Some Lenten Reflections by Synod links, and invited others, of the URC Retreats Group

Ash Wednesday. 17th Feb

Psalm 143
A Psalm of David

Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness!
And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.
For the enemy persecutes me. He has dashed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead.
Therefore my spirit faints within me, and my heart within me is dismayed.
I remember the days of old; I meditate on all your deeds; I contemplate the works of your hands.
I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you in a parched land. Selah.
Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit is failing. Do not hide your face from me, or I shall become like those who go down to the Pit.
Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for I have placed my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for I lift up my soul to you.

As Lent begins, we enter a time of self-reflection and looking inwards, a time when we often take extra time to talk to God through prayer. But what is prayer and how do we know that we are heard? I suspect that the answer to this is not always where we expect to discover it. The way to God lies within each of us. Indeed, the psalmist tells us my spirit fails within me, and my heart within me is dismayed…do not hide your face from me…for I have placed my trust in you (Ps 143:4, 7, 8). In other words, if my life is not as it should be, and if all my energy is used up, and my heart is searching for you, O LORD, don’t abandon me; and God doesn’t if we could only always recognize it. The secret to all right relationships is found in the ‘heart’. Prayer and searching do not help us reach God, for God is already with us, never apart. But when we reach out, our hearts can see, or perceive, and our prayers become meaningful conversations. One of the most practical, perceptive and yet frightening observations I have come across on show me the way I should go (143:8c), is that of the Baal Shem Tov. His wise comments refer to the commandment in Leviticus you shall love your neighbour as yourself, I am the Lord, one of Jesus’ two commandments from which all else stems. In Psalm 121, found in its entirety in the DSS, we find the comment, By night, the LORD is your keeper, your shade at your right hand, where shade can also most correctly be translated as shadow. So we have to acknowledge that God is as near to us as a shadow, and therefore, mirrors our actions. This means that God is like us! So, if we are kind, then God displays mercy and becomes close; if we are angry, we awaken God’s wrath and God becomes distant; and this is the God that we reflect to those we encounter in our day to day lives, for our shadow copies everything we do. In other words, God’s reputation depends on us. Leviticus 19:18 reminds us You shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord, and on this commandment we are to base our actions. However, the original Hebrew text was written without punctuation, and the Baal Shem Tov (‘Master of the Good Name’) suggests an alternative version: You shall love your neighbour: as you are, I am the Lord. This

1 This version of Psalm 143 is taken from the Dead Sea Scrolls Bible, and when read next to a version with which we are familiar, we can see that although the differences are minor, the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) text is made up of only the first eight verses of MT. This means that the psalm no longer contains the final petitions, including the curse on the enemies. However, this does not detract from its sentiment.

2 Baal Shem Tov refers to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Besht, Hassidic Master (1698-1760).
means that nothing we do, or are, is without consequence, there is no room for blame, and responsibility for our actions and thoughts resides, quite spectacually, with us! Worried? So we should be. Whether we profess to be religious, or not, we are never passive, and we are each in a relationship with God, whether we acknowledge it or not. The question is, do we push God away, or do we draw God into a relationship with us, and consequently with others? How good are we for God’s reputation?

Our psalmist is in trouble – we don’t know exactly what troubles him, but we know it is serious. We can identify with the situation, for it is anyone’s. When we ask God to listen to us, do we deliver a monologue, or do we enter into a dialogue? Do we complain about our situation, or do we thank God for being there for us? Whatever we do and think, we reflect God, and more importantly, we receive what we ask for. So, the more we give, the more God gives, and the more God gives, the more we are able to receive.

This psalm, then, offers us a chance to consider something that would not normally be obvious to us. It acknowledges that even though we may try to do our best, we are often beset with problems, often not of our own making. But it is how we deal with those things that face us that is important.

Psalm 143 is the final psalm of seven, traditionally identified as the ‘penitential psalms’, the others being Pss 6; 32; 38; 51, 102; & 130. While Psalm 32 is a psalm of thanksgiving, the others are laments. As a lament, our psalm has been described as 60% formulaic with no real discernible pattern, and although it contains a number of phrases not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, it still appears to be unremarkable in many ways. However, it is this very quality that makes it useful, because sometimes being ordinary is enough!

Deborah Anderson
East midlands

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Feb 18th

Phil 3: 12 – 21

I keep striving...I do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight towards the goal....let us go forward......

Here we are. Day two out of forty days. Thirty eight stretch ahead of us. Does that sound exciting, challenging, interminable, daunting? We observe the forty days of Lent remembering Jesus’ 40 days of testing and preparation in the desert; and that is reminiscent of the 40 years spent by the people of Israel ‘wandering’ in the desert. Did they think that would never end? Certainly there were times when they virtually gave up, wishing they were back where they used to be in Egypt – as slaves! - grumbling about their hardships, believing that God had abandoned them. Did Jesus ever wish his time in the desert would be quickly over? Is temptation or testing or fasting always seen at the time as positive spiritual experience?

Our own observing of the 40 days of lent may take a variety of forms: self-denial, ‘giving up’ something, ‘taking up’ a special Lenten discipline, a good Lenten read, times of prayer and meditation, self-examination, as we take our bearings on our walk with Christ, a Lent house groups or Bible study, visiting this site.......

Starting off can be easy enough; Day Two is still good. But are we going to be able to stay the course? In his letter to the Philippians Paul reminds us of a number of important aspects of our journey in and with Christ. We are to be aware of our own imperfections: I do not claim that I have already succeeded or have already become perfect. We are to be careful not to claim that we have ‘arrived’ or know it all or have achieved full maturity. We are not yet complete like Christ! (See Ephesians 4: 13 – 16.) So we are to press forward in the Christian life, to reach what is ahead, to keep running towards..... the goal. Paul is using an illustration from racing with the images of the single mindedness of the runner (the one thing I do), the finishing line (the goal) and the prize. Whether or not we find such an illustration helpful we can see the importance of clear intent and aim, keeping going, and the reward of life with Christ.

