

Lenten Reflections



ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL
KINGSTON



LENTEN REFLECTIONS

Edited by Phil Rogers

This series of reflections, written by parishioners and clergy of St. George's Cathedral, is meant to accompany your own daily observations on the 40 weekdays and 6 Sundays from Ash Wednesday to Easter, 2021. For each day the readings appointed for Morning Prayer—or for Sundays the Eucharist—in the Revised Common Lectionary of the Book of Alternative Services appear at the top of the page. The reflection for that day follows.

Some writers have elected to concentrate on one of the readings; others have written about more than one, and still others have written not so much on the readings as on their own thoughts in relation to the readings.

The reflections, which vary greatly in length, are different in form and substance; they are all personal, for the contributors were given no guidelines about the nature and content of their reflections, no directions about how they should approach the task, nor any agenda about the whole project.

Nor has editing attempted to create a uniform style in the reflections. It has not been intended that the reflections should be anything other than the personal thoughts of the individuals who wrote them. Editing has been severely minimal.

The writers use different translations of the Bible, and they sometimes quote translations which will be different from those that readers use. They have also sometimes consulted various background sources and interpretive materials to which readers will not have access. Each reader will decide how best to use the reflections in relation to each one's own prayer and Bible reading

Booklet and graphics compiled by Brad Barbeau



Wednesday 17 February Ash Wednesday

Psalms 95, 32, 143; Jonah 3:1-4:11; Hebrews 12:1-14

THE RIGHT REVEREND MICHAEL OULTON

The beginning of the Lenten journey starts with a call, encouraging us to pause the routine of everyday life for a time of reflection to consider our lives from a whole new perspective. We sometimes speak about looking at life from the ten thousand foot view. This time of self examination is the ultimate ten thousand foot view! We are called to lift ourselves from the moment in order to view our lives in the context of eternity. Who are we and to whom do we belong? How are we called to live and what are we called to do? Where are we called to be and what draws us forward or hinders our journey? These are just a few of the questions we are called to consider through these forty days of Lent. So, where do we start and where will we end up in responding to the call to engage in the Lenten journey?

Our starting place can be no more beautifully encapsulated than in the familiar words of Psalm 95. Read these words as though spoken by someone who has just arrived at your front door, or presented themselves at your place of business or met you on the street as you walk along. Approach the words of the psalmist as though you are occupied with all the cares, duties and responsibilities of life, working through your daily “to do” list, with one day pouring itself into another, when along comes one who exhorts you to put all of that aside for a moment.

This person doesn't approach you in an attitude of “Hey, do you have a moment?” There is no subtlety here. They literally burst in upon you. It's high energy and high intensity, filling the moment with a spirit of exultation. Come! Let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout for joy! Let us come into God's presence! Let us raise a loud shout in song! This is no gentle tap on the shoulder.

Why should we respond to this exuberant call? Because we are being called into the presence of the one who created everything from the caverns to the heights, who moulded the dry land and separated it from the sea. Why should we believe this has anything to do with us? Because we are being called into the presence of the Lord our maker, for we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Hearken to His voice! It is the call of one who loved us into being and cares for us throughout life.

Ash Wednesday - continued

We have a decision to make. Do we go or do we stay? This is no easy journey and no punches are pulled. The one inviting us uses the image of wilderness wandering to exhort us not to harden our hearts to the call. I think of Ebenezer Scrooge being invited by Jacob Marley, responding that he would rather not subject himself to the “hope of reclamation” being promised to him. It is too daunting, too terrifying. Why would we go back to the place of desolation? Because it is also the place that ultimately leads to deliverance.

What is our destination, where will we end up if we respond to this exuberant call to come? Followers of Jesus Christ will find themselves ultimately drawn to the foot of the cross. It is from the foot of the cross that we receive the ultimate perspective on our lives and answers to all of our questions. We are creatures fashioned from the dust of the earth by the hand of the one who is the author of life and who sets us on our way. The cross is our wilderness, our deliverance and our joy, the one who created is the one who dies, rises and attends us as we venture forth in his name. O come, let us bow down and bend the knee and kneel before the Lord, our Maker.



THURSDAY 18 FEBRUARY

PSALM 37 1-18; DEUTERONOMY 7 6-11; TITUS 1 1-16

Aveleigh Kyle

From Psalm 37: 1. Do not fret because of the wicked. 3. Trust in the Lord and do good; so you will live in the land and enjoy security 4. Take delight in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart

Deuteronomy 7: 6 for you are a people holy to the Lord our God; the Lord has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession

Titus 1:15. To the pure all things are pure; but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. 16. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their actions. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

At first glance these readings struck no chord in my mind, they appeared bleak with a tinge of revenge. I was hoping to get a Gospel reading added to write on, so I could reply to these thoughts- "love one another," "vengeance is mine I will repay." So why is Paul, in Titus, asking me to find people "detestable and unfit for any good work"? I guess, if truth be told, we all know people who, though I find detestable to be a bit strong, we don't jive with. Normally we can tolerate them, as they probably do us, but as I reflect back on this pandemic, I am reminded of something that, in the world of Twitter, Facebook, and the lunch break room, seems to sadden, or maybe I should say anger, my colleagues in the medical world and me. Whether it be people travelling for Christmas, gatherings in neighbour's homes, churches still meeting with large congregations, politicians who flout the rules, it all makes us feel that many people don't care. They aren't on the frontlines fighting this horrid disease, and we can't shout back with what's going on because of confidentiality. Trying to protect ourselves, our family, our community is a full time job in itself.

I often wonder what Jesus would say . Would He judge them or tell us to "shake the dirt off our sandals" and carry on? Or would He tell us to fight back? So much of this angst in us could be helped by being able to gather, whether in worship, being able to travel and feel the love of family, a dinner out with the "girls" and a bottle of wine, all of which remain out of bounds to us. So I need to "trust in the Lord" as the Psalmist says, because we are a people "Holy to God." I'm not so sure I can call myself "pure" as Paul writes, but I do know that the Spirit will guide me, so I can open my ears to listen, and my hands to heal, and carry on carrying out the work God has chosen for me.

Stay safe.



Friday 19 February

Psalm 31; Deuteronomy 7:12-16; Titus 2:1-15

DOUG GREEN

“Not another lockdown!” “Will it ever end?” “What a crazy year!” Such remarks may ring familiar in chat amongst family and friends these days. Thanks to the Covid19 situation, our respective journeys present some challenging moments, across the land and individually. The palmist is worn out. He is exhausted, yet amid the turmoil he declares his trust in the Lord, his “Rock”! We can relate to his lamentation as he reaches out for strength and guidance during his journey, during his time of sorrow and fear. Perhaps we can understand his predicament today, as we absorb the never-ending infusion of news describing the effects of this world-wide pandemic. Death, illness, unemployment, uncertainty and chaos are seemingly everywhere. After so much of this depressing information, it is not surprising that we can get down in the dumps, feel sad about not seeing grandchildren, feel lonely over not having lunch with friends, feel isolated about restricting travel and pine for a return to “normal.” Like the palmist back in Biblical history, during this winter of a pandemic and crises worldwide, many of us want to reach out for our “Rock”. We also seek guidance, comfort and hope.

The reading from Deuteronomy reinforces the message. Having led his people through their long and difficult journey from Egypt, Moses reminds them and in turn us, of our obligation of devotion to the Lord. After years in the wilderness and with the end of their onerous journey in sight, the people of Israel are reminded about God’s promises of love and support and of the prospect of a new beginning, indeed a new creation. As Easter approaches in 2021, we can take comfort with such advice.

Are we there yet? Can we see the end of the pandemic? Yes. The home stretch is in front of us. We will cope, much as our ancestors did during times of war, conflict, and economic depression. There is hope. There is a “Rock”! That Rock is the cornerstone of our Christian faith, our belief in the Resurrection of Christ: Jesus has gone ahead into God’s new creation. The Easter Message of God’s promised future remains relevant especially during these difficult times.

Whilst scribbling these few lines and thinking about the symbol of our “Rock” so anxiously described in the psalm, I had clear recollections of a favourite hymn from childhood days “down home”: “Will your Anchor Hold in the Storms of Life?” Yes. Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love*

SATURDAY 20 FEBRUARY

PSALMS 30 AND 32; DEUTERONOMY 7: 17-26; TITUS 3:1-15

Laurel Dempsey

An interesting selection of readings indeed. Psalm 30 gives us "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." KJV Deuteronomy gives us murder hornets. Titus abjures us to be obedient and avoid foolishness.

We, whether we like it or not, are living in a period of history. Books will be written and scholars will argue about this pandemic; its causes, effects, and how the years after it are changed from the years before. Day by day our own experience is a small piece of this world-wide shift in human experience. We arise, we stay at home, feel fear, grief, loneliness. We are separated from those we love, and our days seem long. We grasp for any sign of relief, of hope, of our normal lives. We will also be changed forever. We grieve for those who have died or who have become severely ill. We pray for them. My prayers feel so inadequate for hundreds of thousands of souls and for millions of those who are ill.

Read Psalm 30. Verse 5. "For his anger endureth but a moment, in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." (KJV) Robert Alter in his translations of the Psalms has it this way: "But a moment in his wrath, life in his pleasure. At evening one beds down weeping, and in the morning, glad song." (*The Psalms and the Books of Moses*)

A way of understanding adverse circumstances is to interpret it as God's displeasure, giving place then to a life bathing in God's joy. This joy is given to us undeserving and unchanged. The psalmist speaks as having had this experience personally. So we can rest in this; that joy will be ours again.

The passage from Deuteronomy is prescient. It mentions murder hornets. It comes not long after the Ten Commandments and is part of the promises made to the people of Israel as they received and understood their covenant with God and received the promises of a land of their own. They had been liberated from slavery, had journeyed and had overcome enemies, upon whom hornets were to be deployed. For the tribes of Israel it had been a desperate, perilous time. The passage does give them a firm sense of how they are to be held in God's hand.

Robert Alter suggests that the word hornets is a wrong translation from the Hebrew of something more like a nameless terror. The meaning is clear, though. God would protect them.

Paul is writing to Titus of the generous mercy of God. "shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our saviour" KJV. This chapter admonishes and reassures in equal measure, as well as dealing with administrative details of the travels of the early church and that fact that Paul was going to spend the winter in Nicopolis. Actia Nicopolis is in Western Greece.

How shall we then bear our own adversities? I know from conversations how loneliness is a defining burden for so many. As is grief both for individuals and for the army of those who have succumbed to Covid 19. Heavy is the heart that tries to pray for the souls of those lost and the lives of those who are ill.

The promises of God remain. "And joy cometh in the morning."



Sunday 21 February

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

THE REVEREND CANON BARBARA STEWART

Years ago, when our children were young, I taught Sunday School. One of the favourite activities for the children was singing songs – especially action songs! The most favoured song was “Mr. Noah”!

Mr. Noah built an Ark, the people thought it quite a lark.

Mr. Noah pleaded so, but into the Ark they would not go!

On it went, verse after verse, and the children knew all the words. They loved the story of Noah and the ark and all the animals that were saved! Most children know the story of Noah. But much less is said about the ark and what a wonderful, safe and life-giving place it was. Animals of all kinds managed to live together on that ark for a long time. Big powerful animals and tiny insignificant animals. They all made it to the end of the flood.

There are arks even in our world today. Our daughter and her husband both worked at *L'Arche*, which is a worldwide organization started by Jean Vanier. *L'Arche* is a home for mentally and physically disabled adults who live in a family setting with caregivers. It is a safe and life-giving place where all manner of folks come together to care for one another. A place where each person is accepted as they are and know they are loved by God.

Our church communities are arks. They are places where all manner of people come to be known, loved and cared about in a safe and lifegiving community. They come to meet Jesus Christ in the people gathered and to hear God's message of love. A church community is a wonderful ark full of every kind of person with every kind of gift and all are together to weather the storms of life. It may not be Noah's Ark but it is a wonderful kind of ark that keeps us together until the storm is over.



MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY

PSALMS 41 AND 52; HEBREWS 2:11-18; DEUTERONOMY 8: 11-20

David Cameron

This bowing of the knee—physically or inwardly—and prayer, spoken audibly or inaudibly, we owe to our God, in church with our sisters and brothers certainly, but also in our private lives. The complete model is of course the prayer Our Lord taught us.

Fasting creates a time of focus and of self-evaluation. In the Introduction to his book *The Prophets* (Harper and Row, 1962) Abraham Heschel writes: "Insight is a breakthrough, requiring much intellectual dismantling and dislocation. It begins with a mental interim, with the cultivation of a feeling for the unfamiliar, unparalleled, incredible." And we would all do well to make fasting about more than just the savoury or the nourishing. It is fasting too when we hold our minds clear for thoughtfulness, to meet Heschel's 'unfamiliar and unparalleled', and simply to "be still, and know that I am God".

