmaus resonate with this week's themes of human sorrow and joy? Transparently. Near the beginning of the tale the sadness of the two disciples is specifically referred to: 'they stood still looking sad'. The contrasting exuberance of their later joy is underscored both by the very language of burning 'hearts' and by the energy which would have been required for their late night uphill return to Jerusalem! Intrinsic also to the story is the empathetic yet challenging way in which that mysterious traveller responds to them.

As we move through Lent and draw nearer to Passiontide and Easter to explore the meaning of weeping and joy can provide for us vital stepping-stones on the path towards love.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief *(Isaiah 53,3, AV translation)*

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *(Romans 8.38-9)*

And coming into sight of the city Jesus wept over it, and said, if only you had known on this great day the things which make for peace.
(Luke 19.42)

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
(Luke 1.46)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
(Matthew 5.4)

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation
(Isaiah 12.3)

Oh that my head were a spring of water and a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.
(Jeremiah 9.1)

Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.
(Jeremiah 31.15)

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
(Revelation 21.4)

Jesus began to weep.
(John 11.35)

He [Peter] went out and wept bitterly.
(Luke 22.62)

Those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
(Psalm 126.5)

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.
(Psalm 30.5)

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.
(John 16.20–22)

Then were they filled with joy when they saw the Lord.
(John 20.20, ESV translation)

SOME WORDS FOR REFLECTION

There is no aspect of human life and emotion where God is not present. Yet God's way of being present often confounds our expectations and our preconceived notions. Moments of joy, of intimacy, of confusion and despair can be the opportunity for a deeper awareness of God's presence.
(Gemma Simmonds)

Gratitude transforms the torment of memory of good things now gone into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence.
(Eugene Peterson)

Joy is the great enemy of narcissism.
(Stanley Hauerwas)
See also the video at https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/joy

John Piper offers a definition of Christian joy in this video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inEsNrLEMEY

'My joy, Christ is risen!' (the greeting of St. Seraphim of Sarov to all those who visited his monastic cell)

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world. Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world.

(Thomas Traherne, 17th century poet and spiritual writer)

THOMAS TRAHERNE

Thomas Traherne is a 17th century English poet and religious author whose writings were little known until the beginning of the 20th century when manuscripts of his writings which had been lost for over 200 years were rediscovered. Further Traherne manuscripts came to light only about 20 years ago, one in the library of Lambeth Palace. Traherne's best known work is called 'Centuries of Meditations'. A key insight Traherne offers is the importance of what he calls 'felicity' which he suggests can most truly come about when human beings allow themselves to be 'transfigured' by God. A beautiful series of windows celebrating the life and works of Traherne can be found in the cathedral of Hereford, his native city. https://www.thomasdenny.co.uk/hereford-cathedral-the-thomas-traherne-windows

SOME SONGS TO LISTEN TO AND SHARE

Drop drop slow tears.

O the life of the world is a joy and a treasure.

The kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Taize). Beautiful recording at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=32&v=3bkyllRBX48

Beethoven's Ode to Joy – this is a favourite piece for impromptu 'flashmob' orchestras. An especially joyful example of this is found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBaHPND2QJg

Deck thyself my soul with gladness.

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_wideness_in_gods_mercy

Give me joy in my heart keep me praising…

Jesu joy of man's desiring (There are many excellent versions of this available on YouTube including https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EEV-YEKrdw)

SOME QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

Does the biblical language of 'heart' resonate with you? What does it mean for you? Does it speak to you of emotions, and love and longing? A friend commented to me, based on his own personal experience, 'Why is it we speak of the "heart" when it comes to both human love and spirituality? The heart, after all, is the pumping organ that is no more emotional than the liver.

Having grown up with my father having heart disease for much of my childhood, and heard his cries as he died from his final heart attack thirty years ago, the word "heart" means something difficult as well as the conventional meaning. The heart therefore is also the part of the body that holds our vulnerability and fragility. But do we feel love physically from the heart?'

Do you find it helpful – or problematic – to think of God suffering?

What can we learn from the psalms of lament? (like *Psalm 22*)

How would you define 'joy'?

SOMETHING TO PRAY

A Litany of biblical mothers

Leader: Eve, mother of our humanity,

All: Teach us true wisdom, that all life is precious in God's sight.

Leader: Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth, yearning for a child,

All: Comfort and strengthen all who know the pain of infertility.

Leader: Hagar, condemned to the harshness of exile,

All: Sustain those who struggle to feed their sons and daughters.

Leader: Rebecca, bride from a far-off land,

All: Welcome women who must bring up family among strangers.

Leader: Rachel, weeping for your children,

All: Weep with all mothers whose children have disappeared.

Leader: Jochebed, mother of Moses and Miriam,

All: Lend your ingenuity to women who seek protection for their children.

Leader: Naomi and Ruth, bound together by a love greater than blood,

All: Show us how bitter disappointment can become the sweetness of hope.

Leader: Mary, daughter of Israel, mother of Jesus,

All: Share with us God's secrets you have pondered deep within your heart.

SOMETHING TO TAKE AWAY

Christians in the Middle East have suffered much during the tumultuous events since the beginning of this century. Many western Christians find it difficult to understand the profound sense of joy they convey amidst the troubles – and persecution – that many have experienced. There is profound 'wisdom' in the Christian East that it is good to share. The sixth century Syrian Christian saint, Jacob of Saroug, eloquently explores the importance of tears:

> You have no tears? Buy tears from the poor. You have no sadness? Call the poor person to moan with you. If your heart is hard and has neither sadness nor tears, with alms invite the needy to weep with you…provide yourself with the water of tears, and may the poor come to help you put out the fire in which you are perishing. (*Saint Jacob of Saroug*)

One of the final promises in the Bible is that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21.4). But have you ever realised that that is a promise that even God cannot keep unless we have learned how to weep?

[14] Exodus 3 (the text explored in Week One) does 'hold together' both aspects of God: God's insistence on divine sovereign freedom and God's compassion for the enslaved people in Egypt.