In all this we are to forget what is behind (failures as well as achievements) and to keep pressing on. That’s for Lent, and for the whole of our Christian journey. In another allusion to running a race, the author of the letter to the Hebrews calls on us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (12:2). On Day Two, and as far ahead as God enables us we can make that our intention.

For reflection and prayer: in my own life – and in the life of my church – what helps me to ‘keep my eyes on Jesus’?

Mike Playdon

East Midlands and Core Group
February 19th

Psalms 95, 31, 35, Ezekiel 18 v 1–4 and 25 –32, Philippians 4 v 1–9, John 17 v 9–19

The readings today help us to explore relationships, our relationships with friends, enemies, ourselves and particularly with God.

The Psalms today take us through the whole range of emotions felt in our human relationships.

In Psalm 95 we read of the assurance and the comfort of walking with God summed up the great words of comfort in verse 7 “for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care” A good position to be in to face some of the things that our daily living brings. Psalm 31 explores the feelings of desolation and alienation from friends, when sometimes we feel very alone and rejected, apart from friends and neighbours, but not from God. In Psalm 35 the Psalmist works through his feelings of revenge, some of those feelings we may sometimes have for those who have hurt us, or those closest to us. But in voicing his deepest feelings to God he ends by asking God that his friends may also know God.

Ezekiel explores the true nature of God, not as a vengeful God who inflicts the pain of the sinful father on the children, but of a forgiving loving God whose only desire is for us to choose the right path and “get a new heart and a new spirit”

In his letter to the Philippians Paul reminds of the need to focus our thoughts words and actions on the right things, to live in the right way and we will truly find the God of peace in our lives.

Finally John takes us to Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, and perhaps our prayer for others, that we may be held in God’s love for us all and know the power of that love acting in all we do in the world.

Derek Hopkins - East Midlands

An Iona Community Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours.

Take us, renew and remake us. what we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits us.

Lead us on, take us with you. Amen.

A Wee Worship Book page 101
February 20th

Read Ezekiel 39:21-29

February, the drabbest month of the year; the shortest but the dreariest; winter not yet gone spring not yet come; it's all so grey and winter depression threatens, especially this year when winter has lasted forever and the witch might have conquered the narnian land.

But the sound of coming spring shouts from the distant past, and the promise of summer restoration is declared from the place of exilic trial: from out of the place of tough formation, after rebellion and failure, comes new life and a new way.

The Lord has promised that this is the way it shall be.

Thanks be to God!

Barry Hutchinson
Core Group
February 21st

Daniel 9:3-10

Look on the bright side!
Celebrate all we got right!
Stay positive!
Don’t point the finger!
Blame only makes people less confident,
less able to be positive!
Concentrate only on the good,
forget the bad!
Keep on keeping on!
Don’t look back!
Don’t dwell on failure!

Is there, then, no place now for repentance?
Can we recognise the evil we’ve done
and the good we have refused to do
and still love ourselves,
still know that we are loved and loveable,
still cherished children in God’s
cherished family,
able to confront the darker truths about ourselves,
courageously,
positively..........
and make amends
by the renewing Spirit
who enters into the emptied spaces
to breath new life?

Barry Hutchinson
Core Group
22nd February

Genesis 37:1-11

Son of my old age
could you not have kept quiet?
Could you not have seen the anger,
the anguish,
in your brothers
and let your mouth be still
tho' your heart was filled
and pounding with the promise of God?
Could you not have been twenty seven
or forty years mature
when you dreamed the dreams
that spoke of elevation
and strange blessing for your family?

Could not the Dream Giver hold his gift;
or is the world made and broken in such a way
that only thro' suffering can the greater good be known
even by those who have cursed their own kin
and been cursed in return?

A family divided against itself
and finally re-united
after conflict
untold misery
and fear
prepares a future highway of God
secretly, hiddenly guided.

Yet still
could you not have kept quiet
and God’s will then be done
more peaceably?

Barry Hutchinson
Core Group
February 26th

Mark 2:13-22

v 16 "Some of the teachers of the Law and Pharisees, saw that Jesus was eating with the outcasts and tax collectors, so they asked "Why does he eat with such people?"

When the seasons change, we often get rough sleepers in our huge, high, porch at church. One September, two men in their mid-30's, both heroin addicts, were sleeping there. They were invited in to our "Open All Hours" coffee session in church 10am till 12noon every day. They would migrate in for tea after service on a Sunday as well.

At Harvest Festival, I went over to our halls just in time to say grace at the start of the Faith Lunch. I was surprised, but gratified, to find the two men, both named Darren, sitting as guests of an elderly couple who are the most welcoming couple any church could wish to have.

Thereafter, nightly coffee/soup runs were started - mostly by the same couple - up the two flights of church steps to the porch dwellers. In the bitterest weather, we had breakfast each morning hall kitchen, with supplies provided by the congregation.

From Christmas to New Year we slept with them as our guests in rooms in our hall.

The winter survived, the days got lighter, and some grumbles came from some members of the church, and public, at the bedding piles perpetually in the porch, which were so much more evident. Then, after a violent attack on one of them - probably over drug debts - the open air dormitory had to close.

Six months demanding care sprang from the one invitation. We were led to a much closer relationship with these men than we would otherwise have had by inviting them to share, as equals, at our meal table.

(Unattributed)
February 27th

Pss. 55, 138, 139; Gen 41: 1 - 13; I Cor 4: 1-7; Mk 2: 23-3:6

**BEING HUMAN**

Each of the readings today focuses on an element of being human that we can all identify with: being let down by friends, being full of self pride, being confused and uncertain, showing compassion and searching for help and direction.