Almsgiving: As he so frequently does, the prophet Isaiah says it beautifully: "If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday." In an article on the Catholic Education Resource Centre website (www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/spiritual-life/introduction-to-lent-almsgiving.html) Mike Aquilino gives a statement with a more modern ring, citing the Roman Catholic catechism: "The goods of creation are destined for the entire human race. But they can't get there unless we put them there — and that requires effort." Such effort has rich opportunities in Kingston. To name just a few, Lunch by George of course; but also Martha's Table, the Partners in Mission Food Bank, Almost Home, Youth Diversion, Loving Spoonful, Hospice Kingston and various assisted housing projects. Most of these charities need gifts in kind and volunteer help as well as cash.

And perhaps some may choose to work and pray for a guaranteed annual income, which would distribute the goods of creation more fairly in this rich country which we all share.



Tuesday 23 February

Psalm 45; Deuteronomy 9: 4-12; Hebrews 3: 1-11

VALERIE JACKSON

Deuteronomy is a series of sermons from Moses to his people. It is his last advice to them. He will leave his pulpit, climb a mountain and then die. The sermons take God's words written and spoken, the human experience, and the events during the 40 year journey, to produce the word and experience in the moment. That moment is the last stop on the Plains of Moab after 40 years of wandering and the continuous complaints about whether the past, Egypt, was better.

These verses are about the very days of the crossing to Jordan, facing nations much stronger than the people of Israel. They will prevail through God's will, not because the People of Israel had redeemed themselves in the 40 years of wandering. At Horeb they provoked God's wrath. They had turned to other worship and it required Moses' intercession with God; he returned from the mountain with God's commandments to show them how they should live and worship him in the Promised Land.

Hebrews was written to reframe the focus on God's action in Jesus to Jewish Christians, saying that Christ is the perfect sacrifice and the true High Priest. Jesus has perfected and in a sense rendered obsolete the old Levitical institutions from the Old Testament. Jesus is the revelation of what God is doing and will do. It reminds us that we should not supplement or embellish or become too focussed on religious observances, symbolism and rites but rather consider what it is to be a Christian. Our main and central task is to live in obedience to God's action revealed in Christ.

These verses ask us to remember that God spoke through Jesus Christ. He spoke to us through his son. After Christ finished his sacrifice for us, he took his honoured place far higher than the angels and Moses, as a faithful servant getting ready for what was to come. The reading exhorts us to turn a deaf ear to bitter uprising as did the People of Israel in the forty years of wandering.

Reflections:

Are we more focussed on religious observances and symbolism than on following the teaching of Jesus Christ to love and care for each other?

Are we like the Israelites wandering as we are through the Pandemic, grumbling and focussed on ourselves and not enough on others?

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY

(ST. MATTHIAS THE APOSTLE)

PSALM 119:49-72; DEUTERONOMY 9:13-21; HEBREWS 3:12-19

Linda Morgan

In the Passage from Psalm 119, the psalmist repeatedly affirms that in spite of multiple challenges from within and without, he has “kept the law,” “delighted in the law” and he asks God to “teach me thy statutes,” “knowledge” and “judgement.” He wants to grow his faith. This contrasts with the disobedience of Israel in Deuteronomy, the same Israel that was brought from Egypt, from slavery, protected, guarded, fed, watered and who still “stiff-necked” rebelled. (For those of us of a certain age, the passage recalls Charlton Heston, white bearded, red robed, tablets lifted above his head against the flaming Sinai.) They made a golden calf (Why not? Other tribes and the Egyptians had animal gods) and worshipped it. Moses had to persuade God not to destroy them. Yet they were punished. They got to see their promised land but none who came from Egypt entered it. They died in the wilderness, perhaps a metaphor for lack of faith or belief. The writer of Hebrews uses the example of the people of Exodus to exhort his audience to maintain their belief--not to fall into the sin of disbelief, to keep the faith and help each other to do it, to anchor faith and hope.

Two contemporary writers I've read deal with these matters. In her essay, “The Small Work in the Great Work.” from *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Time*, Victoria Safford talks of the meeting point of hope and history “where what has happened is met by what we make of it.” She speaks of our vocation as people “planted at the Gates of Hope . . . the piece of ground (a sacred place) from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle.” Erich Fromm in the *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* discusses the duality of faith and despair as a response to man and his future. Fromm states that to transcend this “dual hapless helplessness” we need “rational faith in man’s ability to extricate himself... from the “web of circumstances he has created.” “To have faith means to dare, to think the unthinkable, yet to act within the limits of the realistically possible This hope is not passive and it is not patient; on the contrary, it is impatient and active, looking for every possibility of action within the realm of real possibilities.” “Such thinking will only bear fruit when it is blended with the most precious quality man is endowed with--the love of life.”

So how did we get all the way over here: in the middle of Lent in the middle (maybe) of a global pandemic? I will go back to the sin of disbelief in Hebrews, linking nicely with the despair felt by the people of the Exodus and the firm belief of the psalmist. I am not speaking of a Pollyanna faith and hope nor even of my favourite saint’s “All will be well” hope. I think we have all had it with staying away from people and places we love; things we would do. We can all tally up in our locked-down lives the losses of the past year and perhaps with a little more work start a reasonable list (though perhaps less enthusiastic) of the things we have gained. But where is hope and faith? These things were sent to try us, and they have. So what do we do with it?

WEDNESDAY 24 - CONTINUED

Based on Safford and Fromm, we choose life; we try to develop an active, courageous faith. I am not talking “Saturday morning knock on the door faith” (though if you think that will help, go for it). How to we do it? I don’t know—read: Safford and Fromm are a good place to start; think, try and work out how we could strengthen the anchor to hold us firm; pray, always a good idea; even an “Oh God!!!” works.

I had the joy of a friendship with Sister Margaret Killeen of the Sisters of Providence, the RC visitor on one of the hospital floors I managed. We got discussing Lent one year and “giving up” things. Sister Margaret pointed out it was harder to pick something up, particularly something you didn’t like or that was challenging to do or involved people you perhaps would not have sought out. You get the idea. So there it is. In this penitential season we select something to do, for ourselves or others, and see where the journey takes us.

“

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops –at all—

Emily Dickinson



Thursday 25 February

Psalm 50; Deuteronomy 9:23-10:5; Hebrews 4:1-10

CHRISTINA SAGER

Often we as human beings lose our sense of direction and focus on the hardships we experience; we have to remind ourselves of the blessings that surround us. In a world that almost always encompasses, pain, suffering, financial challenges, and grief, we tend to concentrate on the challenges without acknowledging the good in our lives. Similarly, in our spiritual paths, we often encounter reasons to feel doubt, to question our faith, and we forget to recognize our relationship with God and our conscious decision to recognize his presence in our lives.

This past year, the entire world has been shaken with a new reality where we are threatened by a virus that forces us to remain in our homes, wear masks, and eliminate social contact. The mere idea of physical distancing attacks what we may view as a fundamental human need, the sense of community, and the ability to socialize and the learning and growth that we experience because of social interaction. Initially, we thought that this situation was temporary, but as we approach the one year anniversary, we are all too aware that this is anything but temporary.

For me and my family (like all of us), the year has presented many challenges that continue to test us daily. There are days when our optimistic outlook doesn't show up, when we feel exhaustion and extreme frustration. The negativity tends to overshadow the mission and our understanding of the role we play of keeping our immediate and extended families safe. Thus sacrifices are being made.

It is easy with all of this negativity for us to make poor decisions, to ignore the call of the Lord. It is wonderful to know that regardless of our inability to make the right decision each and every time, the love he has for us is real and he has given us the ability to repent. Repentance allows us to recognize our misjudgements, reminds us of the resurrection and the fact that we are only human. Constantly we are being tried and we don't always get it right. Remember that as believers we are promised God's rest. That is the mission, to achieve God's rest.

For me it is critical to recognize and celebrate the wins I witness as my journey continues, particularly this journey with COVID-19. Working from home required me to adjust my daily routine, as with the precautions we decided to take to protect our children. We decided that our boys would not be taking bus transportation each day to school. But celebrating the ability to walk our children to school because I now have the flexibility to adjust my day is fantastic. The simple joy in engaging in wonderful conversations with two enthusiastic and very inquisitive boys all while enjoying nature and greeting community members on the way is invaluable.

In our walk with God, being faced with distraction, challenges, frustration, and difficulties can cause us to act in ways that are not suitable in God's eyes. Again, our focus tends to be on the negative and the cycle continues. We have to make a conscious effort to shift our focus and recognize the joys, celebrate the wins, and always keep focus on the mission ahead. God's rest.

I encourage you to remain faithful, endure to the end, and to prepare for God's rest with celebration.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY

PSALM 40, PSALM 54, DEUTERONOMY 10: 12-22; HEBREWS 4: 11-16

Tanis Fairley

I always find it fascinating when I go over a reading from the Bible and it seems to be applicable to today's times. That's what happened with both of these psalms and both lessons for me, as I thought how well-suited they are to our current necessary coping with the Covid epidemic. I hope that you will also find this connection and perhaps get some relief or some peace from the stress of Covid.

Psalm 40, a Psalm of Praise, speaks of waiting for the Lord's help, exactly what we are all doing right now, and encourages us put our trust in the Lord. We ask God to be merciful to us and keep us safe. Then, in Psalm 54, A Prayer for Protection from Enemies, again the Lord is acknowledged as our Defender, who rescues us from all our troubles. I know that I have turned part of my daily prayer to asking God for guidance, support and to show us to the path for rescuing us from all our troubles. These include stress, anxiety, and the self-care required to avoid Covid, which had never been heard of when these psalms were written.

Deuteronomy 10, 12-22 reminds us that we are all God's chosen people, and so we must be obedient to him and obey all his laws. It acknowledges the importance of showing love for foreigners, orphans, widows and of not showing partiality. We are encouraged to be faithful to him and to praise him. One of our anxieties through the Covid crisis is to do exactly what we have been directed to, regardless of how difficult it may be. These are very similar to what we are being asked to do by the top Health Care officials in our country. If we consider all of the violence connected with the Past President's departure, and the new President's arrival, we have seen a significant "uprising" in the U.S.A.. our next door neighbours. In this reading we are encouraged not to show partiality, and to follow the directions to the correct path, and surely this is exactly what the new President referred to in his opening speech.

Hebrews 4, 11-16 reminds us that nothing can be hidden from God, that we must hold firmly to our faith, and that if we are able to do this, we will receive at God's throne mercy and grace to help us just when we need it. Surely that is now. When we consider all of the current anxieties we are coping with, and again, we are reminded that God sees everything and expresses a hope that we did not sin in spite of it, following Jesus Christ's example.

Sometimes people express that the reason they don't read the Bible is because it isn't current, and because so much of it refers to things that we have never experienced and will not in the future. This particular group of readings is so applicable to our lives right now, and good reminders of how we should be behaving.

Thanks be to God.



Saturday 27 February

(George Herbert, Priest and Poet)

Psalm 55; Deuteronomy 11:18-28; Hebrews 5: 1-10

ELEANOR ROGERS

On first reading, today's selections from the Old and New Testaments seem almost random, but reflection suggests at least one shared theme. The Deuteronomy passage warns of the curse that will come from turning away from God, but it also offers a blessing for obedience to God's commands. Hebrews 5 also stresses obedience, a trait we learn from Christ, the perfect high priest, who "learned obedience" through his suffering and became the "source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." In both of these passages, we learn to obey through trust in God's promises to us.

The beautiful Psalm 55 begins with, "Hear my prayer," a plea for God to receive and understand the psalmist's distress. His situation is dreadful: he is beset on all sides with enemies, public and personal. The most horrific of his woes is that his adversaries are led by an intimate friend, one he valued and trusted. He expresses his anguish in the strongest of terms: "terrors of death," "fearfulness and trembling," "horrible dread." The hostility is so great that he longs for the wings of a dove to escape to a quieter refuge, but that is not possible. Returning to the "violence and strife" in the city and in his life, he calls on God to destroy his enemies with painful death and to save him "unharméd." In the end, he entrusts his cause to God, our only sure refuge, confident that "he will never let the righteous be shaken." The psalm's last line in the New English Bible translation is a touching statement of confidence that God will help: "but I will put my trust in thee."

For Christian interpreters, much of the psalm offers a parallel with Christ's sufferings at the hands of the Jewish chiefs and his treacherous disciple Judas. Even the often quoted line, "Oh that I had the wings of a dove" can bring to mind Jesus' wish to be released from his appointed lot in his plea, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me" (Luke 22:42 NIV). In the end, both Christ and the psalmist accept their fates, relying on their trust in God's goodness, a lesson for us.