[15] Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982 p.77

[16] Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, p.81

BOUND TOGETHER IN LOVE AND SACRIFICE

FOCAL READING: GENESIS 22.1–18

As the season of Jesus' passion and death approaches the great biblical themes we have explored during the previous weeks – the mystery and holiness of God, God's absence and presence, the relationship of human beings with God and with one another, the joys and sorrows of what it means to be human are recapitulated. We explore how they are woven together by God's love and sacrifice which, for Christians, find their most visible expression in the cross of Christ.

SYMBOL

Two pieces of wood (ideally sticks or twigs) tied roughly together in the shape of a cross.

OPENING MEDITATION

Holy One, we hear your music in the roar of the sea,
In the song of a people,
In the quiet breeze rustling through the trees.
We thank you God:
That you so love our world.

Holy One, we sense your power in the flickering of fire,
In the yearning of our spirits,
In the dispelling of shadows.

WEEK 5

We thank you God:
That you so love our world.

Holy One, we feel your caress in the gift of our humanity,
In our desire to be whole,
In the blessing of peace.
We thank you God:
That you so love our world.

STARTING OUT

Invite a couple of members of the group to share what particular biblical passages make their hearts burn within them.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

Read Genesis 22.1–18 and ponder the following reflection:

The very first time that the word 'love' appears in the Bible is in Genesis 22, at the beginning of the chapter in which Abraham appears to be tested

by God and told to sacrifice his son, Isaac. 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and go sacrifice…' Love and sacrifice are – and always have been – bound closely together. Their relationship is intimate – yet also challenging.

Even though at the conclusion of the story Isaac is not sacrificed[17], and he is replaced by a sheep on the altar, many people of faith find this story perplexing and difficult. I think they are right to do so. Jewish readers of the story do so as well as Christians. I once reviewed a book by a Canadian Jewish rabbi who boldly and baldly stated 'Abraham got it wrong' in his willingness to be obedient to God's apparent dreadful demand. My positive review of the book brought down on my own head some indignant remarks from a more conservative Christian scholar who felt that my views were typical of modern feminists! Although today I might phrase my own comments slightly more cautiously than I did 20 years ago, I still think that I was not mistaken to find the biblical tale problematic. I certainly stand in a long line of commentators – both Jewish and Christian – who have 'wrestled' with the conundrum of how to read such a tale given our belief in a loving and life-giving God. One of the ways that Jewish interpreters responded to the difficulties of this apparent sacrifice of a young child was to suggest that Isaac was not an unwitting youngster being involuntarily offered up by his father, but a grown man (the age of 37 was often quoted) who willingly presented himself as a sacrificial offering. It is also true that many women biblical scholars do find the story especially difficult, perhaps partly because of the complete absence of Sarah, Isaac's mother, from the text.

One possible way of engaging with the text of Genesis 22 is in fact to see it as a deliberate invitation to us, made by the biblical writer, to enter into a dialogue in which our questions can be raised and be heard. The very 'bareness' of the way that the story is told – so that it is 'fraught with background'[18] - perhaps encourages this. So too does the word play and deliberate ambiguities: for example when Abraham says to Isaac, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son', are the words 'my son' intended as a direct address to Isaac expressing Abraham's hope that the sacrifice of his son may be averted by God, or is 'my son' being explicitly identified as 'the lamb for the sacrifice'? There is also a close link (clear in the original biblical Hebrew though not in English) between the words used for 'only' son (verses 2, 12) and for 'together' (verses 6, 8). The unity of purpose of the father and the son, their travelling together on this difficult journey, is somehow connected to the love that Abraham has for Isaac, his beloved son. Difficult though the story is it invites us to ponder what is the nature of love, and how our love for God and our love for others – especially those most close to us – can and should relate to each other. Of course one painful aspect of the story, touched upon more by contemporary readers than those of past generations, is that in fact Isaac was not the 'only' son of Abraham. There had also been Ishmael, whose forced expulsion into the wilderness had been told in the previous chapter, Genesis 21, with language that itself draws connections between the apparent fates of the two brothers. Presumably from the perspective of Abraham, at the beginning of chapter 22 the fact that Ishmael had survived the death to which he had apparently been consigned was unknown.

Read John 3.16 and then continue with this reflection:

The first time that the word 'love' appears in the Gospel of John is in the great proclamation of John 3.16, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Once again we have a mention of a father and a son, and it is interesting that here too the reference to 'love' is linked to an 'only Son' – even though at this point in the Gospel of John it is the 'world' rather than the 'Son' himself who is described as the object of the Father's love.

As we already hinted in Week Two there are clues scattered through the Gospel of John – not least in its opening Prologue – that the gospel writer is seeking to reflect the book of Genesis and to present the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as a 'new creation'. And so when the author used the description for Jesus of 'only Son' he is in part doing so to recall that tale first told in Genesis 22 of the near sacrifice of a beloved only Son. Jesus becomes a 'new Isaac' whose actual death on the cross, which we have been moving towards throughout this Lent

course, means that he is required to go further than Isaac had been called to go: there will be no sudden substitute lamb that will appear out of a thicket at the last minute to 'save' the situation. Rather this 'only Son' will himself become the 'lamb' and 'Saviour of the world' (see e.g. *John 1.29*).

There is other evidence in the New Testament that early Christians, in seeking to understand the meaning of Jesus' death – drew upon the analogy that was offered by the near sacrifice of Isaac. For example the reflection offered by Paul in Romans 8.32, 'God did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us…' seems to draw on the language used in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The fact that Christ died on the 'wood' of the cross assisted the comparison with the tale of Abraham and Isaac in which 'wood' also plays a key role. It is no accident that in formal liturgies in church during Holy Week Genesis 22 is often read.