It is good to read the Psalms and see how realistic they are: many of our times of celebration or times of despair are reflected in the words of the Psalms. They still speak so clearly into today’s world. In Psalm 55 the Psalmist faces a difficult situation and is filled with dread; and to add to that a good friend has ‘done the dirty’ and the Psalmist feels let down and afraid.

We all know of times like that, when fear creeps in and uncertainty stalks us; we start to suspect those around us of being less than loyal. It is easy to be overwhelmed at these times and to allow everything to get out of proportion. But we need to find a balance and this we can find in our other two Psalms. ‘Though I walk in the midst of trouble, your preserve me...’ (138:7) ‘O Lord, you have searched me and known me...’ (139: 1). Whatever we are going through; however tough we may find life or certain situations, we can be reassured that God is with us: loving, guiding, caring; faithfully and eternally.

But this brings with it some responsibility. It is not just a take-take situation. God asks something of us if we commit to live our lives as God desires, to become the people God knows we can be and wants us to be. We need to work at being positively human, too. We need to guard against an inflated sense of self and allow God’s love to shine from us - through our words and actions, daily. We need to foster the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Gal 5:22).

This cannot be done alone. We are human and we need help to be the best that each of us can be - so like the Psalmist we can ask for God’s Spirit to carry us along and to find rest and to strengthen us for the tasks ahead (55:6).

It isn’t easy being human. We will be let down, disappointed, saddened; we will also let others down and disappoint or sadden them. But God is with us to show us the way. As God spoke to Joseph, still God speaks today, if we are prepared to listen and to fully trust in what we hear.

*Living, loving God*

*when life is hard and I am filled with fear and dread,*

*let me turn to you and seek your peace.*

*I am called to cast my burden on you and you will sustain me.*

*When life is difficult and I feel betrayed,*
let me turn to you as you stretch out your hand.
I know you will fulfil your purpose for me.

When I am tempted to feel too much self pride,
when my sense of my own self importance
threatens to take me away from you
bring me back,
search me and know me
and guide me in your way.

As Christ showed compassion to those who suffered,
show me your love, revealed in your Son
and made real through his self giving.

Faithful and giving God
I give you thanks with all my heart.
Your steadfast love endures forever.
AMEN.

Jenny Mills
Psalm 24

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

These words, from William Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*, were written in 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War. They have an eerily contemporary ring, as we are aware of the horrors of the Haitian earthquake, continuing extremist violence in several parts of the world, the raising of the terrorist threat level in the UK to “Severe” (an attack is “highly likely”), the devastating results of flooding, and so on. Many do not find it difficult to feel that their feet are planted on shifting sand. This may come about as the result of personal or family experience, or of what has happened in community, nation or Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once asked whether any generation had ever had less ground beneath its feet.

To answer these gloomy observations we turn to verse 2 of Psalm 24:

*He built it on the deep waters beneath the earth  
and laid its foundations in the ocean depths.*

This verse takes us back to the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis:

*In the beginning, when God created the universe,  
the earth was formless and desolate. The raging  
 ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness. (Gen.1: 2)*

In ‘Paradise Lost’ John Milton spoke of how *In the beginning... the Heav’ns and Earth Rose out of Chaos.*

The picture that the psalmist and his contemporaries held was of deep dark waters swirling just beneath them, and it was only the wonderful creating power of God who had *laid the foundations* of the world *in the ocean depths* that enabled them to be saved from the chaos below.

The picture that the psalmist held of the nature of the universe and of the world cannot be ours. But we can relate to the sense of there being *deep waters beneath the earth*, waters which sometimes, perhaps often, threaten to burst out and overwhelm us. It may often seem that Yeats' words describe pretty accurately the world in which we live. And into this we are to declare with the psalmist:

*The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord;  
the earth and all who live on it are his.*

We put our confidence in the Great King, the King of Glory, who shared the life of Yeats’ world and Bonhoeffer's world and our world in Jesus the Christ.

So lift up your heads and your hearts  
and let the King of Glory in.  
Alleluia! Amen!

*Mike Playdon – Core Group*
1st March

1 Corinthians 4:8–21

v. 20 ‘For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.’

We are wary, often wisely wary, of leaders with popular, political or even cultural power. Our British society is particularly wary of religious people who claim, and seem to practice, impressive and spectacular spiritual power, often surrounded by huge publicity machines to promote their activities.

Someone I know was particularly impressed that in one demonstration of such apparent power on a television programme no mention at all was ever made of love: and this continued for a number of weeks.

Paul speaks of the power of the Spirit; the kingdom of God depends upon the power of the Spirit, who is love, for God is love; and the power of the Spirit is the power of love - to transform lives, to grow the fruits of love, the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Without self-giving, sacrificial love, demonstrations of spiritual power, even through the charismatic gifts, are empty and devoid of meaning or kingdom value.

On holiday with friends in Ghana a few years ago we were invited to a huge Anglican service of healing to celebrate some medical work done by a group of American visitors. We travelled a long time down atrocious roads to what seemed to us to be a desert place outside of a small rural village. Eventually we arrived at a very large space, shaded by temporary covers of various sizes, materials and colours, sheltering hundreds of people, many of whom had travelled at least as far as we had. Joyful, exuberant, loud, ebullient worship was already in progress; the pugnacious sermon bordered on prosperity gospel teaching.

Yet when the time came for healing ministry, the gathering stilled and became quiet; the people laying on hands listened intently and sympathetically and offered prayer gently and quietly, without demands, sending people back to their seats with kind smiles – and it seemed that love you could touch with your hands, flowed tangibly amongst us.

‘the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power’.

Too often tho’ we depend upon our talk and forget the power of love that heals us from the bottom of our souls.