Psalm 55 has had significant influence in Christian worship, inspiring a number of composers, including Antonín Dvořák, Zoltán Kodály and, of course Felix Mendelssohn, whose cantata "Hear My Prayer" has been performed and recorded a multitude of times since its composition in 1844. Its solo "O for the wings of a Dove" has numerous individual presentations by such artists as Ernest Lough, the first choirboy to record it, and Kiri Te Kanawa. Even Bob Marley and the Wailers have an adaptation. A reviewer of the 2015 recording by the St. John's choir Cambridge (conductor Andrew Nethsingha) that includes "Hear My Prayer" places the anthem among compositions that are "considered quintessential to the Anglican choral tradition of yesterday and today."

"Trust", though a tenuous connection among today's readings, is a powerful characteristic of Christian faith. It offers us the promise in the direst of times that God will hear our prayers, a meaningful comfort in these stressful days.

SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16; PS 22:22-30; ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8 31-38 OR
MARK 9 2-9

The Venerable David Selzer

Reflections on being blameless

'I am El Shaddai. Walk in my ways and be blameless.' (Genesis 17.1)

The beginning of this Chapter of Genesis has Abram at ninety-nine years old, and God appearing to him after an absence of thirteen years. With this appearance there is the second story of the Covenant, this time from a different source (most likely J), which was in Chapter 15 before this time.

God identifies as El Shaddai, which is disputed in meaning. 'El' is a term for God; Shaddai could mean 'Dai – enough' as the Midrash understands, or 'Almighty' which is another understanding commonly accepted. Rashi uses the first understanding of 'enough' to translate God as the One whose divinity is sufficient to all creation.

The command of God is to 'walk in my ways and be blameless.' The Hebrew word is tamim, which can convey perfection, or wholeness, or, as in animal sacrifice, 'without blemish.' Earlier in Genesis 6.9, Noah is said to be blameless; later, Job is said to be blameless. I understand the meaning is fluid.

In Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary, produced by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the understanding is 'to be whole' meaning, come before God with your whole self: the parts of yourself you are proud of, and the parts of yourself you are not proud of and wish were different. The example is that on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) we come before God not proclaiming our blamelessness but bringing to God our whole selves, our faults with our merits, to be told we are acceptable in God's sight.

Walk in my ways and be tamim—whole. Our journey, our Lent journey, is to walk in the presence of God, accepted by God, and to continue the journey of wholeness or transformation. We accept ourselves, we accept others, and we keep on the journey in God's grace.

Monday 1 March (St. David of Wales)

Psalms 56, 57, 58; Jeremiah 1:11-19; Romans 1: 1-15.

DEBBIE DOCHERTY

Decoding the Bible has been a source of irritation and fascination for my entire life.

That emotionally ambivalent reaction is a reflection of my spiritual journey. However, try as I occasionally might, I have been unable to sever the umbilical cord that links me to my sense of origin.

I have chosen to write my reflection on the Psalms, though my thoughts may well apply to all of the reading above. Jeremiah receives a rather shocking and stern warning. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, spends an inordinate amount of words in salutation before he begins his message. However Verses 11 to 13 speak directly to the sense of separation we are living today.

The Youth Poet Laureate, Amand Gorman, brought the value and beauty of poetry back to the consciousness of so many on January 20, 2021. We are reminded, through verse, of the deepest wounds and the loftiest aspirations of the human spirit.

The Psalms as poetry, have often confounded me (as has much of modern era poetry). However David in Psalms 56, 57, and 58, writes of universal truths - the inestimable human propensity for the oppression of one another. We are reminded of that capacity throughout every era of history and indeed in our present day.

In the chosen Psalms David speaks of the 'trials' that assault him. "My attackers trample me all day long." Do we feel daily assailed by the current Pandemic, literally or metaphorically? Like David, do we not look for, long for a release from our current situation? David goes on, as he does in most of the Psalms he authored, to describe the salvation he promotes, through belief in God. "In God I trust, I shall not fear." In keeping with his writing pattern, he concludes with a thanksgiving.

Personally I recognize the history of oppression that predates David and continues to the present. I am less clear or convinced of David's proposed solution, namely through faith in God. Thus my agnostic journey continues, my life in the grey zone of 'wondering' about the source of all energy persists. I am however clear that despite the challenges and terrible losses suffered over the last 12 months, we will have learned some crucial lessons. Hopefully, those moments and experiences of deep learning will enhance and enrich our sense of connectedness and guide us in the future.

TUESDAY 2 MARCH

(JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY)

PSALM 61, 62; JEREMIAH 2, 1-13; ROMANS 1, 16-25

Peter Gower

Psalm 61 reminds us, and these days we seem to be constantly in need of being reminded, that this is not the first time that people have been in despair and in need of God's guidance: "Hear my cry, O God, and listen to my prayer. I call upon you from the ends of the earth with heaviness in my heart (BAS); lead me to the towering rock of safety (New Living Translation)." Despair can appear in so many ways: personal, because of what we have done, or what has been deliberately or accidentally done to us; national, because our people have failed to do what we think was needed; universal, when all of God's children seem to have been misled. We feel wronged and know we (or the nation, or the world) could and should have done better. We know that we need help to overcome our despair and we, as God's people, know where that help will come from. Today we do not expect it to come as a bolt of lightning, nor from an angelic appearance, nor will we have to find a real rock of safety. But believe and pray and patiently wait (and we are getting so good at that!) and we will one day realize that we are no longer overwhelmed.

If we lose that belief, Jeremiah warns, "The heavens are shocked at such a thing and shrink back in horror and dismay For my people have done two evil things: they have abandoned me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all" (2: 12-13, NLT).

St. Paul is more specific: People "know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them ... but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. They began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like" (Romans 1:19, 21. NLT). As the psalmist said, we lost faith and despaired, and we do not trust in God because we think we can look after ourselves.

Wonders have been performed in this past year, if not miracles, by scientists faced by a new crisis that could so easily have led to total despair. Those with faith must keep that faith. As Offred in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* prays, "I wish I knew what You were up to. But whatever it is, help me to get through it, please. Though maybe it's not Your doing; I don't believe for an instant that what's going on out there is what You meant.

We will reach that towering rock of safety and lose our despair – at least until, in our weakness, we will again lose hope.

Wednesday 3 March

Psalm 72; Jeremiah 3:6-18; Romans 1:28-2:1

MEGAN BRUCE

When I think of the God of the Old Testament I rarely attribute traits of forgiveness or grace to his personality. We are commanded to worship and obey, lest pain and tribulation befall us, as in so many Old Testament stories. It's not until Jesus is sent in the New Testament that I find the forgiving and loving side of the Trinity. Yet, today's readings challenge that idea of mine; Paul tells us in Romans how guilty and sinful we all are. He plainly lays out how we revel in breaking all of the commandments we're to live by, and ends by saying that in judging each other we're no better than those we judge. There's no hint of salvation here. Jeremiah, on the other hand, tells of God's mercy and forgiveness for the wickedness of Israel and Judah. They have rebelled against God and live in sin. Despite their defiance of God's laws, he's happy to forgive them and welcomes them back, and I can easily imagine the beauty and serenity that Solomon invokes for his people in today's Psalm reading.

The acknowledgement of the universality of sin is so relevant for us today. Our world and lives have been so drastically altered this past year that it's hard not to compare the present day to the prophecies found in Revelation. There is pain all around us and judgements abound. Nevertheless, we must focus on God's will, and put our efforts to doing it, despite the challenges that face us.

Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day. Preserve us with your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, or be overcome by adversity; and in all we do, direct us to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

THURSDAY 4 MARCH

PSALMS 70, 71; JEREMIAH 4:9-10, 19-28; ROMANS 2:12-24

Sarah Earl

When I reflect on parts of these readings, the content feels harsh. It is as though God is showing an unrelenting passion for punishment against those who do not follow him, who do not do exactly as He wishes. Immediately I think of all the ways that I have failed to follow the Lord; when I was too busy to pray, or made commitments that I did not follow through with. It is striking how quickly all of my failures in the “eyes of God” spring to mind.

And then a psalm softens my feelings: “For thou art my hope, O Lord God: thou art my trust from my youth . . . I am a wonder unto many, but thou art my strong refuge,” and I remember that not only does God love me, but He knew me before I came into being. God is not only my refuge when I choose to remember that He is there, or when I turn to Him in despair, but always. Always.

Curiously, it is sometimes when we feel the most vulnerable that we pull away from God. Our shame stories convince us to focus on some of the more harsh language in the Old Testament because it is how we feel about ourselves in those moments. During this Lenten time of quiet reflection, my hope is to remember the God of joy and forgiveness. The only One in this world who is truly able to appreciate and delight in the uniqueness of each and every one of us. I pray that all of us remember that our mistakes and failings are also part of God’s plan, and that once we can remember to turn our eyes to Him in our harshest moments, He will lead us to him. “O God, be not far from me: O my God, make haste for my help.”



Friday 5 March

Psalm 69:1-23, 31-38; Jeremiah 5:1-9; Romans 2: 25-3:18

SUSAN EVERETT

As soon as I read these passages, I wondered what the Biblical equivalent was of the expression, “up to my ears in alligators”.

Over and over David cried out to God to save him as he sank in the mire and the flood waters swept over him. Again, and again, he pleaded with God to save him from the Pit. To soothe his parched throat, he was given poison and vinegar just as Jesus was given gall and vinegar as He was dying on the cross. David was shunned, insulted and dishonoured for his faith. Despite the woe he endured, David persisted in crying out to God for salvation and he offered praise in thanksgiving for God’s consolation and justice. Like David we are surrounded by the mire of sin and, like David we offer prayers and praise continuously. We have begun to chase away some of the alligators around us.

Jeremiah was asked by God to search the streets of Jerusalem to find just one man who lived justly and sought the truth. And it is from Jeremiah that we learn the second lesson about our relationship with God. Even as people say, “As the Lord lives”, they swear falsely. The people of Jerusalem were hypocrites. Their prayers were empty. It is not enough to pray for forgiveness and salvation and offer praise. We must believe in our hearts and live a life of truth and justice. More alligators are pushed aside.

Paul picked up the message of truth and justice when he argued that an outward sign of faith such as circumcision is negated by living a life of sin. The way to faith is through Jesus and understanding that he is the source of forgiveness, healing, and salvation. The alligators which Paul describes are the horrors of a sinful life. So, the third lesson from today’s passages guides us to a life of faith in Jesus. When the alligators return, as they will, we know how to chase them away—with prayer, Christian lives, and faith in Jesus Christ.

SATURDAY 6 MARCH

(PERPETUA AND HER COMPANIONS)

PSALMS 75, 76; JEREMIAH 5:20-31; ROMANS 3:19-31

Brad Barbeau

It is no surprise that of the readings for today, Psalm 76 particularly spoke to me, a musician. This is one of those psalms with so many imaginative and descriptive words that it is almost easy to visualise the psalmist witnessing these events. Consider for a moment the possibilities that come to mind with verse six, "at thy rebuke, O God of Jacob: both the chariot and horse are fallen" (Coverdale/KJV). It's not terribly hard to imagine a battle field when the chariots and horses have been smitten by God, ending the battle, and good has triumphed over evil. Indeed the first few verses of this psalm describe a war (actually a specific war between the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, and Judah about 700 B.C.) where God has fought for Judah. The images that are conjured, in verse four, of God breaking the arrows of the bow, the shield, the sword, and the battle are intense and simultaneously comforting to me. God takes the side of the right. God fights. God wins.

I suppose it is the perhaps romantic side of me, in which good always triumphs over evil, that this war song particularly appeals to. There have been times over the past year, and even longer, when occasionally I have questioned this ideal of mine. When I first read this psalm, I was immediately drawn to a comparison with the business world, capitalism at it is finest. Imagine a similar situation to verse four but with God breaking the instruments of power in all the C-suites on Bay Street, the 1% no longer.

In 2016 many of us watched as the power dynamic shifted in the United States with the election of Donald Trump as President. Over the past four years, it feels a little like we have witnessed a war like the one that the psalmist alludes to in verse one. Small attacks, often in 280 characters or less, regularly launched upon the enemy: science, the arts, compassion, humanity.

On reading through the psalm again, I was drawn to this comparison of Sennacherib and Donald Trump. When viewed through this lens, nearly every verse of this psalm has a parallel that can speak directly to the events of the past few years. Consider the events last year that led to the President standing on the steps of St John's Episcopal Church in Washington; read the psalm, and then consider what has happened since 20 January.

Perhaps I am not just a hopeless romantic, but really an optimistic Christian.

Sunday 7 March (Thomas Aquinas)

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22.