But it is the Gospel of John which seems to explore most profoundly this comparison between the sacrifice of Isaac and the death of Jesus Christ – and its meaning. In this analogy God the Father takes on the double roles of God and father from the story of Abraham and Isaac and in doing so radically expands the importance of the 'love' which lies at the heart of the story. Instead of the challenge apparently once offered to Abraham to show that his love for God was greater than his love for his Son, now it is the Father's love for both Son and world that means that the gift of the Son is given freely. And it enables us to begin to understand more about the nature of love: that its power lies in its essential vulnerability which makes it stronger than hate. Over the centuries there have been many 'explanations' of how the crucifixion of Christ 'works' to restore the relationship between God and humanity; perhaps for our age we need to be encouraged to explore it primarily from the dimension of 'love' which is both a matter of heart and of will. For humanly speaking we know that there is an intrinsic relationship between love and sacrifice: for those we love we are willing to give our all, and though apparently made weak, we discover a renewed strength which can change not only ourselves but also those who are the object of our love. It was a true instinct that led to those words from the Gospel of John ' Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15.13) being placed on many war memorials, even though as Christians we would want now both to expand and to qualify how it has been used in this way.

As is suggested in the introductory paragraph for this week 'love' can and does draw together the great biblical themes we have explored earlier in our course: God's absence and presence, human relationships and reconciliation, sorrow and joy. It weaves them together and will thread them all through the cross, that life-giving sign at the heart of our faith.

After Genesis 22 there is not very much about 'love' in the rest of Genesis. The word is used to speak of Isaac's love for Rebecca, and then it seems to go downhill, as it appears a few times in the tales of Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers in a way which seems to emphasise unfair favouritism. Of course 'love' does feature often in much of the rest of the Old Testament, not least in the parts of scripture where the relationship between God and the people of Israel is compared to a marriage, which has produced some of the most 'heart burning' texts in the Old Testament. The idiom of sacrifice also reappears, used for example of Moses' self-sacrifice on behalf of his people, or of the 'man of sorrows' who is wounded for the transgression of others. In both these instances sacrifice seems to draw very close to our understanding of love.

But it is interesting to contrast how rarely the word 'love' is employed in Genesis with the Gospel of John's profligate use. It is as though once 'love' has been first mentioned in John 3.16 the flood gates are open. A few verses further on the Father's love for the Son is explicitly stated (3.35) and repeated again in 5.20 and 10.17. Then importantly Jesus' specific, concrete, particular and practical love for Mary, Martha and Lazarus, the family at Bethany, is emphasised in 11.5. Following this the Farewell Discourses circle round and round again to explore the varied dimensions of love: Jesus' love for his disciples, his demand that the disciples mirror this by loving one another, and his promise that they will abide in the Father's love. What is also important to note is that in these chapters in which love is explored so intensely that the unity of Father and

Son is also emphasised: 'As you, Father, are in me and I in you' which then extends to include us in this dwelling of love, 'may they also be in us' (John 17.20). Perhaps it reminds us of the stress back in Genesis 22 on the word 'together' to speak of the journey of Abraham and Isaac. Similarly in the journey to the cross Father and Son need to experience it together. It is somehow important – crucial one might literally say – that if love is to involve sacrifice then the one who is to undergo this experience needs to be a full and willing participant in the act.

The picture chosen to accompany our reflection for this week is the remarkable representation of the Sacrifice of Isaac painted by Marc Chagall sometime between 1960-66. There is a striking range of colours used in the painting which emphasises both the painful nature of the act and the heavenly intervention. Chagall's 'additions' to the biblical story include the figure of Sarah, who looks on pleading from behind the bush in which the substitute lamb is concealed. On the top right of the picture the depiction of the crucifixion clearly draws attention to the 'link' between the ordeal of Isaac and the passion of Christ. Chagall himself was Jewish and it is also significant that the cross-bearer is clad in the clothes of a Jew from mid-Europe – and that in the small space above there are visual hints which recall the Holocaust.[19] The intertwining of Judaism and Christianity 'bound together' by the story of Abraham and Isaac and how it has been used in each of the two faiths still continues. In Islam a very similar story is told, but in this faith it is Ishmael who is the son who is almost sacrificed. The 'Christ is our reconciliation icon', which was our focal picture for Week Three also draws implicit attention to the 'parallel' between the two brothers, Isaac and Ishmael with a picture of Sarah and Isaac on one side of the icon and Hagar and Ishmael on the other.

As with the other weeks of the course we conclude by suggesting links between the theme of the week and the story of Emmaus. Here they are especially compelling. The 'sadness' of the two disciples and their detailed recounting of Jesus' life and ministry emphasise the love they feel for their friend. The response of their travelling companion, 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' (Luke 24.26) underscores the way that throughout Scripture sacrifice is written into the story of God's loving relationship with human beings.

Sacrifice of Isaac, Marc Chagall
Painting: © *ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2019*
Photo: *Flickr / Michael Jones*

Lent is the call to draw nearer to the enduring and sacrificial love of God, and to allow ourselves to be transformed by that love.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. *(John 3.16)*

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son…
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
(Hosea 11.1, 3-4a)

‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’
(Mark 12.28-30)

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.
(John 11.5)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal… Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends… now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
(1 Corinthians 13.1, 4-8, 12-13)

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?
(Romans 8.32)

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you: abide in my love.
(John 15.9)

SOME WORDS FOR REFLECTION

To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek him the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement. *(St Augustine of Hippo)*

The measure of love is to love without measure.
(St Augustine of Hippo)

In order to discover the character of people we have only to observe what they love.
(St Augustine of Hippo)

To him who is everywhere, men and women come not by travelling but by loving.
(St Augustine of Hippo)

I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife, something, whatever you like, but one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence, and one must always try to know deeper, better and more.
(Vincent Van Gogh)

It is impossible to love and be wise.
(Francis Bacon)

Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.
(James Baldwin)

Love is an act of endless forgiveness.
(Jean Vanier)

The greatest thing that can happen to any human soul is to become utterly filled with love, and self-sacrifice is love’s natural expression.
(William Temple)

The day we stop burning with love people will die of the cold.
(Unknown)

Love is the cosmic energy that flames from the constellations and is concealed in the abyss of the atom; is whispered by the Holy Spirit in the heart, and placarded before human eyes upon the Cross. It offers to us all that it has, and demands from us all that we can give.
(Bishop Lumsden Barkway)

Love was our Lord’s meaning.
(Julian of Norwich)

See, as they strip the robe from off his back
And spread his arms and nail them to
the cross,
The dark nails pierce him and the sky
turns black,
And love is firmly fastened onto loss.
But here a pure change happens. On
this tree
Loss becomes gain, death opens into birth.
Here wounding heals and fastening
makes free
Earth breathes in heaven, heaven roots
in earth.
And here we see the length, the breadth,
the height
Where love and hatred meet and love
stays true
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns
to light
We see what love can bear and be and do,
And here our saviour calls us to his side
His love is free, his arms are open wide.