Barry Hutchinson
Core Group
2nd March

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

I really wish I didn’t have to write, or even think about this bit of Paul. I’m only doing it because I had a total barrenness of thinking about today’s other readings – and the two people I asked to do this small section couldn’t – so I’m left with it.

I’m wary of making comments because I’m aware that there are issues of first century family ethics and their Hebrew precursors but I’m not very well versed in them. Neither do I have much knowledge of social mores and customs in the Roman world of the first century.

I have known people who have been excluded by their own Christian fellowship, sometimes for not adhering to arbitrary, so called pastoral discipline, associated with strong leadership demands for group loyalty. And I have experienced a little of a kind of exclusion by over enthusiastic, maybe self-righteous, Christian ‘friends’ who still, after many years, do not acknowledge their past cruelty.

Yet I believe that God does still speak through his word and that we cannot pick and choose the scriptures we listen to or ignore. I cannot, then, choose to ignore this hard word or perhaps I would miss something of God’s grace and love. I also believe that in trying to be loving and kind in thoroughly Christian ways, we find it hard to practice any kind of pastoral discipline in our congregations, not withstanding the huge amount of work being done by the URC Pastoral Response Teams (helping in cases of ministerial discipline) and Synod Safeguarding Committees and Reps (dealing with complaints about sexual misdemeanours amongst lay members).

Could it be that the action Paul demands of the Corinthians was appropriate in his culture and for the circumstances that the new church found itself living in and missioning to? His stated compassionate purpose was restoration for the offender, to save him from a more painful fate.

Could the challenge be for us to find compassionate and loving, yet firm and clear ways to discipline those who offend Christian values and morality today? It’s a huge challenge but perhaps in our PRT and safeguarding people we are continuing to develop ways and means?

Barry Hutchinson
Core Group
3rd March

1 Corinthians 5 – 6

‘Can it be that there is no one wise enough among you ……’ (6) Paul asks the question in the context of law suits amongst believers. Yet the need for wisdom is a perennial need. How can we Christians live wisely, with ourselves, with each other, with God? As the Psalmist says, true wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, perhaps better understood today as being in a living, loving relationship with the Lord on which the whole of life is founded.

Then, perhaps, we begin with ourselves for it is over ourselves that we have the most control. And perhaps the greatest need is for us to become wise in the ways of love, in the ways of growing to maturity, which always involves coming to terms with some kind of pain, of learning how to live through painful episodes positively so that we end up becoming more ‘like Jesus’ and therefore more loving people:

"My Heart Is Afraid that it will have to suffer," the boy told the alchemist one night as they looked up at the moonless sky."Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams." (From ‘The Alchemist' by Paul Coelho)

Coming to terms with the inevitability of suffering and learning not to be afraid of it is just one step on the journey to wise living. Later, perhaps, we’ll learn to take hold of any suffering that life throws at us, because we know that here we will meet the Lord in deeper ways than we ever thought possible. This is not a process we can hurry or circumvent and sometimes we need to be lost for a while, or stuck in a painful place for a while before we can find the positive way, through to a true and deepening peace, so Kahlil Gibran writes in ‘The Prophet’

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.
Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascend to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.
Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself,
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God’s sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life’s heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love’s peace and love’s pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love’s threshing floor,
Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears …………..

Not the easiest way then, but amongst the safest and most fulfilling in Christ.

Barry Hutchinson – Core Group
Thursday March 4th  Mark 4:21 - 41

One can imagine smiles, if not outright laughter, as Jesus speaks of someone lighting a lamp and then putting it under a bushel or a bed. Sure, in the Palestine of Jesus’ day, one might have put a light under a bushel, but only with the express purpose of putting the light out!

Jesus comes into the world as the light and calls us too, to be lights to the world. We receive the light in order to bring into the open what otherwise would be hidden. To my mind Jesus’ saying begs the question, “Am I hiding anything?”

As often in the Gospels, Jesus expresses his doubt that his hearers will understand him. Jesus is recorded more than once as saying “If anyone has ears to hear then let them hear.” If we are really listening we can surely hear through these words Jesus’ frustration. Even those closest to him find his words difficult. At the end of today’s passage we read that, “when he was alone with his disciples he explained everything.” Let’s spend a little time with Jesus now “hearing” what he is saying to us personally through this little parable about the lamp. Maybe asking ourselves the question - “Is there any way in which I hide the light of Christ?”

A number of organisations seek to support those Christians throughout the world who face daily persecution because they insist on being open about their faith,-- thus living in the light. Each month I receive information from one such organisation and I am challenged beyond words at by the incredible courage of so many Christians - putting me to shame. May our prayer be, “Lord, may I too, refuse to hide the light.”

Richard Davis
North Western
Read this passage, and try setting it into the context of the chapters prior to it. Here is a family in a period of confusion not just hunger. During the Easter events those closest to Jesus seem in confusion, forgetting teaching they had already received. If you have the time, allow the gospel comparisons to underline questions ...

1. **Focus:** verses 1-3  The brothers hadn’t recognised their own kin now in the role of Governor of the land. 
   **Glance:** Matthew 17.1-17  Failure to recognise the signs of the coming “Son of Man”  
   **Do we:** fully recognise Christ as Lord and Saviour in our everyday activities? 
2. **Focus:** verses 4-7  A father upset at the action of the children. Did the children consider him in the actions they took, or self-protection?  
   **Glance:** Luke 15.11-31  A father upset at the action of a son. Here the focus is on the action of the father, and on reunion.  
   **Do we:** fully value the acts of forgiveness inherent in the very nature of our Father – God? Could we at times take forgiveness for granted?  
3. **Focus:** verses 8-11 The father has to act in faith and trust toward the wider family.  
   **Glance:** Luke 14.25-35  Being a disciple [God’s wider family] is no light, easy role, calling us at times to make sacrificial choices.  
   **Do we:** ever sit down and count the cost of what we (a) have to give up (yield) to God our Father, and (b) sit down and ask ourselves what sort of “salt” we are in the eyes of God?  
4. **Focus:** verses 12-15  Despite the famine-poverty laid upon them, the love of the father in further sacrifices is designed to surround his children.  
   **Glance:** John 3.1-21  God the Father gives His all, His Son, to save all His children in this world.  
   **Do we:** see the power of the Cross, and Resurrection, against the all-too-frequent poverty of our spirituality? 