THE REVEREND CANON BOB HALES

Sometime ago when crossing the border to the United States was easier than now, a one-time Dean of St. George's, his wife and sister along with Faye and me went to Alexandria Bay to hear and see in person the Everly Brothers, pop musical icons of the 50s and early 60s. They were well beyond their 'best before' time. I suspect their guitars were set so loud in order to hide their waning skills and would certainly 'wake up little Susie', as they pleaded in one of their many hits.

Don and Phil, the brothers' names, may have disappointed somewhat but their warm-up act did not. It was provided by Dion, another Rock and Roll Hall of Famer from the 50s and 60s. His offerings had such a heavy beat that soon even those who were not particular fans of this genre were moving with it. Many took to the aisles to dance, including the Dean of this cathedral, my wife and the Dean's sister. The other two of us stayed seated and were content to dance by tapping our toes and clapping our hands to the music. We, along with close to 500 or 600 others in attendance, left feeling exhilarated by the dance, whether we danced in the aisles or in the comfort of our seats. Our hearts had been touched.

It was a different type of joy and comfort from that felt on leaving the ballet, different from seeing the unabashed dance of young children and different from the many dances we have seen and shared over the years. Yet all these feelings and experiences, however shared, added a richness and freedom to our hearts and lives.

It is not surprising that many Christian writers of various theological stripes have used dancing with God as a way to enrich our spiritual journey.

The first reading prescribed for today, commonly called the Ten Commandments, is not God's rule to dance a certain way but instead an announcement of freedom to dance as we can, led by God: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," Exodus 20 begins. It continues God's dance, makes us free not to need any other gods. We are free to rest on the seventh day; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish ourselves in the rich dance with God.

Sunday 7 March - continued

In the second reading, from 1st Corinthians, Paul writes to cosmopolitan Corinth inviting the followers of Jesus to a dance with God not restricted by the wise and 'with it' folk who set the community standards but shaking aside their reticence and dancing freely in their hearts and, as possible, total being with Jesus. This passage is often given the subtitle "fools for Christ".

Today's third reading is a familiar one, Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. It is related in all four gospels but the writer of John's gospel places it near the beginning. This could be because the writer sees this as a statement of Jesus' ministry, one that calls to catch the wind of God's Spirit and to soar in our hearts in a dance of the Spirit not subject to all those things put in its way.

I love the image of our faith journey as being a heart-filling dance with God. The English writer Sidney Carter wrote a song which he put to music of the Shaker melody called Simple Gifts. Carter, who called his song "Lord of the Dance," wrote that he never expected his song to gain the status of a hymn. He was wrong. Five of the six hymn books I own that were published since 1963 when he wrote the song include it. The chorus ends with this invitation of God's offering.

*And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he.*



MONDAY 8 MARCH

PSALM 80; JEREMIAH 7:1-15; ROMANS 4:1-12

Stephanie Dickey

As an art historian, I focus my research on the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69). The Netherlands in his time was a brand-new country that had rebelled from the Spanish Empire in part so that people of all faiths could worship freely. Most of the population belonged to the newly formed Calvinist branch of Christianity, and Rembrandt has often been called the first Protestant artist. While Protestant churches in those days, like most today, did not permit visual images within the sanctuary, many people brought scenes of biblical stories into their homes for inspiration and moral instruction. As I ponder the passages assigned to me, I cannot help but think about how Rembrandt and his contemporaries might have responded to them.

Psalms 80 offers a desperate plea for mercy. The writer feels abandoned by God, who once sustained the Israelites but now rains misery on them. It begins by mentioning several Old Testament figures who were frequent characters in Rembrandt's work: Joseph, his brother Benjamin, and Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Menasseh, born in Egypt. My favorite Rembrandt painting, illustrated here, was inspired by a related passage in Genesis 48. The patriarch Jacob, on his deathbed, has called for Joseph's sons to bless them. Rembrandt depicts the two boys, brown-haired Menasseh and blond Ephraim, nestled by their grandfather's bed. By tradition, the old man should bless the elder child, Menasseh, with his right hand, but he reaches toward Ephraim, who leans forward with arms reverently crossed over his chest (as many do today when approaching the altar for a blessing). Exactly as described in Genesis, Joseph gently tries to guide Jacob toward Menasseh, but Jacob will not be swayed, stating "He also shall ... be great, but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he" (Gen. 48:19). Calvin and other later interpreters saw this gesture as foretelling the eventual triumph of Christianity. Yet, many trials lay ahead.



Rembrandt, Jacob blessing the Sons of Joseph, 1656

The Psalmist writes, "How long, Lord God almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? ... You have made them drink tears by the bowlful." He pleads: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you." Recall that it was Ephraim who received the right-handed blessing of Jacob. But what else is going on here? Who is the Son of Man the psalmist mentions? When this passage was written, the Israelites could not know how and when Jesus would come, yet they held out hope of salvation. Today, we may wonder why we are called to suffer plague and economic turmoil, but like the psalmist, perhaps the best we can do is to lift up our prayers: "Restore us, God Almighty; make your face to shine on us, that we may be saved."

Jeremiah 7:1-15 Let's return for a moment to that plea from Psalm 80: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand ... Then we will not turn away from you." That second sentence is problematic. Is the Psalmist trying to bargain with God? In the reading from Jeremiah, the Israelites have ventured much farther along the path of sin. They are accused of theft, murder, adultery, and cruelty of all kinds. They follow false beliefs and "burn incense to Baal," yet they continue to treat the Temple as if they are welcome there. When I was a child, my mother used to speak with disdain of people who went to church every Sunday, yet behaved badly to their neighbors the rest of the week.

MONDAY 8 MARCH - CONTINUED

It seems this kind of hypocrisy is not new. I cannot help connecting this passage with the differing world views that are causing painful divisions among Christians today, especially in the United States, where intolerance and political ambition seem to have blinded the eyes of many. Jeremiah foretells a bleak and punishing future, but fortunately, the instructions are clear: if we want to live in God's house, we need to live by His rules. As Jeremiah proclaims, this includes dealing justly with each other, welcoming the foreigner, and helping the less fortunate. The Israelites were seekers, but today, it seems to me that everything we need to live justly can be found in one simple question: What would Jesus do?

Romans 4:1-12 The opening passage of Paul's letter to the Romans addresses two other fundamental questions. The first still perplexes many today: can we earn salvation? Are we marked as the elect of God by our good works, or are we saved by faith alone? (In Rembrandt's time, the Dutch Calvinist church was split in half by debates over just this point.) The second was urgent in Paul's time (the first century AD): was God's favor available only to those who are circumcised (the Israelites) or also to those who are not (the Gentiles)? For many people today, circumcision is a medical procedure done for hygienic reasons, but in Jewish tradition, the bris is a sacred rite of purification. Family and friends gather to celebrate the little boy's entrance into the community. As a sign of belonging, the Christian equivalent, of course, is baptism. But does baptism bring salvation, or is it the other way round? Paul argues that Abraham believed in God before he was circumcised. Circumcision was not a condition for justification, but a sign of the allegiance to God he had pledged already. So, it was not his good works, or adherence to ritual, that guaranteed Abraham's righteousness, but purely his faith. The grace of God, then, is open to all who truly believe.

Abraham's faithfulness was another theme that Rembrandt treated often. In two etchings, he depicted moments from the part of Abraham's story that I, as a parent, can never think about without tears. In Genesis 22:2, God instructs Abraham, "Take your ... only son, whom you love—Isaac—and ...sacrifice him as a burnt offering." Following God's command, Abraham set out the next morning with Isaac. What he told his son about where they were going, the Bible does not say.



Rembrandt, Abraham and Isaac, 1645



Rembrandt, The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1655

Rembrandt depicts Isaac as a teenager, helping his father carry the firewood. At a certain moment, he stops and asks, "Father, the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering? Abraham answers, "God himself will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:7-8). Yet it is not until Abraham has bound Isaac, laid him on the pyre, and raised the knife to slit his throat that God sends an angel to stop the sacrifice. Rembrandt captures Abraham's bewilderment as the angel enfolds him, saying, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Genesis 22: 12). As we move toward Easter, we know that God, when called to do the same, did not hesitate.

Tuesday 9 March

Psalm 78:1-39; Jeremiah 7:21-34; Romans 4:13-25.

JANE BALDWIN

In Paul's letter to the Romans he presents his basic statement of the gospel: God's plan of salvation for all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike. Romans is noteworthy for being the most complete compendium of Christian doctrine.

The apostle Paul had three objectives in writing this epistle: (1) to teach the fundamental doctrine of salvation to fortify believers against their enemies; (2) to explain the unbelief of Israel and vindicate the faithfulness of God in his dealings with Israel; and (3) to give practical instruction concerning Christian living in the society of his day. Romans communicates the details of how a person is redeemed, transformed, sealed, and sanctified for that day when we will all stand before the Lord. It explains that salvation is received by grace through faith. It articulates the foundation of Christian belief, explaining how the good news of salvation has been made available through Jesus' death on the cross and is actualized through the Holy Spirit's work in us.

In this section of Romans, Paul illustrates how Abraham and his successors find favour with God by not wavering in their faith. What a lesson for us all in this time of a global pandemic. We are now deprived of the rituals of daily living that we once took for granted. Effectively housebound, we are limited in our modalities of communication with our family and friends – telephone, email and Zoom keep us connected but we long for the sharing of visits and meals together. What of our current relationship to God? How are we to keep our spiritual health alive and well? Luckily, we do have Sunday services transmitted to us in our homes via YouTube but we are deprived of the ritual and mystery of communion. We are deprived of passing the peace with fellow congregants. Like Abraham, we must now keep focussed on the good news of God's love for us and the hope of salvation through Christ's love for us. Just as Christ took 40 days to contemplate God's plan for him, let us now recharge our faith in this Lenten period by focussing on God's love for us and rely on this love to see us through this challenging time.

WEDNESDAY 10 MARCH

PSALM 119:97-120. JEREMIAH 8:18-9.6. ROMANS 5:1-11

Ruth Oliver

Today would have been the 71st birthday of my late brother Stephen, who was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, London, UK as a boy. Although not ultimately a card-carrying Christian he was a great admirer of the psalms, calling them the greatest outpouring of the human soul. Having sung them daily in the Cathedral he knew them all by heart in the Myles Coverdale version in the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is in his memory that I think about the psalm assigned in the lectionary for today and I am using the BCP version for my reflection.

Psalm 119 is by far the longest one of the 150 and is broken up to be said or sung starting on day 24 of the month at Evening Prayer and ending at Evening Prayer on day 26. I imagine that choirs who continue this tradition are very happy to get to Morning Prayer on day 27! (Although singing the psalms to Anglican chant is never a burden in my mind!) Much of Psalm 119 has to do with fulfilling the Law and Commandments. In this section the psalmist gives various reasons for following them. They give him more understanding than his teachers (v 99). They make him wiser than the aged. (v 100) They save him from the snare of his enemies (v 111) and they give him hope and make him feel safe (v 117).

Modern psychology would say that there are 3 attitudes towards keeping rules and 3 levels for compliance. Level 1 is the fear of punishment. Level 2 understands why the rule exists and has a grudging level of compliance. Level 3 recognizes that the rule solves problems and is there for a higher good. Here there is a greater willingness for compliance. Think of the rules of the road—traffic lights, seat belts and speeding tickets—in light of these three levels. The Psalmist seems to cover all three levels. In verse 120 he says, "I am afraid of thy judgements" (level 1). In verse 99 he says, "I have more understanding than my teachers" (level 2), and in verse 103 he writes that God's words are, "sweet unto my throat. Sweeter than the honeycomb unto my mouth" (level 3).

The Scribes and Pharisees were adamant in their adherence to the letter of the law but there doesn't seem to be much evidence of level 3 in their approach. (Long before these levels were devised, of course.). Jesus however, although keeping and teaching the law, creates an even higher level of thought, going beyond the three levels to breaking the law in the interests of love and compassion, e.g.: healing on the Sabbath and allowing the disciples to pick corn. To him the rules serve a higher purpose and when they are not relevant to a higher goal he breaks them. (Think of an ambulance going through a red light in order to rush a patient to hospital.)

In the challenging times we are in we are asked to obey the rules laid down by the government and public health officials. To break them is to incur a fine. (level 1). We can reluctantly obey, understanding the scientific reasons for the restrictions (level 2), or we can willingly concur, understanding that in doing so we will protect ourselves and each other, ultimately giving us the freedom to break them. They may not be exactly "sweeter than honey in our mouths," but we obey knowing that we keep Jesus's commandment to love one another.

Reflecting on this psalm in relation to my brother's life I can see how the discipline in his life manifested the love of God. May the disciplines of our lives manifest the same.