(From the sonnets of Malcolm Guite which explore the Stations of the Cross. This relates to Station XI as Jesus is nailed to the cross) [19]

SOME SONGS TO LISTEN TO AND SHARE

Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est (Where charity and love dwell there is God, Taize)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eF8AW6JzWpE

Morning glory starlit sky https://hymnary.org/text/morning_glory_starlit_sky

Oh thou who camest from above, the pure celestial fire to impart
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3UYybc7Xa0

Love divine all loves excelling.

Love is his word, love is his way
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQWC1IV-fL8

A FATHER'S PRAYER UPON THE MURDER OF HIS SON

The powerful prayer below was composed by Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, the Anglican bishop in Iran at the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979. As soon as the revolution began the Anglican church came under attack. An attempt was made on Bishop Hassan's life later that year and he was forced into exile. In May 1980 his only son, Bahram, was murdered in Tehran. Bishop Guli Francis Dehqani, Bishop Hassan's daughter and now the Suffragan Bishop of Loughborough writes, 'This is the prayer my father wrote after my brother, Bahram, was killed. He dictated the words to my mother over the telephone and the prayer was read, in the original Persian, at Bahram's funeral in Isfahan. This is the English translation which has become known as the forgiveness prayer'.

O God, we remember not only Bahram but also his murderers;
...because through their crime we now follow thy foot-steps
more closely in the way of sacrifice.
The terrible fire of the calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us;
Its flame reveals the depth of depravity and meanness and suspicion,
the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature;
It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in God's love
as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection;
Love which makes us free from hate towards our persecutors;
Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage,
loyalty, humility, generosity of heart;
Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's final victory
and his eternal designs for the Church and for the world;
Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death.
O God, Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls;
so when his murderers stand before thee on the Day of Judgment,
remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives.
And Forgive... *(Hassan Dehqani-Tafti)*

When I survey the wonderous cross.

There's a wideness in God's mercy
https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_wideness_in_gods_mercy

SOMETHING TO EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

What do you think about the story of Abraham and Isaac told in Genesis 22?

What is the relationship between passion and passion? Or to put it in different words do you think that powerful love is inevitably intertwined in some way with self-sacrifice and suffering?

Does the strength of love lie partly in its vulnerability?

Does our age value 'sacrifice' in the way that previous generations did? What forms can and should 'sacrifice' take today?

SOMETHING TO PRAY

If only we had been there
when the earth was born
perhaps we would have seen more clearly
how precious is our world, how fragile and irreplaceable,
perhaps we might have cherished it better and loved it more
If only we had been there
When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.

If only we had been there
when the vast cathedral of the skies first soared aloft
perhaps the music of the stars
would have soothed our spirits,
and played their harmonies into the lyrics of our lives,
perhaps we too might have learned by heart the great psalm of peace
If only we had been there
When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.

If only we had been there
when people could meet God face to face, in garden or in whirlwind,
perhaps it would have been easier to live with questions,
knowing God didn't want us to stop asking them -
perhaps we might have understood they can't all be answered - at least this side of eternity –
If only we had been there
When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy

If only we had been there,
when the lamb of God was offered before the world's foundation,
perhaps we would have grasped the texture of our universe's strange fabric,
still being woven through with love and sacrifice,
perhaps we too might have learned obedience,
treading the path of the servant Son,
If only we had been there
When the morning stars sang together, and the holy ones shouted for joy.

(*Prayer originally inspired by Job 38)*

SOMETHING TO TAKE AWAY

What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men, women and children. That is what love looks like.
(St Augustine of Hippo)

[17] Jewish commentators normally refer to the story as the Akedah or 'binding' of Isaac, to reflect the fact that ultimately Isaac is NOT sacrificed.

[18] A phrase used of this story by Erich Auerbach

[19] A very helpful reflection on the 'meanings' of Chagall's painting, as well as paintings of the scene created by Rembrandt and Caravaggio can be found at http://home.nwciowa.edu/wacome/KarenDiss.htm

[20] © From The Stations of The Cross sonnet sequence by Malcolm Guite: Sounding the Seasons, Canterbury Press 2012, used with the poet's permission

'How then would the scriptures be fulfilled?'

Holy Week

The practicalities of church life during Holy Week probably mean that it is unrealistic to provide a full set of resources for this week, as in many cases it may be difficult for groups that have been meeting throughout Lent to carry on doing so during this particular week. Nonetheless individuals and churches may welcome some ideas to help them continue to reflect on the themes and ideas that have been explored during the first five weeks of Lent, weaving them together to help us interpret the Passiontide mystery which is at the heart of our faith. The following material is therefore designed to be used by either individuals or groups, to assist with their reflections during Holy Week and it will be complemented by one further reflection which is intended to be used shortly after Easter.

Opening prayer

O Tree of Calvary,
send your roots deep down
into my heart.
Gather together the soil of my heart,
the sands of my fickleness,
the mud of my desires.
Bind them all together,
O Tree of Calvary,
interlace them with Thy strong roots,
entwine them with the network
of Thy love.

O Tree of Calvary - Chandran Devanesen [21]

Reflection

This course has been called 'Opening the Scriptures' and it is intended to encourage participants and users to explore several great biblical themes which are embedded deep within Christian scripture, first being introduced to us in the opening books of the Old Testament, Genesis and Exodus. Partly through our use of 'heart-burning verses' each week we have seen how these themes then resonate with other parts of the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New.