This Old Testament passage is pivotal to opening an understanding of God. What alternative questions would it raise if YOU had written these notes?

*Richard J Gill  
North West*
March 6th

Mark 5:1-20 The story about Jesus, a man possessed with many devils, and pigs!

In the beginning was the Word
The Word was in the world
but the world
though it owed its being to him
did not recognize him.
He came to his own people
and his own people would not accept him.

That is a strange thing –
no one recognised him
even his mother and his brothers did not understand him
they came to take him home
to look after him
to take care of him
to protect him –
they thought he was mad.

One should be very careful
calling people names can hurt
it can damage
it can even destroy.

I know what madness is
I was the mad man
the cause is unimportant now
hidden
long-shrouded in the mists of time.
I was the mad man –
possessed by so many devils
they had taken me over
they obsessed my whole being
it was their voice not mine that spoke
they called themselves 'Legion'.

And they were the only ones
with others like them
who recognised him.
They knew who he was
they knew that Jesus wasn’t mad –
but he was different
so very different
they knew him for who he was –
and they trembled with fear!

Jesus was different –
when he saw me coming
he wasn’t like the rest
he didn’t run away
he stood his ground
he spoke –
and I heard him
deep within the chasm of my subconscious
like a distant echo  
It was the first conversation I had shared in years!

Of course it is the pigs  
always the pigs that people remember.  
They blamed Jesus then  
and it still perplexes people.  
It was all to do with economics  
isn’t everything?  
That was why they wanted him to leave  
my healing was of little consequence  
they had lost money  
their pigs were gone!  
But it wasn’t Jesus’ fault  
he simply allowed my devils  
to go into the pigs  
he didn’t tell them to self-destruct  
but that is all too often the nature of evil  
beware  
it diminishes  
it destroys  
it nearly finished me.

And here’s another strange thing  
the most difficult part was yet to come  
for though the devils who recognised him first were gone  
their vestiges of recognition remained –  
I knew him too  
I wanted to follow him  
I pleaded  
I begged  
but he said ‘No’ –  
‘your task is harder.  
Go home and tell your own people  
tell them what God in great mercy has done for you.’

And so I did as I was asked  
something which we can all do  
in our lesser ways  
I told my story  
and in the telling  
I hope  
said something of who he is.

But to those who did accept him  
to those who put their trust in him  
he gave the right to become children of God.

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North Western
7th March

Genesis 44: 1-17

“But I didn’t do it!”
We can hear the cry between the lines of the story;
a bewilderment that belongs to all time.
It is the cry of the child wrongly accused
or of the adult set up by another for that other’s own ends.

“But he couldn’t; he wouldn’t have done it!”
Equally a cry for all time;
the anguish of the family, helpless in face of injustice;

And the tension: the relief to be leaving for home . . .
then the fear as they are stopped . . .
the story racks up the suspense as the soldiers search,
sack by sack, until . . . until the brothers’ world falls apart.

They tore their clothes, then one and all returned to the city,
to the one who had set it all up – even though that same man knew
from bitter experience the pain of false accusation.*

*(Gen. 39: 1-20)

Into our prayer we bring
those in prison, falsely accused
the prisoner of conscience the victim of an unjust regime
or of a capricious ruler
or the victim of false evidence; false testimony.
We bring
those accused of beliefs and intentions
solely because of their nationality or colour.
And we bring the oppressed who become the oppressor;
those who remember only the wrong and not the feelings
that wrung their own hearts.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive then that trespass against us.

Ruth Crofton
Northern
8th March

Genesis 44: 18-34

How did it feel to be Judah?

His had been the idea to sell Joseph into slavery, and, for all they knew, to a death through hardship and neglect and perhaps the knowledge that Benjamin was to be taken away to the same fate meant that guilt beat particularly loudly at the door of his heart. So he stepped forward and faced this great potentate who held their fate in his hands and offered to stand in place of Benjamin. He would give up his freedom; his place in the family; his own children, so that his father would not suffer further misery.

Quite right, too, we may say. You lot caused all that suffering; now it’s time for at least one of you to make up for it.

Or we might think again how it felt to be Judah – a father’s favour was granted, generally, to sons in order of seniority, but Jacob played favourites with the younger sons. How did it feel to know that your father would miss you a lot less than your younger half brother? It is an experience with which a surprising number of people can sympathise.

Yet he was willing to give his own life, for Jacob’s sake; feel the reality of physical slavery to match his slavery to guilt.

Quite right too? Is this what we really believe?

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. But God proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6 &8)

Ruth Crofton
Northern
9th March

Genesis 45: 1-15

So now all is well - but not before when Joseph identifies himself to the dismay of the brothers, as the guilt that has surfaced in their visits to Egypt comes together in this man before them.

It is only when he assures them that they need blame themselves no longer, for the wrong that they did has been used by God to “preserve life” that true reconciliation can begin.

So often we tie ourselves in angry or guilty knots wondering why this or that has happened rather than looking for where God is at work in a hard situation.

I used to be a bell-ringer, and one practice night we were ringing a quite complicated but very musical method, which some of us were a bit uncertain about, and a lot of discord began to creep in. In this situation, the person in charge would normally call a halt, give everyone a scolding about learning things properly and maybe try again. This time the person in charge, an expert at this particular method, kept going, calling out what each pair of bells should be doing moment by moment, until we were all back on track and the lovely harmonies could be heard. When we had finished, I waited in dread for the lecture (much of the confusion was down to me!) but instead all he said was, “That was exciting!”