Thursday 11 March

Psalms 42, 43; Jeremiah 10:11-24; Romans 5: 12-21

MARY ANN STEEN

I will begin with a brief history of the two Psalms. Some scholars believe that Psalms 42 and 43 were originally written as a single song of lament which was later divided into two parts for no known reason. The Psalm is the first of the 11 or more of the Sons of Korah, who were responsible for some of the music of worship in the temple in the time of David. I shall consider Psalms 42 and 43 as one Psalm in my Reflection.

Richard Wagamese, an Objibway writer states, "What you wish to know, what you reveal to yourself you also reveal to the reader."

The Psalm has well known words of great beauty "As the hart panteth after the water brooks so my panteth my soul after thee O God" However, underlying the beauty of the words as the Psalm continues there is a tone of despondency, a minor key feeling. There is a desire to be at peace with God, to be at one with Him. The desire of the writers is being crushed by the outside world. They feel God has forsaken them.

This leads me to the present. The Covid Pandemic has created an environment of despondency, uncertainty, loneliness, hunger, turbulence, mistrust, monetary stress and death itself. The outside world is crushing in upon us as it did the Psalmists. Many may feel God has forsaken them.

What can we do? We need to work together with our families, our friends, our Cathedral community, and the community at large to overcome the crush of the pandemic upon us.

The Psalmists did not forget God in their trials nor should we. They continued even in their hardship to believe that God was their rock, light, truth and hope, as should we. The light will dispel the darkness, the rock will give us a sure foundation; hope leads us to the essence of our being and the truth shall set us free.

Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so during the Lenten season may our souls long after thee, O God.



FRIDAY 12 MARCH

PSALM 88; JEREMIAH 11:1-8, 14-20; ROMANS 6:1-11; JOHN 8:33-47

Jane Kirkpatrick

This day's readings: a cry for relief from persecutions of life and a feeling of abandonment; a call to honour the covenant or face the consequences; a call to live in the freedom of God; and a rebuke to those who do not listen to the truth told to them by God's son Jesus. (I have added the passage from the Gospel of John to the readings set for today.)

These are readings that almost eerily reflect our current 21st century life of disruption, where all we have believed in and lived by is crumbling. The pain of the psalmist trying to understand why God is not answering his pleas for help resounds as we try to carry on in the face of sweeping changes caused by the pandemic. I suspect that there are very few of us who have not cried out during this time of devastation to all we have known and loved.

Does not Jeremiah, charged to prophesy to Israel and Judah what will happen because they have broken the covenant, reflect how our monetary, me-too society has broken the social contract to help the poor, the homeless, the ill? Jeremiah also shows us to put our trust in God to support us in our time of trial, calling on the Lord of Hosts who judges righteously to protect him from those who persecute him.

As we live in this time of upheaval, not just the pandemic but the moral breakdown we see in politics and society, Paul in his letter to the Romans gives us the guideline: don't give sin a vote in the way we live our lives! Jesus has died to sin so that we might walk in the newness of life. If we are going to do that, what does it mean? For me, I look to Bishop Michael Curry who says follow the Jesus Way; it's quite simple, really. Love God, love your neighbour and love yourself. From that will flow our actions to support one another in community, in outreach to those who are hurting, to keep strong in prayer and praise.

John's gospel relates part of Jesus' encounter with the chief scribes and Pharisees: "Jews who had believed in him," but "now are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God." Just before our passage, Jesus had said: "if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." In our times, truth has been so compromised we can scarce recognize it. It is thus even more critical that we know Jesus' truth of salvation, that we know the truth of our actions in faith.

Thanks be to God for His Word.



Saturday 13 March

Psalms 87, 90; Jeremiah 13:1-11; Romans 6:1-11

HOLLY GWYNNE-TIMOTHY

Today's four readings present a cosmic Judeo-Christian sweep, with broad spiritual inspiration and challenges for the reader, starting with Jerusalem's Holy citadel—Zion, the City of God. These readings take us from the beauty of Zion, God's earthly home on a mountainous perch with a huge view (perspective); to the promise of eternal life in Romans 6 for all who truly serve Christ as the new master. Psalm 87 refers to Zion in a hopeful way for Christians (and those of any faith), showing God's wide embrace, breaking tribal bonds and enmities, uniting common spiritual aims and moral human endeavours in one, earthly kingdom. It speaks of the symbolic birth of faithful people in Zion, regardless of their homeland.

Psalm 90 is sobering in its reminder of our impotence and mortality; but it is also reassuring especially in this trying Covid time. It presses me to find faith through trials and continued service to God, gratitude for my life in the face of God's power to judge and destroy. I must bend to His supremacy (or mother nature's supremacy, or that of viruses like Covid) over my human will. Jeremiah 13's story of the linen belt is also apt for Covid times. The belt, which is initially a kind of sacred garment and task for Jeremiah, is discarded by God as a symbol of pride and the danger of false idols. The things that draw us together and bind us can grow decadent if we cease hearing God's call to change. We must listen for how He will lead us to new garb, new communal endeavours and ways that tie us together.

Romans 6 also cautions us to be watchful as to which master we serve. In these moving lines, however, our bodies are part of the equation, supporting the incarnate ideals of John's indwelling Christ and Paul's words in Corinthians that the body is a temple. How I treat my body is both a moral and spiritual issue. My physical actions are expressions of ideals which might enslave me wrongly. May God help me and my body remain in service to the right ideals, and to the lessons in these beautiful scriptural passages. Amen.

SUNDAY 14 MARCH

PSALM 107.1-3; NUMBERS 21.4-9; EPHESIANS 2.1-10; JOHN 3.14-21

The Venerable John M. Robertson

Numbers 21.4-9 Some years ago, I made my first of many trips from western Canada to the United Kingdom. When I first received my plane ticket, I took note of the fact that I would be on an airplane from Vancouver for close to ten hours, but I didn't fully grasp what it would be like to be confined to such a small space for such a long period of time. Only a few short hours into the flight, perhaps over Edmonton, I found myself obsessively checking the "flight tracker" on the screen on the back of the seat in front of me. I was overcome with impatience, yet I was powerless to change anything about my situation. Knowing from my own experience that patience is a rare virtue, I can't blame the Israelites for growing restless as they wandered in the desert. If you or I were in their place, chances are we would have reacted in a similar way. Perhaps then the lesson we may learn from this passage is not that we should be able to remain perfectly patient at all times, but that we should not allow our impatience to cause us to lose sight of the God who calls us out, journeys with us, and will not abandon us in the wilderness.

Imagining our lives are a journey, to what destination are we currently travelling? In moments where we have felt lost, have we been reminded of the presence of God in our lives?

Psalms 107.1-3, 17-22 "[The Lord's] mercy endures for ever." Forever? Forever is a long time—unfathomable even at the limits of our imagination. We struggle to comprehend how anything could last forever, because all of our life is defined by limitations and boundaries. We are born and soon after we discover that this life, as we currently know it, will not last forever. For this reason and if we are wise, we seek to make the most of our lives—living fully into each moment. Still, even in our knowing that this life will not last forever, we fail. We make mistakes and we fall short of the plans we make to become the best version of our selves. Today – in our Psalm, we are reminded that it is in our limitedness that we find reason to give thanks to the Lord, for we have been redeemed and his mercy endures forever, extending beyond the limits of our wildest imagination and the boundaries of this temporal life.

Recalling Eric Friesen's thoughtful reflections on a number of well-known psalms in his homily offered at St. George's Cathedral on January 31, and as we contemplate the everlasting mercy of God, in what ways do we feel challenged to be more merciful to others in our lives?

John 3.14-21 In the late 1960s, when I was much younger, of course, I found myself posted as vicar in a remote Tsimshian First Nations village on Dolphin Island, five hours by fishing boat south of Prince Rupert in the Diocese of Caledonia. In an attempt to live a healthy lifestyle and to keep up with the dozens of very active young people, I took up the practice of running: along the winding, steep pathways in the village, even in the rain! After running several times a week for three years, I found that that was a good way of learning new things, on a regular basis, which made me a better runner. One time, for example, I discovered the importance of looking up and beyond my current stride while running and thinking about my next homily. I learned this while jogging up a steep incline with my head down and not noticing a raised edge on the pathway...just tall enough to catch the toe of my shoe. Suddenly and without warning, I lost control of my stride and began to fall – for what seemed like a solid minute of trying to regain my balance. My downfall—no pun intended—was brought on by stubborn refusal to look up beyond the present moment to see and prepare myself for what was coming next. Similarly—in life, it is tempting to be so fixed on our current circumstances that we can forget to look up and see that God has already lifted up and provided a Saviour for all the world, one who seeks to redeem and make all things new, even our present circumstance.

So how might trusting God to provide for our present circumstance, free us up to see and prepare for what lies ahead? Good question, I submit, for early 2021.

Monday 15 March

15 March Psalm 89: 1-18 Jeremiah 16:10-21 Romans 7: 1-12

JT CRUICKSHANK

Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is intended to replicate Christ's sacrifice and withdrawal into the desert for forty days. Hence, this lenten season is a time for Christians to pray and reflect. The three readings assigned to me illustrate widely different aspects of this reflection: redemption, love and punishment for those who violate the LAWS.

Psalm 89:1-18 is a declaration of the speaker's love and faithfulness forever, with strong reminders of God's power to "Crush and scatter his enemies" while at the same time being our Saviour, our shield. As in all psalms, many of the Bible's main ideas are echoed here—praise, thankfulness, faith, hope, sorrow for sin, God's loyalty and help for sinners. This reading is joyful, robust, upbeat overall, notwithstanding references to God as a righteous judge, a relentless God who displays his wrath every day.

Jeremiah 16: 10-21, on the other hand, is quite grim. It begins with a proclamation of the Israelites being thrown off their land into a strange land of wilderness, so that "you may serve your false gods." As is oft-times the case in Biblical readings, there is a road to redemption described in the reading—v14: "however the day is coming when the Israelites will be restored to the lands."

But wait! Again there is a stern warning! The people are under God's watch and subject to severe punishment should they take up wicked ways. "I will repay them double for their wickedness should they defile my land with lifeless forms and vile images of their detestable idols." Dare we consider COVID-19; 70 million homeless persons, current wars between tribes, as a reflection of our wickedness?

Such is the rhythm of this and many other old testament readings. Punishment, redemption, followed by warnings. Several complex concepts of the LAW are articulated in Romans 7: 1-12. The relationship between the LAW and the believer.

Practical effects of the LAW. The LAW brings knowledge of sin; without the LAW, we would not know sin. Ends in death – the marriage example (curious that only women are identified as the potential adulterers and that they can be remarried [redeployed] only after their husband's death. What are the men doing?) Through Christ, the Believer is dead, to be "born again."

How do we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to be born again? At this point of belief, Christianity takes off in a number of directions – a reflection best left for Easter.

Perhaps at this time, we will find opportunities to reflect on the recent history of St. George's with the messages of Lent in mind.

TUESDAY 16 MARCH

PSALMS 97, 99; JEREMIAH 17:19-27; ROMANS 7:13-25

Eric Friesen

Here we are in our second Lenten Season under the shadow of Covid-19. The approaching darkness of remembering Our Lord's crucifixion is deepened by the darkness and uncertainty of a Pandemic which has touched us all. The grief of the women at the Tomb of Jesus is anticipated by the grief many of you have experienced in the past year. In our family, the death of a brother (cancer) and a cousin (suicide) haunt us, even if we have been spared a Covid infection, for now.

Until this past year, I confess that I have taken the Psalms for granted. Sure, phrases from some of our favourites appear in majestic works like *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation* and in some of our favourite hymns, and when the Psalms are sung on a Sunday morning they add meaningfully to our worship experience. But until this year I haven't read the daily office with any regularity. Now, in this time, I find the Psalms, in the words of Dean Robert Willis of Canterbury Cathedral, the most "imaginative encouragement."

Take the first of today's Psalms, #97, "The Glory of God's Reign." The words and images stoke a fire of hope and consolation. Even as the Lord is surrounded by "clouds and thick darkness... Fire goes before him. His lightnings light up the world...the mountains melt like wax before the Lord of all the earth. The Lord loves...guards...rescues" those of us who are "faithful. Light dawns" for us and gives those of us who are "upright in heart...JOY!" There is in this Psalm, as well as in Psalm 99, such a majestic strength and power to draw on, especially now.

The glaring difference between Lent and the Pandemic is that we know how the Easter Story ends. It ends in Resurrection, in a blaze of light and in a halo of peace and a promise of redemption for all who accept this gift. On the other hand, we don't know how the Pandemic story is going to end; it is a time of the greatest anxiety: national, international, and personal. We may feel that in reaching for our faith we are grasping at straws. That is when we can turn to the Psalms, like grasping the horn on a saddle, or a firm railing on a ship in a storm at sea.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who knew what it was like to face a darkness-like-no-other, reminds us that the Psalter was "the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word." Jesus, in his utter humanity, also knew despair and doubt and fragility. In his humanity "He prayed the Psalter and now it has become his prayer for all time," and so ours as well. "Here we encounter the praying Christ, because as we pray the psalms we are joining in with the prayer of Jesus, our intercessor, that surely reaches the ears of God." A promise for today, and for all time.