As we travelled through Lent we discovered that this biblical story offers us the challenge of holding together diversity. We want to celebrate God's love for and involvement with creation and God's presence with us, yet at the same time we have to acknowledge there is an important biblical strand which speaks of God's almost dangerous elusiveness. We have discovered that to meet God 'face to face' is both life-giving and terrifying. We learn that our position as created 'in the image of God' speaks to us not only of our privileged relationship with God, but also compels us to see something of God in one another. The very word and concept 'reconciliation' itself tells of the need to hold together contrasting realities in a creative relationship. We have pointed

out that both weeping and joy, both lament and praise are all deep expressions of our biblical faith. And in the material for Week Five the following brief comment was made: 'Love can and does draw together the great biblical themes we have explored earlier in our course: God's absence and presence, human relationships and reconciliation, sorrow and joy. It weaves them together and will thread them all through the cross, that life-giving sign at the heart of our faith.'

The suggestion therefore is that there is a profound link between Jesus' passion and crucifixion and the perhaps almost impossible paradox involved in holding together such biblical polarities. In and through the cross we hold together divine absence and divine presence, profound beauty and deep pain, weeping and joy, the binary realities implied by the phrase 'face to face'. The events of Holy Thursday and Good Friday act as a sort of pivot or fulcrum in which these opposites are drawn tightly together, bound closely by bands provided by love. It is quite literally the 'hour' when eternity is gathered into a small space of time, and the world is re-created through the planting of the tree of life in the soil of a garden outside Jerusalem. Thomas Traherne, whose writings we looked at briefly in Week Four, expressed this idea through an amazing metaphor, 'The Cross is a tree set on fire with invisible flame which illumineth all the world. The flame is love.'

The words of the title above allude closely to the words with which Jesus in Gethsemane greeted those who came to arrest him, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. 'Let the scriptures be fulfilled.' (*Mark 14.49*) The question of how the events of Jesus' life and death 'fulfil' the scriptures is one that has taxed Christian theology from New Testament days to the present. But the suggestion that I want to offer is that the way that such fulfilment takes place is fundamentally through the threading of all the Bible's various and diverse strands together through this person, whom the Gospel of John proclaims as 'the Word of God' at this point of time and place.

Within the unity provided by the fact that it is now held together in the one canon of scripture, diversity is a key characteristic of the Bible. This is expressed in various ways. Not only through the contrasting motifs and emotions that we have already explored, but through other means as well: for example the fact that our Old Testament is willing to give us two complementary interpretations of Israel's life and history, one in which kingship is seen as a gift from God, the other in which it is judged a false step; one in which the life and worship of the Temple in Jerusalem is seen as inspiration, the other in which it becomes a dangerous snare. When we turn to the New Testament this diversity is perhaps most obviously expressed by the fact that we have four canonical Gospels, each translucent to Christ, but each bringing to light slightly different colours of his story.

Christ's life – and death – is one in which this diversity, this paradox, is squeezed together in a small fragment of space and time, thus both fulfilling the scriptures and then allowing them – through the resurrection – to open out again with richer resonances as indeed will happen on that post-resurrection journey to Emmaus. It is appropriate and necessary that this takes place through one who is a paradox in his own person, Word and Flesh, truly divine and truly human. To truly hold together within oneself such contrasts, such tensions, was literally an agonising experience.

It is from this starting-point that the following reflection relating to the events of Holy Thursday, the evening before the death of Christ, is offered.

SOME HEART-BURNING VERSES FROM THE BIBLE

First some 'heart-burning' verses from the Gospel narratives of both the Last Supper and especially Gethsemane:

Jesus knew that his hour had come.
(John 13.1)

Having loved his own who were in the world Jesus loved them to the end.
(John 13.1)

I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.
(Luke 22.14)

This is my body which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me.
(Luke 22.19)

I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.
(Mark 14.25)

I give you a new commandment that you love one another.
(John 13.34)

They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I?'.
(Mark 14.19)

So, after receiving the piece of bread, Judas immediately went out. And it was night.
(John 13.30)

When they had sung the hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives.
(Mark 14.26)

Jesus went out with his disciples … to a place where there was a garden.
(John 18.1)

I am deeply grieved even to death
(Matthew 26.38)

Jesus said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'
(Mark 14.36)

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.
(Luke 22.44)

Could you not stay awake with me one hour?
(Matthew 26.40)

Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.
(Luke 22.46)

He went up to him at once and said 'Rabbi' and kissed him.
(Mark 14.45)

When Jesus said to them, 'I am he' they stepped back and fell to the ground..
(John 18.5)

But let the scriptures be fulfilled.
(Mark 14.49)

All of them deserted him and fled
(Mark 14.50)

This is your hour and the power of darkness
(Luke 22.54)

You may want to read each of these short sentences slowly and prayerfully, allowing them in turn to speak to you.

We have chosen primarily to focus on the experience of Gethsemane, and, briefly, Jesus' supper with his disciples which is its precursor, because this is the hour when, humanly speaking at least, choices are made and profound decisions are taken which will lead to the inexorable consequences of Good Friday. It is of course interesting, and perhaps part of the Bible's own treasured diversity, that the presentation of Gethsemane (and the Supper beforehand) differs from Gospel to Gospel, with John's Gospel being especially different in tone and content from what we are told in Matthew, Mark and Luke. There is no agony in John's retelling of the events of this particular evening. Jesus is in complete and willing control, 'knowing all that was to happen to him.' (*John 18.4*) Yet in fact there is a sort of 'agony' of Jesus in the Gospel of John – but it comes several chapters earlier when, prompted by the request of some Greeks to 'see Jesus', Jesus suggests that 'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (*John 12.23*), and then goes on to acknowledge 'Now my soul is troubled'. (*John 12.27*) As we suggested in our exploration of 'glory' in Week Two, it is a word which speaks of the visible presence of God. The Gospel of John is therefore suggesting to us that this moment when the reality of God is shining in the human flesh of Jesus – that exquisite paradox – is profoundly costly to the one who had to bear it.