My own life experience tells me that this is how God is with us: gets in there and helps us sort ourselves out to a greater good than we could ever imagine. The question, of course, is how alert are we to that guiding in our lives?

*Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”*  
*John 10: 10*

Ruth Crofton  
Northern
March 10th ‘Life isn’t easy!’

Psalm 119: 97–120; Genesis 45: 16–28; Mark 6: 13–29; 1 Corinthians 8: 1–13

(Focus verses - Psalm 119: 105; Genesis 45: 24–26; Mark 6: 18–20; 1 Corinthians 8: 7–9)

Half a world away,
more than half a life-time ago,
a Scottish preacher, Peter Marshall, pondered life’s difficulties,
‘Life isn’t easy’, he said.
Then here was a long, echoing silence before he thundered,
‘but no-one ever said it would be!’

* For ‘Technicolour Dreamcoat’ Joseph,
In his family relationships in Canaan,
In the royal court in Egypt,
Life was not easy.

For Herod, although he was King,
As he listened to the words of those around him,
and agonised about his decisions,
Life was not easy.

For first century Christians in Corinth,
Learning to live out their new-found faith
In an alien culture,
Life was not easy.

For John, the Baptist,
Even, for Jesus, the Christ,
Life was not easy.

For the people of today,
For those in the news,
For those whose lives touch ours,
For me,
For you,
Life is not easy.

* Just for a moment be still, set aside your tension and preoccupation
and allow yourself to become aware that God is at hand;
Bring to mind those whose difficulties you carry on your heart today;
those things with which you struggle.

Lord of all being,
May you so live within us and among us,
That in our relationships you become our love,
In our decision making you become our wisdom,
In our words you become our integrity,
In our actions you become our justice,
In our darkness you become our light,
In our suffering you become our hope,
In our dying you become our life.

Amen, let it be so.

Sandra Pickard
Alice was grumpy.
She was not looking forward to being in respite care while her daughter was on holiday.
A war widow, Alice had struggled to bring up Sally alone and this had honed a sturdy, independent spirit within her.
Although it was for just a few weeks Alice was dismayed by the thought of ‘going into a home’, but that was how it had to be.
When Sally returned from her holiday she was not surprised when her mother welcomed her with a beaming smile.
However, she was surprised by her mother’s greeting.
‘I want to come and live here.’ Alice said, ‘It’s lovely here. I don’t want to go home.’
And go to live there Alice did.
For the rest of her life she told all who would listen that this was the best thing she had ever done.
Who would have thought it?

Who would have thought
that in the misery of God-forsaken anguish
the Exile could put his hope in God?

Who would have thought
that on his journey to a foreign land
ancient Jacob would himself receive old Abram’s promise anew from God?

Who would have thought
that in the hands of Jesus
just five loaves and two fish could feed five thousand men, and maybe more,
with basketfuls to spare?

Who would have thought
that despite the disputes of the church
the Christian faith survives and flourishes?

Just for a short while turn away from the many things which clamour for your attention
in order that you may attend to the things of God.

Living God, we thank you that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from your love.
We pray for those exiled from the place they long to be.
We pray for those facing a future they had not expected.
We pray for those in need of the necessities of life.
We pray for the peace and unity of all your people.

A Prayer of St. Benedict

O Gracious and Holy Father,
give us wisdom to perceive you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to behold you,
a heart to meditate upon you,
March 12th

‘Help!’

Psalms 88; Genesis 47:1-26; Mark 6:47-56; 1 Corinthians 9:16-27

(Focus verses: Psalm 88:1-3; Genesis 47:25; Mark 6:49-51; 1 Corinthians 9:22)

Pictured on the television screen, a woman sits alone. Around her there is nothing but desert for as far as the eye can see. A victim of famine, the words of this one woman express one of the ageless cries of humanity. ‘I wait for God to help me now.’

‘If the Lord don’t come, he sends.’ – or so the old saying goes. The Lord came to his friends, across the water, as they strained against the oars in the fiercest of the storm.

‘Take heart,
it is I;
do not be afraid.’

Once in the boat with them, his presence calmed their fears and all became still around them.

The Psalmist cried to God for help -- and waited in his dereliction. Joseph saved the famished ones of Egypt -- but it cost them all they had, even their very freedom. Paul used ‘all means to save some’ -- chameleon-like, changing himself to be as they were.

‘If the Lord don’t come, he sends.’ -- but there’s no telling how or when.

‘If the Lord don’t come ......’ Might he send you? Might he send you?

Could God be sending you to use your faith, your skills, your resources to help those who, today, cry out to God for help - and wait.

Words of St Teresa of Avila

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
Yours are the only hands with which he can do his work,
Yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world,
Yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
(In this version from ‘Worship from the United Reformed Church)

As the storms of doubt and fear blow hard against us as we receive these words, to us - and to all - the Lord says,

Take heart,
It is I;
do not be afraid.’

Sandra Pickard
South Western
16 March

Psalms 97, 99, 100
Mark 8: 1-10

I rage at you God. Where are you?
Mighty God - do something about those who misuse power.
God who loves justice - sort out those who abuse it.
The Lord who hates evil - change those who exploit others
We blame. We accuse. We shake an angry fist. We wring our hands with the pressure and futility of it all.

Then Jesus took bread gave thanks and broke it. The bread was shared and the hungry were fed.

And who are his hands now to feed the hungry?
And whose is his voice to speak out against injustice?

Lesley Charlton
Southern
17th March

Readings: Genesis 50:15-26 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-11  
*David Helyar Southern*

In creating this magnificent world, God saw that everything was good and that everyone and everything had potential for good. However, in moments of frustration or anger, of depression or pain, that is not always how we see things. Poor Joseph had experienced a rough deal from his brothers and, when they eventually met up with him again so unexpectedly in Egypt, they were naturally concerned that Joseph might bear a grudge against them.