Wednesday 17 March (St. Patrick of Ireland)

Psalm 101,109:1-4 (5-19), 20-30; Jeremiah 18: 1-11; Romans 8:1-11

LEIGH SMITH

Reflection I

Psalms 101 and 109 are both titled “A Psalm of (King) David.” Ps. 101 reveals a man who greatly values his reputation and responds to criticism in a judgmental and vengeful fashion. David thus reveals an unease in his relationship with the Lord.

His sense of isolation begins Psalm 109. He is being slandered and responds with a particularly vengeful tirade. Then follows a description of profound distress, especially of the body.

David calls to God for help but then returns to negating his “accusers” while thanking the Lord.

Reflection II

Jeremiah describes a potter remaking a clay vessel which had not remained in its original essence. He realizes that Israel has been similarly “spoiled” but can be remade by the hand of the Lord if it “turns from its evil.”

Hearing “the word of the Lord,” Jeremiah reports to “the men of Judah” that to save “Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” each and every one of them must “return from his evil way.”

A lesson for our time, as well.

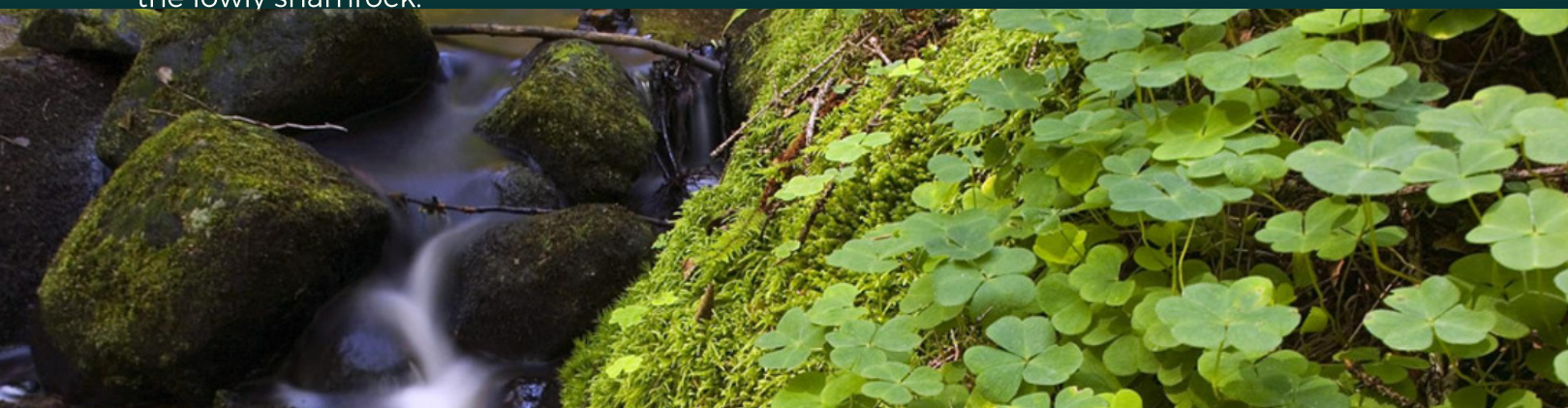
Reflection III

Paul knows that his Roman readers are people of the law. He ends Chapter 7 by contrasting “the law of God” in his mind with “the law of sin” in “my flesh,” and begins Chapter 8 by declaring that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free.”

By sending his Son “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” God fulfills that law in “those who live according to the Spirit.” They will receive life “to their mortal bodies.”

Thus Paul describes the reality of the Trinity and the hope of resurrection for all.

Today being St. Patrick’s Day, I would note that St. Patrick described the Trinity by using the lowly shamrock.



THURSDAY 18 MARCH

PSALM 69:1-23 (24-30), 31-388; JEREMIAH 22:13-23; ROMANS 8:12-27

Gordon Gwynne-Timothy

“Save me O God, for the waters are come into my soul.” (Psalm 69:1, KJV)

I recall saying to myself when I heard words like this as a young man, raised in the Anglican tradition, “What do I need saving for? I’m doing fine.” Now some decades later, I feel I am more able to see my own failings and mistakes. This is a good thing; it has not led me to useless self-berating, but has instead helped open the door to realizing my need for God—that is, my need for steadiness, guidance, solace, comfort, encouragement, perseverance, fortitude, hope, and living with a softer, less critical, heart and mind. In other words, it has moved me forward.

At one point, the writer of this psalm clearly wishes punishment and suffering on his enemies (in verses 23-28). This stands in direct contradiction of Jesus’ teaching to bless and pray for those who persecute you. I used to simply distance myself from passages like this, saying that such sentiments are obviously not Christian and in fact not worthy of any religious teaching. I still believe that is true. But today I see psalm 69, in its entirety, as presenting the cry of an obviously flawed person—a person who is beset by a swirl of crazily changing psychological states. He cries out desperately; he then recalls his humiliations and embarrassments; he mutters mean-spirited vindictiveness against his enemies; he then asks to be “set up on high” by God (v.29); he then gives praise and thanksgiving to God and describes all of creation as praising God. This swirl of voices reminds me of a person suffering from mental illness! But on consideration, is there even one of these states that I have not myself felt? Indeed, if I consider honestly the parade of random uninvited thoughts that can enter my mind within even the span of a minute if I allow myself to daydream, then the apparently mentally ill, alternately self-pitying and self-aggrandizing writer of this psalm suddenly feels very close to me! This is, in fact, a bit embarrassing!

I believe we are all sick, and all in need of health. All need salvation and deliverance. To recognize one’s need is a gift. It is a firm step in the direction of actively seeking and ultimately being given salvation. The writer of psalm 69 has experienced pain like Christ’s: he has suffered unjust reproach, humiliation, agony and despair; he was given vinegar to drink when he was thirsty. He calls out unceasingly. Yet, the arc of the psalm ends with peace and dwelling together in love.



Friday 19 March (St. Joseph)

Psalm 132; Isaiah 63:7-16; Matthew 1:18-25

CAROLYN PRATT

A common theme in these scripture readings is how God raises up leaders for God's people. The psalm tells us that God will provide leadership through King David's line of descendents. "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne." Isaiah reminds the people of all the good things God has done for them, "and he became their saviour". Matthew narrates the impending birth of another leader, Jesus. This leader whom we follow is Emmanuel, God with us.

Matthew tells this story. There was a man named Joseph, a good and righteous man, who was betrothed to Mary. A betrothal in their culture was a binding contract. So when Mary told Joseph before they were married that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, Joseph was faced with a difficult decision. He cared for Mary and did not want to expose her to public disgrace. However, he was not the father of her child, which was grounds for breaking the betrothal agreement. He decided to quietly break the contract to spare Mary any more hardship.

However, God had another plan. God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to tell him to take Mary as his wife and become a step-father to the baby whom he was to name Jesus. Joseph chose to fulfill the role he was given, to love and nurture Mary and the baby Jesus and to provide a home for them with him. The choice Joseph made was contrary to the customs of the day but this decision to accept and act on the message he was given in his dream must also have been motivated by compassion and love for Mary and her situation.

So why is this story of Joseph in the scripture readings for today? These scriptures are about God raising up leaders to show God's people how to care for each other as God cares for us, with deep love for our wellbeing. Joseph, not being a well-known public figure of political importance, showed his leadership qualities by choosing to do what was good for Mary and the baby as God asked of him. It was an act of love and compassion. His decision paved the way for the birth of God's chosen leader, Jesus Christ. Joseph's action allows the story of redemption to continue.

We may not be leaders with a capital "L" but like Joseph's our decisions matter. Our acts of kindness, compassion and love which come from our inmost being further the kingdom of God on earth. God is with us.

SATURDAY 20 MARCH

PSALM 107: 33-43, 108: 7-13; JEREMIAH 23: 9-15; ROMANS 9, 1-18

Geoffrey Pratt

Is God to be regarded as a punitive God or as a God of Love or both punitive and loving? In the Psalms, God is portrayed as changing wasteland into a liveable space and bringing the hungry and homeless poor to live there and prosper. Good people are glad about this, Bad people are not. It is time for these bad people to appreciate God's "deep love." The psalmist goes on to praise God effusively, saying "the deeper your love, the higher it goes" but is then concerned about whether God is giving up on "us." The Psalmist needs God's help in their battles because, while they will do their best, "God will flatten the opposition for good." Note the contrast between God's deep love and God flattening the opposition. In Jeremiah, "the prophet of Doom," some call him, the land is portrayed as being full of adulterers, godless prophets and priests and doers of evil deeds. God says "I shall bring disaster upon them" "I shall give them wormwood to eat and poison to drink". There is no love spoken of in this passage. Here clearly God is a punitive God. In the Romans passage, Paul is addressing the "great grief and sorrow in my heart." It's the Israelites, "my family," who produced the Messiah, the Christ. Yet they have not accepted that Jesus is that Messiah.

Paul goes on in several chapters to explain why they are wrong. In doing so, he makes clear that God is in charge—in particular, in charge of who receives God's mercy and compassion and who does not. In illustration, God is said to say, I loved Jacob, I hated Esau. God also is said to say that "I picked Pharaoh as a bit player in the drama of my salvation."

Also, Paul says the rejection of Jesus was part of God's plan. It was the means by which God would offer salvation to the Gentiles and the world. So God is capable of hatred and, in picking Pharaoh, causing unpleasant events which included the drowning of an army. Paul also implies that it was God who caused the rejection of Jesus by the Jews.

Where is the love in all this? Well, some of the most wonderful passages about the love of God were written by Paul. For example, he writes in Romans 8 that "nothing, living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us." While in the Old Testament in particular, God is often seen as being punitive as well as loving, the understanding of the character of God has evolved over time to the point where God is viewed by many but not all as a God of Love exclusively. Particularly with the mystics such as the 12th century Thomas Aquinas and the 14th century Julian of Norwich, the love of Mother as well as Father God is viewed as universal, applying to all creation without exception. God has been viewed as the universe itself wherein we live our lives of "well and woe" as Julian of Norwich puts it. According to this view of God, God is with us in Covid 19 as well as in the traumatic events our U.S. neighbours have recently experienced. I confess that I can believe this more as a matter of the heart than as a matter of the intellect. I conclude with a statement from Julian of Norwich, who lived through the Black Death epidemic. With her faith and decades of contemplation and action as an anchoress, she can write: "All will be well and every kind of thing will be well." Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief. Alleluia!

Sunday 21 March

(Benedict, Abbot; Thomas Cranmer)

Psalm 51:1 -13; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-30

THE REVEREND CANON PETER CASE

Remembering the Big Picture

“The days are coming”, declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31). What a welcome note of relief and comfort are these words from the prophet Jeremiah! They stand in stark contrast to the gloom and misery foretold by the first twenty-nine chapters of Jeremiah’s prophecy. Those chapters harshly condemn the people and announce both the imminent destruction of the nation and the exile to Babylon. But now come words of comfort. There will be redemption; hearts will change and there will be a new reality built around a new covenant and relationship with God.

Like Jeremiah, we are living in a time where it is hard to escape stories of doom and gloom. As of the time of writing, we in Kingston are still under a Stay-at-Home Order and we read, almost like baseball scores, the daily statistics of new infections of COVID-19 and a rising death count. Our lives have been disrupted, the economy is suffering, vaccines are not coming as quickly as hoped, and it is easy to be discouraged and wonder if our lives will ever get back to ‘normal’. And what will ‘normal’ even look like with increasing political and societal strife and division pitting one or more groups against others?

Perhaps this is a time to reflect on the words of Jeremiah and rejoice that a new order is coming and that God will bring change. Unlike the Old Covenant that was characterized by rules imposed from without, the New Covenant is characterized by a change of heart and a desire from within to follow God’s will. The Old Covenant was about duty, whereas the New Covenant is about regeneration and a new sense of purpose. It is sounded in the words of the psalmist who prayed, “create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). For Christians, this new order is already here, albeit imperfectly due to our human nature.

The embodiment of this New Covenant is Jesus and his loving, intimate and obedient relationship with his heavenly Father. Despite the physical and emotional hardship that he knew lay ahead of him, his heart was so in tune with God’s that he could not do anything but pursue his mission. “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). The life of Jesus was one of faithful service to God and God’s people. In the midst of our darkest and most discouraging moments, we can rejoice in God’s amazing gift of a New Covenant, open our hearts to his love and grace, and go boldly forward. Let us always remember Jesus’ words that, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” (John 12:26).