To preface the story of Gethsemane with the account of Jesus' Last Supper. Here we are not saying all that could be said about the Supper, that

foundational act for Christian worship through the centuries. However the overt links with Passover, itself honoured as a foundational part of the biblical tradition, remind us of the importance of 'memory'. The command to us to 'remember' Jesus through the eating of bread and the drinking of wine is made in the context of Jesus himself and his disciples 'remembering' the story of his people's past, that act of liberation which was the focus of our biblical exploration in Week One. In the Book of Exodus words linked to memory appear at solemn moments such as Exodus 12.14, 'This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.' But 'remembering' in such terms is not a mere antiquarian exercise, it is reaching into the past to draw it into the present, so that together past and present may help to shape and change the future. We can think therefore, if you like, firstly of Jesus remembering all those great themes which we explored in 'opening the scriptures' and in their variety and diversity drawing them into his present, a present in which he made himself to be part of the continuing story with his request to his disciples to 'remember' so that as we remember these themes through him we too ourselves become part of the narrative of God's people of faith.

In John's Gospel in particular 'love' is the keynote through which Jesus' Last Supper is to be understood. It is a hermeneutical key. It is the motif that surrounds the narrative – which begins in chapter 13 with the remark that Jesus loved his own until the end and it concludes in chapter 17 with Jesus' promise that, 'the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.' (*John 17.26*) It is love which provides the way to allow Jesus to hold together in his body all those sharp contrasts which will so shortly crowd in upon him.

Jesus and his disciples leave for Gethsemane. They sing a hymn before they do. The word 'hymn' certainly implies a song of praise. Later on that evening Jesus' prayer to his Father will in some ways echo biblical laments, which we explored briefly in Week Four. Lament and praise necessarily complement each other, as is also the case with Psalm 22, the great psalm of Good Friday, whose own contrasts also offer an interpretative tool for these events.

The place is named Gethsemane in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. It is not named in the other two Gospels. The name is drawn from an Aramaic word which means 'olive oil press'. It is a symbolically appropriate name for what is going to happen here, as those contrasting pressures of time and space are squeezed and squeezed in and through the person of Jesus, releasing God's mercy and healing, of which olive oil is often a sacramental symbol, into the world.

Although the Gospel of John does not use the name Gethsemane, he does speak of it as 'a place where there was a garden' (*John 18.1*). This opens up for us another set of resonances. The sentence echoes the words used in John 19.41 to describe the location where Christ was crucified and where he would be buried, and thus also the place of the resurrection. It also of course reminds us of the wonderful garden of creation in Eden, of which we are told very near the 'opening of the scriptures' (*Genesis 2.8*). As we have suggested, especially in Weeks Two and Five, the Gospel of John presents the story of Jesus to us as a new Genesis, a new creation.

The garden presumably would have sheltered trees, particularly olive trees. Matthew, Mark and Luke speak specifically of the place as being on the Mount of Olives, probably in its lower reaches; John tells of Jesus and his friends crossing the Kidron Valley to get there – which implies the same location. Even today the ancient olive trees at the foot of the Mount of Olives speak powerfully to the pilgrims who visit this site. Trees of course remind us too of the creation stories – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*Genesis 2.9*). It is an ancient and a true instinct of Christian history to draw parallels between the trees of Eden and the 'tree' of the Cross on which Christ is 'lifted up' (see also the words of Thomas Traherne above). Perhaps though we also need to remember the parallel – and contrast – between the trees of Eden and the trees of Gethsemane. It is by 'reading' the account of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane bearing in mind the story of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Eden that we realise the profound nature and cost of Jesus' struggle and ultimate obedience, 'not my will but yours be done' (*Matthew 26.39*, *Mark 14.36*, *Luke 22.42*). The struggle – and its eventual resolution – is emphasised by the three synoptic Gospels. Luke speaks of how Jesus was

drenched with sweat, and how an angel came to console him; Matthew and Mark draw on Jesus' powerful words to his disciples 'I am deeply grieved, even to death' (*Mark 14.34*).

There is however one word in Mark's account – and only Mark's account – which somehow marks out this as a unique moment in Jesus's life, perhaps as the moment within which all moments are gathered. That word is 'Abba' (*Mark 14.36*). It is the only time that the word 'Abba' comes in any of the Gospels, though it does appear also in Romans 8.15 and Galatians 4.6. It is an Aramaic word, which means 'Father', especially in a familial and intimate context. It is comprised merely of two consonants, the first two letters of the Hebrew (and many other) alphabets, which help to give the word a feeling of relating to something which is fundamental to the whole of human existence. In his poem 'Gethsemane' Rowan Williams called it 'the densest word of all, abba'. It is well known that at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry is the depth of trust and commitment implied by his description of God as 'father' which he lived out in his life and teaching. For the word 'Abba' to appear at this point, specifically in Aramaic, the language that the Jesus of history himself used as his human speech somehow squeezes and presses and crushes the whole of his ministry into this particular moment.

Of course in the Gospel of John it feels so very different. No agony – and when they come to arrest him Jesus' complete control of the situation is highlighted by the three-fold use of the expression 'I am', the last occasions on which this phrase appears in the Gospel (*John 18.4-7*) With these words we are back to the motif with which this Lent course first began – the 'I am' who spoke to Moses from out of the burning bush, and the implication of Jesus' identity with the God who revealed himself to save his people. So reading the four Gospels together, Gethsemane is the moment when those two extremes, Jesus' obedience and his human vulnerability on the one side, and his own intimate relationship to this elusive God on the other are perplexingly and powerfully held together, and he lives out his vocation to be the paradox of God (see the discussion in Week Four).