Not so. “You intended to do me harm,” Joseph said to them, “but God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people.” From God’s perspective, everything is always intended for the common good.

In writing to the Church in Corinth, Paul reminds his readers that when a person receives a gift of the Spirit, it is not simply for his or her own benefit, but for the good of all, for the building up of the whole community.

In his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus knew that pain and death were awaiting him. Yet he took that journey, knowing that God would somehow work it for good, that the death of one would be for the ultimate good and salvation of all.

As we draw nearer to “Good” Friday, let us reflect positively on the fact that God intends only good for us in every circumstance of life. May we grasp the reality of that and, with James Haylock Eyre, pray:

*I find prayer so powerful that I need but one;*
*heavenly Father grant me the wisdom to see*
*the good in everyone and in everything.*
*You know my needs: I do not need to ask,*
*I appreciate your gifts. Amen.*

*(I regret that I do not know the source of this prayer D.H.)*

*David Helyar Southern*
18 March

A KISS AND A CROSS.

Mark 8.v.34. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Take up a cross? What does it mean?
- maybe doing what is hard, exhausting, demanding.

Why should we accept a cross?
- to show that love is real.

A true lover will make any sacrifice to prove his love for his beloved. Jesus lived His life and then gave it, to demonstrate God's love and save us from the results of our selfishness. He asked His followers to demonstrate their love for Him, by caring for His needy children sacrificially.

We in the west, enjoy many things we don't really need. We have many choices. Others have none, and many are denied even the means to survive. We are called to share our comparative riches and live simply, as Jesus did.

The true value of our lives and of our love is measured by what we give, rather than by what we get. Although true love is costly, it is also rewarding. Living simply, we learn to value many things we take for granted and simple pleasures that are free. Our desperately needy neighbours around the world teach us to value things like loving relationships, clean water, simple food, medical care and educational opportunities. We appreciate our homes and the beauties of nature, - birdsong and sunshine, rain and rainbows.

Most of us, if our income were halved, would still be better off than many who are destitute and desperate today. Let us rejoice in and use, the many opportunities we have to serve God and our neighbours, near and far, today and every day. To those who choose to share God's everlasting pain of love, He gives His eternal peace and joy, and calls them His friends

"You are my friends if you do what I command you." John 15.v.14.

The Kiss and the Cross.

Love is a kiss; love is a cross; it always has been so,
For since Creation God has shared our trials and our woe.
Within His heart there is a cross, a loving Father's pain
Watching His children make mistakes, maturity to gain.

He bore the cross to Bethlehem, where infant weak and frail
Revealed His depth of love, so that His purpose should prevail;
And sharing in our human life with love, despite our sin,
His Son gave us the kiss of life, unfaithful hearts to win.

Then on a cross of wood, He gave His life to meet our need,
Calling His followers to share the work that love decreed.

The persecuted and oppressed are forced a cross to bear,
But Jesus bids us choose a cross, denying self, to dare
To follow Him and break away from lives of wealth and greed,
So we can ease the pain of those in deep distress and need.

Enduring love is strong because it's reinforced with nails,
And God ensures it brings His friends a joy that never fails.
So let us give our hearts and minds to working out new ways
To offer others love and hope within the coming days.
Romans 12: 1 – 12

*Reflect* on your body in its uniqueness – the story it has to tell in its form, its scars, its beauty, its imperfections, its strengths, its ability to heal itself, its mystery as part of God’s creation.

*Present* your body – head to toe – to God, a living sacrifice, an act of worship, a life to be lived by God’s grace and mercy.

*Reflect* on your need for transformation – the ways you conform so easily to the values of the marketplace, the norms of greed and selfishness, complacency and carelessness.

*Seek* God’s will – what is good and acceptable and perfect, God’s will for your life and the life of the world around you.

*Reflect* with sober and realistic judgement on who you are and what you do – don’t underestimate yourself and your gifts, but don’t kid yourself either.

*Know* your unique part within the body of Christ, connected to countless others, needing their gifts as much as your own, their generosity and cheerfulness.

*Reflect* on the centrality of love – genuine love, the kind seen in the life (and death and now) of Jesus.

*Show* that love to someone today; seek that Spirit of Jesus; rejoice and persevere.

*Terry Hinks*

*Wessex*
22 March         Who’s the greatest?

Mark 9: 30 – 41

Lord Jesus,
how did you put up with your stupid disciples
on that journey to the cross?
For all the time you gave them
- teaching and warning and explaining -
still they did not understand,
and worse, they were afraid to ask you to tell them more.
Hiding from the stunning truth they thought only
of which one of them was the most important,
who was in and who was out.
The way of the cross,
the way of the servant,
the way of the welcomed child
was hidden from them.

Lord Jesus,
how did you put up with your stupid disciples
on that journey to the cross?
And how do you put up with us now?
We still have so much to learn from you.
The way of the cross,
the way of the servant,
the way of the welcomed child
is still so hidden from us
amid all our self-concerns.

Forgive us, Servant Lord.
Renew us, Crucified King.
Teach us the way of the kingdom,
where each child is welcomed
and a cup of water means so much.

*Terry Hinks
Wessex*
23rd March

Read: Exodus 5 1-6:1, Mark 9 42-50, 1 Corinthians 14 20-40

The children of Israel, a motley dispirited group of slaves, understood their history in the light of a powerful God who saw the misery and the hardship which the King of Egypt inflicted upon them and brought them out of slavery under the leadership of Moses. It was this common desire for liberation that brought them together and built them up as a community of God's people. It led them into the wilderness and perhaps taught them that it is in such places that the people of God learn the most about the God they are called to worship and to serve.