MONDAY 22 MARCH

PSALM 31; JEREMIAH 24:1-10; ROMANS 9:19-33

Lynn Wilson

What do a supplication from a put-upon psalmist, two baskets of figs (one good and one inedible) presented to Jeremiah by the Lord, and an imprecation by an earnest apostle (Paul) to an audience of mixed receptivity and review, have in common? This is a question often faced when trying to reconcile the three readings given for each day in the Lectionary. One approach to finding common ground among the passages above is to point to the essential condition of trust in the Lord, that is, faith in the Lord's protection in times of peace but particularly of conflict, as the key to reconciliation and salvation. This all three passages attest to in their various ways.

Psalm 31, in the BCP *in te, Domine, speravi* (in thee, Lord, I have hope), in the Hebrew actually reads "in you, O Lord, I shelter." Refuge is sought from a world where the Covenant feels undermined at every turn, the commandments held in abeyance, and the injunctions of the "Shema Y'Israel forgotten. The Lord is seen as a stronghold of rock, a bastion, a crag, and a fort house. "As for me, I trust in you, O Lord. I say you are my God" (15). "Love the Lord, all his faithful, steadfastness the Lord keeps . . ." (14). Be strong and let your heart be firm, all who hope in the Lord" (15).

The psalmist prays the Lord to fall upon evil-doers wrathful. In the passage from Jeremiah, the Lord likens to the basket of inedible figs the evil-doers who not only fail to recognize him but who never will. It will be destroyed as it should be. The writer speaks of a specific historical circumstance here, but the theological point is retribution for desecration of the Lord's house and holy instruments. The basket of good figs, representing those who trust in him and have faith, and those who can be turned to this account, will know his mercy. "And I will give them a heart to know me, for I am the Lord" (7). The Lord will bring them back to their land and restore them. He will fold them into his shelter.

If the psalmist and Jeremiah understand the restoration and maintenance of the universal moral arc, Paul seeks to create the understanding that God and Jesus Christ are the sheltering endpoints for all, Jew and Gentile alike. One must have trust and faith in this. In a discussion with Judaeans about the merits of recognizing Gentiles into the Christian faith, he reminds the Judaeans that they and the Israelites forgot about this for a long time. They lost faith, in essence, in favour of rigid obedience to the symbols and rituals of faith. For that, they suffered over 400 years. How then can they criticize those who may not be of their blood, but who do have faith and behave as such? God's justice and mercy are for all who would come to him. His point is reinforced by the minor prophet Hosea "Those who were not my people, I will call my people, and those who were unloved, I will love. And in the place where it was said to them 'You are not my people,' they will be the children of the living God" (25, 26). He will fold them all into his shelter.

MONDAY 22 MARCH - CONTINUED

The dynamic between God and his people is transactional and reciprocal. Walking in the path guided by the arc brings reward and shelter; deviating from the path brings an accounting. When his wrath is visited on those who err, the punishment is of an altruistic nature; it hurts him as much as it hurts those who suffer it. But he waits. His patience in waiting for the return is infinite, his presence assured. Eternally available to those with faith and trust is his shelter.

Where is the love in all this? Well, some of the most wonderful passages about the love of God were written by Paul. For example, he writes in Romans 8 that “nothing, living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.” While in the Old Testament in particular, God is often seen as being punitive as well as loving, the understanding of the character of God has evolved over time to the point where God is viewed by many but not all as a God of Love exclusively. Particularly with the mystics such as the 12th century Thomas Aquinas and the 14th century Julian of Norwich, the love of Mother as well as Father God is viewed as universal, applying to all creation without exception. God has been viewed as the universe itself wherein we live our lives of “well and woe” as Julian of Norwich puts it. According to this view of God, God is with us in Covid 19 as well as in the traumatic events our U.S. neighbours have recently experienced. I confess that I can believe this more as a matter of the heart than as a matter of the intellect. I conclude with a statement from Julian of Norwich, who lived through the Black Death epidemic. With her faith and decades of contemplation and action as an anchoress, she can write: “All will be well and every kind of thing will be well.” Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief. Alleluia!



Tuesday 23 March

Psalms. 121, 122, 123; Jeremiah 25:8-17; Romans 10:1-12

FRAN HARKNESS

I can't read the words of Psalm 122 without hearing in my mind the wonderful composition by Hubert H. Parry, *I Was Glad*, composed for the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902 and played at every coronation since. In fact lines from both Psalm 121 and 122 have been used what seems like countless times by composers. I know because I fell down the rabbit hole of looking for the works and listening to them for an entire afternoon, amazed at the variety and the beauty of the music. What struck me was the wonderful assortment of settings, from Jewish chanting of the first two lines of Psalm 122 to the version by an American composer, Jackie Gouche Farris, of Psalm 121, sung by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir or the haunting setting of the same Psalm by John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers. The settings all came from different parts of society but religious faith seemed to reach out from each of them, inspiring and emotional and touching the heart.

Our Christianity is a big tent and it includes black evangelicals in Brooklyn, Celtic singers from Ireland; a Renaissance composer, or an Oxford trained classical musician. I write this on the birthday of Martin Luther King and I reflect on the long journey that we have ahead in society to achieve the 'big tent' in which everyone is welcome. Leonard Bernstein said, 'music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknown.' As the days go forward to Good Friday and Easter I think about sitting quietly on Good Friday afternoon listening to the thrilling music of J.S. Bach, the St. Matthew Passion or the great B Minor Mass. Bach signed all his religious music with the letters S.D.G, *Soli Deo Gloria*: 'to the glory of God alone', and one cannot help but see God in it.

WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH

PSALM 119:145-176; JEREMIAH 25:30-38; ROMANS 10:14-21

Harold Redekopp

This reflection focuses briefly on the life and faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which has, I believe, something important to say to us about Lent. Bonhoeffer is one of the 20th century's best known and universally admired Christian martyrs. His brief life is a powerful expression of the salvation message and acceptance of the Way of the Cross. Born into an aristocratic German family, Bonhoeffer was a gifted scholar and musician who at the age of 14 announced he intended to become a minister and theologian. He completed his doctoral degree in theology and in 1931 became a lecturer at Berlin University and was also ordained as a Lutheran minister.

As Hitler rose to power Bonhoeffer, along with other pastors and theologians, organized the Confessing Church (1934) that boldly declared its allegiance first to Jesus Christ. Subsequently, he was banned from teaching openly. As a consequence he abandoned his pacifist approach of relying on moral persuasion to oppose the Nazi regime. Instead, he began actively working secretly to help Jews escape Nazi oppression. He also became part of a plot to overthrow, and later to assassinate, Hitler. Then, in 1943 was arrested and sent to various prisons, including the Buchenwald concentration camp. On April 9, 1945, one month before Germany surrendered, he was hanged with six other resisters. He was 39.

Shortly before his execution Bonhoeffer wrote the poem "Who am I?" Deeply personal and moving, it is his testament of the "Way of the Cross". (Translation is by J.B. Leishman.)

Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.
Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.
Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.
Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled,
starving for colors, for flowers, for birdsong,

thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?
Who am I? This one or the other?
Am I this one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering weakling?
Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions
of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest me; O God, I am
thine!

Thursday 25 March (The Annunciation)

Psalms 85, 87; Isaiah 52: 7-12; Hebrews 2: 5-10

TILLY NELSON

After reading the passage in Hebrews, I immediately thought of the needless and horrific killing of George Floyd—an unarmed African American on May 25th, 2020. He was born on October 14th, 1973. He was 47 years old and a father. His death was a senseless misuse of police power and justice. He was detained and thrown to the ground. He had done nothing, yet was seized simply because of his colour. An officer of the law held George Floyd down by putting his knee on Floyd's neck, not only briefly, but for nine minutes, while Floyd repeatedly proclaimed,

"I can't breathe." He begged, he pleaded, he called for his mother!

He has become a martyr as and as a result of his public, shameful and criminal death, has given an example, yet again, of the senseless persecution of blacks in America. It supports the credo of Black Lives Matter. His death became the supreme sacrifice in a pre-destined defeat. The oppression and fear of authority known to most blacks and minorities in America and around the world is tragically brought to the fore yet again by his senseless death.

It has prompted reactions from friends and family, politicians, and the clergy of various countries world-wide. They comment on racism, discrimination, racial terror and oppression, aggressive conduct by police and the absence of any moral conduct by police that fateful day. All those who reacted condemn the incident, but serious significant action is needed.

Pope Francis said "we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life."

The Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church said 'we are all, each of us, one in Christ Jesus. As such there should be no hatred, no enmity, hostility between us, but reconciliation, peace and prayers.'

Hebrew 2: 9 reads: "But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, so that through God's grace he should die for everyone. We see him now crowned with glory and honor because of the death he suffered."

FRIDAY 26 MARCH

PSALM 22; JEREMIAH 29: 1, 4-14; ROMANS 11: 13-24

Maxine Clarke

Reviewing this passage has reinforced for me the fact that God is always with us, in good times and bad.

In spite of the current, significant difficulties in our world, we can be confident that God has a plan for each of us to prosper, and to have hope for the future.

He will always be found when we seek him, and always answer when we call on him.

I find this very reassuring, particularly in these times.



Saturday 27 March

Psalm 137: 1-6 (7-9) 144; Jeremiah 31: 27-34; Romans 11: 25-36

BARBARA WATSON

God's Gift of a New Restorative Covenant

Lamenting. Remembering the past fondly. Seeking the path to follow. Complex and ambiguous to read, these texts offer us promise for our times. The psalm presents us with the lamenting Israelites to whom God is promising a new covenant with their release from exile in Babylon, the captive Israelites weeping and pouring out their sorrows over the ravaging of their beloved Zion. And Paul, that great theorist who laid down for us many of the core Christian beliefs, tells us in the Romans passage that Israel will be saved. Thus, we can imagine God weeping with Israel as they were taken into exile, and then promising to carry them home.

Jeremiah gives us God's promise that life, human and animal, will be restored.

How? God will create a new covenant, one that is written on the hearts of the people, one that pledges absolution of sins. This levels the playing field: everyone's sins will be forgiven; and everyone will know God, which eliminates the need for a learned religious to teach the law. God has a plan.

What, then, is God's plan? Jeremiah tells us that God's restorative covenant includes the pledge to build and to plant that which has been destroyed. This is part of God's plan. But how, especially in uncertain times such as our current pandemic reality, can people move from lamenting to rebuilding? Perhaps we can begin by looking at why people lament. Consider how many times you may have heard someone say "I definitely did not see that coming". Why did they not see it coming? Because they had expectations. We do not always know we have expectations until suddenly our expectations are not met. Then, with our expectations dashed, we know.

The current pandemic provides us with an analogy, at least in this respect, to the plight of the Israelites. It gives us an example of dashed expectations. Many people have voiced the fact that they failed to see the pandemic coming. But there is hope... Realizing that our expectations have been dashed can open the door to acceptance, to accepting whatever is happening in the moment.

The moment—this moment, every moment—no matter how uncomfortable, no matter how much we long to change it, encompasses at its core a deep sense of wholeness. We can accept because we can find that wholeness with God in prayer; and we can rebuild in that moment, because we have been given the very Good News that we know God and that our sins are forgiven by God. This is the message I take from these readings: God's restorative covenant is written on our hearts, so we can remember our past fondly as we live our present into the new path we seek. We can choose to rebuild with God.

SUNDAY 28 MARCH PALM SUNDAY

ISAIAH 50:4-9A; PSALM 31:9-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 14:1-15:47

Major the Reverend Canon Catherine Askew

"I am forgotten like a dead man, out of mind; I am as useless as a broken pot." Psalm 31:12

The year 2020 is one that will be engraved on our memories for the rest of our lives, whether we wish it or not. It was a year in which we learned who the true essential workers were in our communities: health care workers, grocery staff, postal workers, among others. It was a year in which the values of society clashed, sometimes with shocking violence. It was a year when the elders we said we revered died from the virus, often alone in overworked longterm care homes.

It was also the year that a veteran of World War II heard the cry of the health system in his country and rose up. His body was old and frail. He was no longer the young man who served in the British Army in India and Burma. He was hunched over and used a walker to stabilize his steps. In some ways he had become like a broken pot; someone who resembled the man he had been but who was unable to do so many of the things he had done in the past.

But despite the Psalmist's words, even a broken pot has use. Its curved sides can still be used to scoop bits of liquid. Its flat bottom can serve up nourishment like a platter. Capt. Sir Tom Moore heard the cry of the British health system and was not dissuaded by who he was no longer; he saw within his fragile self a piece of broken pot that could bring hope and inner nourishment to others. He inspired donations of over £33,000,000, but more importantly, he inspired hope. He invoked the words of the prophet Isaiah, "the Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word."