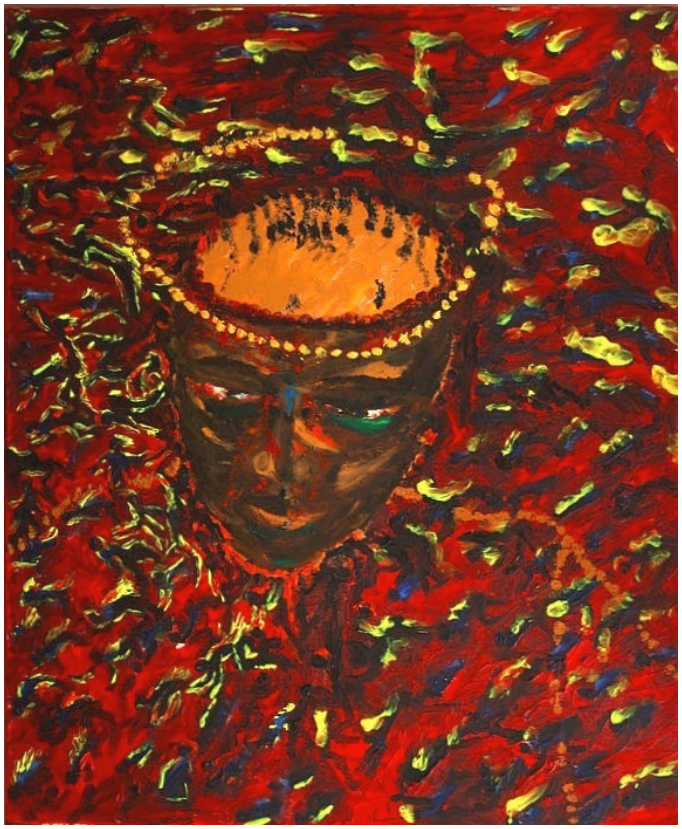
Running through the events of this last evening of Jesus' life is the motif of darkness – and light. As Judas departs from the company of the last supper we are told 'it was night' (*John 13.31*). When he then leads the company to arrest Jesus, they need to bring with them 'lanterns and torches' – probably intended as a metaphor which contrasts with Jesus himself, who as 'the light of the world' generates light from within himself. Finally in Luke's account of the events of Gethsemane after Jesus has resolved his inner conflict he accepts his arrest with the words, 'This is your hour and the power of darkness' (*Luke 22.53*). It was a true instinct of those who built the Church of All Nations in Gethsemane to draw attention to this thread through their dramatic use of darkness in the building, with its purple, grey and black stained glass.

As it happens it was the same architect – an Italian called Antonio Barluzzi – who in the 1920s also designed the church on Mount Tabor commemorating the transfiguration of Christ. Barluzzi built the two churches to be a contrasting pair. So for example the church on Mount Tabor is built to be suffused with light. In this Barluzzi offers a profound – and sure – interpretation of the Gospel narratives of the transfiguration and of Gethsemane. They are intended to act as two contrasting poles in the life and ministry of Jesus. The connection is partly signalled by the fact that it is the same three disciples who accompany Jesus on each occasion. The placing of the transfiguration on a mountain-top is set against the agony of Gethsemane in the valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives. The words that the heavenly voice uttered on the mountain-top 'This is my son, listen to him', commanding obedience to Jesus, are inverted by Jesus' own words in Gethsemane, 'Abba, Father… not what I want, but what you want' (*Mark 14.36*). What does it mean for transfiguration and Gethsemane to be connected in this way? Transfiguration surely leads on to Gethsemane, for it is as soon as Jesus and the disciples descend from the mountain-top that we are told, 'When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem' (*Luke 9.51*). The transfiguration is a foreshadowing of the destiny of Jesus – and indeed Jesus' followers – but it is a destiny which can only be attained through treading first the path that will travel through this valley of the shadow of death. We reflected briefly on the theme of transfiguration –

and 'face' – in Week Three. You might want to return to re-read what was written there. But the question now is, if transfiguration leads to Gethsemane, can Gethsemane lead to transfiguration? The deep answer is yes. It is through the pressure, the squeezing, the crushing, the obedience, the offering of love, that Jesus will experience first of all this night – and then on the day of his death, that he will be able to become a channel – the stem of a tree if you like – which will draw to himself all those diverse elements that we discovered in our journey of 'opening the scriptures'. Through him and his sacrifice they will be 'transfigured' into 'something rich and strange', so that we can meet them as they flower again on the other side of his resurrection.

TWO PICTURES TO EXPLORE

There is an extraordinary painting by the Ugandan artist Gloria Ssali, now resident in Britain, which is called 'In Gethsemane'. Jesus' head is 'literally opened up and on fire – it seems to have exploded, setting loose all his haunted thoughts so that they now dance before his eyes. The thickly applied brushstrokes give a sense of heaviness to the work, and the fiery, blood-red tones suggest intense heat,



Painting: *In Gethsemane - Gloria Ssali,* All rights reserved.

appropriately hinting at what's in store for Jesus in the coming hours. And what's that around his head: a halo (marking his divinity) or the imprint of a crown of thorns (marking his mocked kingship)? Or maybe both at the same time?… The shapes around Jesus' head assume a similar ambiguity. At the bottom left their form seems human, but elsewhere in the frame they are just nebulous whirls of colour… are they the souls whose futures are yet to be determined by the decision Jesus is about to make?' [22]

The painting expresses in a visual way, that is intensely uncomfortable and disconcerting, the way in which the experience and response of Jesus Christ in Gethsemane is the hinge on which hangs the whole biblical story of the relationship between God and humanity.

The second picture is both 'easier' and more difficult. It is one of the Traherne windows in Hereford Cathedral. It is intended to illustrate Traherne's words 'The Cross is a tree set on fire with invisible flame which illumineth all the world. The flame is love.' The placing of the tree in the midst of a 'wood' helps to suggest that we should read the words not only in the context of the wood of the cross on Good Friday but also the trees of Gethsemane the evening before. However the way that the figure on the tree which represents the cross almost disappears into the background, gives us a sense that what the Crucifixion is about is almost the 'dissolution of God'. It is as though the concept of God is dissolved and remade. It is as if the Cross itself – and its occupant – are being dissolved for the sake of the beauty of the whole of creation, for its radiant life. In order to give radiance to the creation the creator accepts being at this 'crux' as vulnerable yet life-giving victim.

A SONG TO LISTEN TO

There in God's garden stands the tree of wisdom.

Words and video at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFGne7VGpMY

Traherne Window, Hereford Cathedral.
Artist: Tom Denny
Photo: James O. Davies

A PRAYER

Jesus, enabler of endings and new beginnings,
Lord of supper places and gardens,
You loved your own so much that you loved them to your end.
As we wait and watch with you this hour,
Share with us – in the measure that we can bear – that fearful pressure of Gethsemane.
Anoint us with the fruitful oil of your healing,
Enabling us to become with you midwives of transfiguration and growth,
and help us learn to speak with you that childish word 'Abba',
Through which we and all creation come to new birth.
Amen.