When we are called to desolate places it is easier to fall back on the things that bring us comfort and delight. It is far harder to push away from us those things which cause us to be tempted. It is easier to keep for oneself instead of sharing. It is easier to want the first place at the table instead of the last which may be at the bottom where not much food is left. It can be easier to make one's voice heard above the rest pushing our own point of view instead of deferring to those whose voice is small.

Those with a small voice in New Testament times were the children who were regarded and treated as no better than slaves, they had no rights and no status in society. Childhood was a place to get out of as soon as possible, so when Jesus takes a child and makes it a symbol of himself he is declaring that he is the least and the servant of all and yet he has come from God. God gives himself in what seems to be the least godly way. The only way to receive him will be to do likewise, to receive the shame and humiliation that will be sent to us.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to belong to him and any good thing the disciple does will be rewarded, but the disciple will need to walk through the fire which is unquenchable, the fire of sacrifice and destruction. It is the fire which will make them acceptable to God. Discussion of who is greatest and who is least is not for the true disciple, the true disciple remembers the fire and all it took from him but also all he has gained from the ashes of such destruction from which he has risen to live another day for Jesus Christ.

Kathryn Louch
West Midlands
How do we enter the kingdom? That is a question which is on the mind of many a Christian, and not one which is easily answered.

The slaves in Egypt had to endure plagues which God inflicted upon the land of Egypt to try to break the will of the King and so allow the slaves to be set free from his oppressive regime. The suffering was for all, slaves and Egyptians alike. God wanted his people to be able to move into the wilderness, he wanted the people to offer him worship and sacrifices but whatever he came up with the King had become stubborn and refused to be moved, he would not let the Israelites leave his country.

Perhaps that is how temptation and sin is, when we are comfortable and life is easy then we are not willing to let go of what we have become enslaved too, we become stubborn and truculent, we have earned our right to the riches of life, we have worked hard for it, why should we let it go. The King of Egypt and God are having a tug of war and who is in the middle, the slaves.

Jesus gave us teaching on divorce. When a man and a woman leave their parents and start a new life together as man and wife then they are becoming disciples of Christ. If they leave each other then who are the ones in the middle of the tug of war – the children, those who are thrown into the wilderness of separation from either one parent or another.

Those who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven are the little ones, the children, they are representatives of the ones who are unimportant, the oppressed, they have no skills, no status or possessions and that is why Jesus hugs them. His ‘hug’ is significant, he declares that entry into the kingdom will be for those whose only title to it is that they have no title, we get into the kingdom when we have nothing. In the kingdom wealth is a curse not a blessing.

Paul speaks of us spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, we are as a letter written by Jesus posted to the rest of the world, what we say is like perfume, it can be fresh, sharp or it can be oversweet and clinging.

What kind of Christian do you want to be, fresh and sharp or oversweet and clinging.

Imagine yourself on either end of a tug or war – which side would you rather be on? God’s side or the other side, I know which end of the rope I want.

Kathryn Louch
West Midlands
25th March

2 Cor. 3:7-18 based on the hymn, “Immortal, Invisible”

We only see you, Lord
In creation,
In other people,
But we can’t actually see you.
You are hid from our eyes
Yet we still praise
Your great name.

You lead us with your strength,
Never resting.
Your justice soars over us
Greater than the highest mountains.
Your goodness engulfs us
As if we were clothed
By a cloud.

You give life to all creatures
And live your life in all creatures
Great and small.

In our life
We blossom,
We flourish,
We wither,
We perish
But you don’t change.

Help us to see
Your glory
Through Christ in the story
And with Christ
In our heart.

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Yorkshire
26th March

Mark 10:32-45 based on the hymn, “The servant King”

It’s easy to offer ourselves to you, Lord.  
To say that we are going to follow you.  
But to actually do it – now that’s a different matter!

And yet you want us to do it, that is why  
You came from heaven, a helpless baby, so that  
You could die that we might live.

That sounds fair enough – a pretty good deal,  
But we really should not rest on our laurels.  
You have called us to follow,  
and follow we must,  
whatever it entails,  
whatever sacrifices we have to make.

No sacrifice can be greater  
than that which you made –  
on the cross.

Help us to proclaim you as King  
And to serve others for then  
We will be serving you.

Help us to live our life according to your will  
So that  
Each day everything we do may be an offering of  
Worship to you, our servant King.

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Yorkshire
March 27th

Mark 10: 46 -52.

I have a friend who has macular degeneration which weakens cells in the central retina of the eye. In its early stages she experienced diminished adjustment from light to dark. Next were blurring of images and reading difficulties, and in the later stages much or all central vision is lost. Yet she is one of the most adventurous people I have ever known. Aged eighty five she goes out most days, often on public transport. She paints huge pictures full of wonderful colour, goes on cruises, has piano lessons, goes to the ballet, concerts and the opera. And lives independently in her own home.

It is her faith in her own abilities and in the kindness of friends and strangers that helps her do all these things. And also because she knows when she needs to ask for help.

It was the faith of Bartimaeus that gave him back his sight. This is a simple tale of a miracle seemingly performed just before Palm Sunday. So much going on in Jesus’ life, but he hears a single voice crying to him from the crowd. People told the blind man to be quiet but he persisted in calling on Jesus and was rewarded with the restoration of his sight.

Sometimes we may find it difficult to see even if we have 20/20 vision.

Sometimes we may feel as though we are a lone voice crying out for help amidst the clamour of the world. How can we see? How can we be heard?

Like Bartimaeus who could not see at all, and my friend who sees the world as a blurred image, we need to believe that if we ask we will be heard. Whatever the dark means to us there is always the possibility of the light shining in the darkness.

Look, Seek, Ask, Cry out, Believe.

Fredwyn Hosier
Thames North