I write this reflection on the day that Sir Tom died. You read this as we stand at the cusp of Holy Week. What does the image of the broken pot say to us after all these months of upheaval and loss? How do we contend with the effects of isolation, fatigue, and sorrow? I invite you to come to that sacred place with your Creator, be it in your garden, or in the early morning hours, or perhaps within the sound of music. Let your ear be wakened to God's voice. Take your piece of broken pot and let God guide your hand. Let God's kindness working through you allow you to see those other people in our lives and communities using their bits of "broken pot," and may God bind us together spiritually into the wholeness for which we have starved for so long.



Monday 29 March

Psalm 51:1-18 (19-20); Jeremiah 12:1-16; Philippians 3:1-14

PAUL ROBERTSON

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7).

As I look out my window at the white snow gleaming in the frigid sunlight, I see a world refreshed and renewed, cleansed of its autumnal muck and bitter November grey. I am both calmed and reassured by this season of slumber knowing the world shucks its past season’s mantle in anticipation of the spring to come, the season of rebirth, renewal and growth.

And as I reread this passage from Psalms, I am also reminded of our language’s ability both to empower and to inhibit and damage. As was so well enunciated in the February edition of the Anglican Journal, many of the familiar metaphors of scripture are not inclusive and to many of our brothers and sisters, they are outright racist. To be washed clean whiter than snow, perhaps very Canadian in its imagery, cannot be automatically equated with goodness and purity.

In different ways, all three of these readings address the concept of the second chance: God’s challenge to us to take stock of our past shortcomings and actions inspired and fettered by our various wants and ambitions and his invitation to shed this detritus and renew ourselves through faith in God’s unbounded love.

It is fitting that Lent begins during the winter: a quiet time to reflect and reassess, to come to terms with our temporal lives and our relationship to God. As we prepare the ground for the growing season to come, so must we prepare the way for God, examining our failings and gifts, shedding that which keeps us from him and building up that which brings us closer to God.

In many ways, the ongoing world pandemic and its associated lockdowns and quarantines have forced us into year-long Lent, a time to reassess what is truly important to us, our loved ones and our communities. For me, it is relationships with friends and family that outweigh any of the toys I could ever order online. It is the people who sustain us, give us connection and reason to wake up each day. In them I see God’s face and eternal love. “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15).

TUESDAY 30 MARCH

PSALMS 6 AND 12, JEREMIAH 15: 10-21; PHILIPPIANS 4:15-21

Edgar Tumak

In my understanding, today's readings all have passages of concern and sorrow for the grieving, the weak and the needy whose troubles are caused by people of power, often referred to as wicked and vile. At this time of Lent overlaid with the COVID pandemic, we can think of those who suffer and those who cause suffering.

We all readily acknowledge the grief associated with people living in or working in long-term care residences, along with their families, friends and loved ones. Yet we have so many in positions of power who speak good, even overtly Christian words, but who have not diverted sufficient funds to staunch the suffering, loss of life, or exasperation and exhaustion of those who provide care—often underpaid.

We have people who believe it is their right to go on discretionary resort vacations – not because of pre-existing health concerns requiring a hot dry climate for several months of the year, but because they have done this for many years. The vacationers consider it their right because they have the money, and a shocking number at the same time have required their employees or electorate to hunker down and stay put. They have broken a moral code, while many people suffer from isolation, or worse, die in isolation in under-supported long-term care facilities or hospitals, without being allowed the comfort of the presence of those they hold dear.

Further under-appreciated at this time are the poor, the homeless, refugees and the addicted, who are often treated as though they are sub-human; far too many are left to die, as though it is entirely their fault that they have come to such difficult straits. Have our people in power responded to these crises sufficiently? Are the super-wealthy people and corporations using their largesse to respond more fully to the deserving needy, whom far too many consider to be the undeserving needy? Or do the wealthy and powerful use their influence to rail against the sharing of this largesse created by and made from all the contributions of society in which they live and prosper?

We have, and have had, leaders who, along with their supporters, confound science and logic, and treat the COVID pandemic as a hoax or something that is not that important. When more people die in less than a year, versus all the combatants of a country during the entirety of the Second World War, is this responsible behaviour and governance? Instead, we see people using the language of Christianity and its symbols as props for dismissive if not hateful and criminal behaviour.

The powerful and wealthy are not only those who need to reflect. We have hearts displayed in windows and on the streets, but have people in 'lesser' authority truly responded with kindness? Have these people contributed to the discomfort of others such as the loss of employment, hurt and inappropriate behaviour?

The bible is an ancient text, but its meaning lives for today and for eternity.

Wednesday 31 March

Psalm 55; Jeremiah 17:5-10, 14-17; Philippians 4:1-13.

DIANA DAVIS DUERKOP

1. It is difficult sometimes to understand why readings are put together, and this is one time. These three readings seem to stand alone. The thread however seems to be to love the Lord and to put one's faith in Him.

David wrote this psalm. He felt that he had been betrayed by a friend. He speaks about how his friend has hurt him and betrayed him, but in the last half of the reading, he calls upon God to look after him. He invites us to leave our troubles with the Lord.

Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet and reformer who authored several books. In the first few verses in this chapter he quotes the Lord saying that He will bless those who put their trust in Him. In the latter part, Jeremiah says that he knows that the Lord is to be trusted and that He is the hope of Israel. Finally Jeremiah asks the Lord to heal him. The Lord is the One he will praise!

Paul's letter to the Christian Philippians in Macedonia was written while he was in prison. The Philippians had sent him a gift, and his letter was to thank them for it and to encourage them to be strong followers, to keep the Lord in prayers, and to rejoice in the Lord. Paul had a deep faith in Jesus and was very troubled by the way Jesus' followers were being persecuted.

CHRIS & MARIE MCELVAINE

2. We believe the Psalmist is expressing here what we all often experience, frustration and pain inflicted on us by our own demons or perhaps by the thoughtless words of an acquaintance. Here he expresses of pain and considers escaping in whatever possible way. The message is not to let these overwhelm us, but like the Psalmist, realize that the solution is to listen and ask for guidance from the Lord, and trust Him to provide the resolution, or maybe a way of coping.

Jeremiah is a follow up to the Psalm and draws a comparison between good and evil. The person who does not believe or trust in the Lord will be lost in a wilderness and have no roots. It is a straight forward directive to love your neighbour, but remember in your relationship to test his values against your Christian values.

The letter to the Philippians brings it all together for us and gives us encouragement to live through tribulations such as the current pandemic. Amongst all our current problems we need to be content and thankful for what we have: our friends, our family and our lives. It suggests we concentrate on truth, honesty and justice and enjoy the blessings that we have and further our relationship with our Lord.

THURSDAY 1 APRIL MAUNDY THURSDAY

PSALM 102; JEREMIAH 20: 7-11; 1 CORINTHIANS 10: 14-17, 11: 27-32

Tom Westgarth

Psalm 102 sounds like a lot of people in today's society. Self esteem lacking, self loathing, no direction in life, selfishness, on and on—especially now, given our world's current state. Loss of faith can be a core element to most if not all of the above sadness. This psalm brings to mind that many of the world problems and personal life problems of ancient Hebrew society persist in today's world. It would seem that the passage of centuries of time has brought no improvement. We are so far apart in our many different religious beliefs; unity and compromise are two main paths forward.

Being human, we are prone to act in many ways badly. Faith Hope and Charity are the most used collection of words that we all are familiar with, may we all practice them.

Faith, leading the way, can move mountains. Keep your prayers coming; hope and charity will follow. God bless us all.

Paul, like all of the first apostles, had great faith in God's power and great courage to face the world against all odds. He was beset by many different evils as he went about delivering God's word. But he persisted, never giving up. Today we have to be busy spreading God's word to the public at large. Paul was so brave—a fine example for us to follow.



Friday 2 April Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25; John 18:1-19:42

THE RIGHT REVEREND GEORGE BRUCE

Like many people, I am unlikely ever to forget the year 2020. I vividly remember standing at the counter leading to the kitchen of the Great Hall on Shrove Tuesday 2020, flipping pancakes with my compatriots, Dean Davidson and Bishop Michael. Shortly thereafter came the first lockdown with its virtual worship, followed by a partial opening and limited in-person worship. Then came the second lock down, which is still in effect as I write. The prolonged period of isolation has provided much time for reflection and my mind went back to the time when I served at the Canadian Defence Liaison Staff in London. Theo and I attended a production at the Palace Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue of Timothy Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical production, *Jesus Christ Super Star*. While I was a serving military officer, I was also at that time a postulant in the Diocese of Ottawa and studying for the priesthood.. I remember being somewhat astonished as I looked around the audience to see so many clergy in attendance in full clerical dress. My attendance that night had a two-fold purpose. I wanted very much to see the production but I was quite prepared to be critical of any errors in theology. The staging was very simple: a blackened stage whose floor was divided into squares which could be lit up from underneath. Thus the appearance of Pontius Pilate was announced by a bolt of purple light on the stage.

Of particular note was the arrest in the garden, the trial before Caiaphas and Annas; the first appearance before Pilate and his sending Jesus to Herod events culminating in Jesus' flogging and the final decision to yield to the wishes of the mob and sentence Jesus to crucifixion. The climax of the production was the carrying out of the sentence of death ending with Jesus' final words, "It is finished." That seemed to be the play's composers' understanding of the significance of the events. The production's emphasis was clearly on Jesus' death and it was totally consistent with the attitude of the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities. For all of them, it was indeed over. Yet another Jewish revolutionary had been dispatched. Rome and the Sanhedrin would be well satisfied. Certainly that is how John describes the reaction of Jesus' followers locked behind closed doors in abject fear. I was annoyed because that was not how the Gospels describe the succeeding events. It seemed to me that the production had missed the point. What about the Resurrection, the fulfilment of God's promise. Yet it seemed accurate for that Friday in Jerusalem.

My concern that the composers had missed the whole point by ending the production on the Friday was somewhat mollified by the finale which remains firmly fixed in my mind to this day. The whole cast appeared on stage robed in white caftans and as the risen Christ appeared they raised their arms and revealed that the hem of their garments was tinged blood red. Immediately through my mind ran the verse from Revelation 7: 13-14. "These that are robed in white, who are they and where have they come from?" "Then he said to me, 'These are they who have passed through the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"

SATURDAY 3 APRIL

PSALM 88; JOB 19 21-27A; HEBREWS 4: 1-16

Lynn Wilson

...but they 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 40:31

Not the message that the first two of our passages relate! The Right Reverend Mary Irwin Gibson posted this message on the morning I wrote this. It's almost the opposite of the passages from the Psalm and Job, but not of our passage from Hebrews. But I thought it relevant to all our readings in its way.

The Psalm 88 paints the blackest of pictures, highlighted by intensification after intensification of his despair to a pitch worthy of John Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* or *La Nausée*. No mention is made of any transgression for which the supplicant is paying the price with the hope of relief from a benevolent being. It reads as if God, who the Psalmist says is capable of kindness and the creation of wonders, has abandoned him to a fate of desolation for no real reason, almost an act of caprice. All the Psalmist can do is endure.

To paraphrase Vita Sackville West, God doesn't come off very well in the Book of Job either. God is presented as engaging in a wager with the Adversary, wagers being something that Zeus was known to take delight in along with other antics characteristic of capricious ancient Greek gods. The object of the wager—a bet on human behaviour in challenging circumstances. There is an unwilling participant, a victim. Victim (although not of a wager) is certainly how the Psalmist seems to be drawn. Like him, all Job can do is endure. And Job, in his response to Elihu, makes plain his continuing agony (19:21-24).

The laments of the Psalmist and Job raise the age-old issue, why bad things happen to good people; that is, why God, if He is good, causes or allows it. Theodicy. The Book of Job is unique in the biblical canon in this respect. No other book in the canon asks the question in this way.

But Job also makes plain his unwavering faith (19: 22-27). The sentiment remains unspoken, but the Psalmist probably has that same faith at some level; he is not feeling the love today, however. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reiterates the importance of that faith, although he is clear that one has to be open to receiving that faith in the beginning (4:1-3, 11). Through that faith, if we are open to it, we enter God's rest. Labour and suffering are relieved. As the passage from Isaiah that Bishop Irwin-Gibson posted, in that rest born of faith, we find strength.

In human history and in the current day, probably no question is more vexing or asked more frequently than "Why do bad things happen to good people?". We ask that question at a personal level; we ask that question at higher levels. There is no more answer for us than was presented to Job. As do Job and the Psalmist, we endure. It seems unfair and unjust, but that is just part of the mystery. As we endure, faith offers hope, even when there seems no point in having hope. As the bad exists in the world, so does the good—out there, sometimes appearing unattainable, but out there, the reward of being open to, and enduring in, faith. Thus, we shall walk and not faint.

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