[21] "Permission sought".

[22] Victoria Emily Jones, "Gloria Ssali: In Gethsemane," ArtWay, August 2012, https://www.artway.eu/content.php?id=1219&lang=en&action=show.

EYES OPENED, HEARTS ENLIGHTENED

This material might be used if people want to meet for one closing session to reflect on what they have learned this year during Lent and Easter. Alternatively it is something that people might like to have a copy of to aid ongoing reflection.

FOCAL READING: LUKE 24.13-35

We have now travelled through Lent to the other side of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and so at last we stand in spirit with the two disciples who met the risen Jesus on the Emmaus Road. Our Lent course ends where it started – with the story of the encounter between Jesus and those two disciples and their amazement at how their hearts burned within them when their mysterious companion opened and interpreted the scriptures for them.

Over the last few weeks we have been exploring some fundamental questions of life and spirituality, God and humanity, which have fascinated and burned within the hearts of people of faith for centuries and millennia. We have seen how these themes are profoundly reflected in our scriptures, often in particular passages and texts which, because they touch on matters so important to human beings, set our hearts on fire. To be true to the context of those travelling on the Emmaus Road for whom 'scripture' would have meant what we today call the Old Testament, we have given particular

IN EASTERTIME

weight to texts which come from that part of our Bibles. However as we have explored those profound questions we have also found their echoes in the life, ministry and passion of Jesus Christ and in the biblical texts which interpret that life and death. As we have seen, especially in the reflection offered for Holy Week, how for Christians the story of Jesus Christ offers us the gift of grappling with these great questions with a unique and unparalleled intensity. Other people of faith, including our Jewish brothers and sisters, may want to offer different answers to the questions: but by and large the questions themselves are similar for all people.

Throughout this course we have returned week by week to address that question which is rooted in the story of the Emmaus road: what are the biblical passage(s) which make your heart burn

within you? We have complemented such biblical perspectives by also drawing on 'heart-burning' examples of prose, poetry, art and song, largely from the Christian tradition. Perhaps the irony is though that, for many of us, it is the story of that journey to Emmaus itself which is one of the most 'heart-burning' moments we can find within Christian scripture. It has fascinated poets, artists and theologians since the beginning of Christian history. As Jesus Christ is for Christians a prism through which the mystery of God's gracious encounter with humanity can be viewed with a particular intensity, so in turn the road to Emmaus becomes a prism to view the story of Christ himself. Why is this so, and what might this say to us, particularly about the gift of scripture?

• Scripture and Jesus Christ interpret each other. Word and Word belong together. It is through the words of Jesus to his companions that the scriptures are 'opened' to them. In turn the scriptures enabled those companions (and the earliest church) to understand more about the one who travelled with them from Galilee to Jerusalem and beyond.

• Remembering is an essential part of biblical faith. We remember the Exodus, we remember the Last Supper, we remember the one who asked us to remember him. The story of the road to Emmaus bears witness to the importance of remembering. It is probably no accident that the very word 're-member' can be understood as bringing together those fractured elements of our reality which have been 'dismembered'. By remembering we become whole, and people of one heart (it is interesting that in Luke 24.32 the word 'heart' is used by the disciples in the singular – not the plural!). By 'remembering' we use the riches of the past to enable us to tread a path into the future.

• On the road to Emmaus we now read the scriptures in the light of the resurrection as the themes previously explored start to 'open out' again after having been squeezed through the fulcrum presented by Christ's passion. This may help to offer a pattern or a way for Christians as we seek to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New. There may be – indeed there are – other 'pivot points' which could gather up and rework those profound biblical motifs which we have explored during the five weeks of Lent; the reality that because as Christians we read them in the light of the risen Christ does not rule out the possible validity of other 'keys'.

• The 'opening' of the scriptures and the 'opening' of the eyes of the two travellers are also linked. This connection seems to be deliberately intended as Luke tells us this story. The same – quite rare in the New Testament – verb is used by Luke to describe both actions in this passage. What does that mean for us? Might it suggest that if we really open the scriptures we will discover our eyes gradually opened to look on what is before us in a new light?

• Speech and action, spirituality and materiality, belong together and complement each other. There is much talking in the story of the road to Emmaus, but it is only in the action of the blessing and the breaking of the bread that Jesus is finally recognised. Scripture requires us to take seriously the physical dimension of human existence and our Christian faith.

• Dialogue is a fundamental aspect of the story of Emmaus. Through a genuine conversation the disciples come to a new vision. 'The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. . . . To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his or her whole life: with eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, and with the whole body and deeds.' (Mikhail Bakhtin) Is this a model for how we, as readers of biblical scripture need to engage with the text? What is the new vision which it offers to us?

PRAYER

Jesus our Way,
Strange story teller who has become for us the story,
Living word through whom the eternal God
shines out,
Meet us face to face this Eastertide.
Stay with us and open for us the scriptures,
Illumine our eyes and set our hearts on fire,
So that with you as companion on our journey,
With joy we will be enabled to discover
That the key to unlock this mysterious library is
always love. Amen.

What biblical text sets your heart on fire?

This question is central to the CTBI Lent course for 2020.

This phrase is drawn from one of the most evocative and treasured New Testament episodes – the account of a mysterious stranger who meets two people journeying on the road to Emmaus, whose identity is eventually revealed as the three of them break bread together (Luke 24: 13-38). After the realisation dawns that their fellow traveller was none other than Jesus himself, the two disciples say to each other: 'Were not our hearts burning within us…'

Taking this biblical story as its starting point, the course invites us to 'open the scriptures' and read them with both our hearts and our heads.

The course has been written by Dr Clare Amos. Clare is an Anglican Christian who has worked both in the field of biblical studies and of interreligious concerns and who has a deep commitment to sharing as widely as possible her passion for the Bible. Clare has worked for the Anglican Communion Office in London and more recently for the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

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Year of the Word – 2020

A number of churches in Britain and Ireland are keeping 2020 as 'the Year of the Word' so this course, with its focus on scripture, will be an ideal resource for Lent 2020.

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