



biblical
stories
re-told

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Was I mad, hearing voices? But no, my companions also gazed ahead, trembling, unable to speak. The voice went on, and dimly within the light that shone around us, I could see a human form. An angel? Then the vision faded, and I fell to the floor.

I looked up to find my companions leaning over me; but their faces had changed, become joyful, radiant. New life had taken hold of them and they hauled me to my feet, dancing and shouting, "Jesus is alive; the kingdom of God is here." "We must tell the others". We ran, laughing, tripping over their skirts, dropping their scarves on the way back to the town.

To be faced with stony, uncomprehending faces. "You're imagining things; grief has turned your minds; you're irresponsible, you can't be trusted." We became quiet, chastened, foolish, yet the joy still trembled within us.

Peter noticed it and wondered.

Sue Rowe

The bible is packed with stories about a huge variety of people who strive to make sense of their faith, in times of joy and sorrow, challenge and celebration.

God still speaks to us today from such stories.

In the pages of this booklet, you will find stories from the bible—some more familiar than others—re-told from a specific perspective, conveying refreshing insight and instigating reflection.

Each contributor brings their own style, showing unique creativity, a great depth of understanding, and a renewed way of looking at faith.

This re-telling of tales will both challenge pre-conceived ideas and confirm deeply held beliefs. We hope that God will speak to you through these stories and that they will inspire you into further exploration of your own.

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A new day

inspired by Mark 16:1-11

The sky outside the door lightened. It was almost time. I dragged myself, stiff and aching, off the narrow pallet bed, and picked up the cloth and jar of perfume. I walked slowly out, and then knocked at two doors close by. Two other faces, grief-aged and exhausted, gazed back at me. Two other women broken by pain, but bringing what remained of their courage and desire to serve, joined me. In silence we walked up the hill to the place of the tombs, white, silent, the ultimate defeat.

A thought occurred to me; what about the stone? It was far too heavy to move alone. Could three of us manage it? I asked the others. They, in their grief, had also forgotten. We should have asked one of the men. Frustration overwhelmed me; even in this there was failure. We wouldn't be able to tend Jesus' body. But then a new thought, and a moment of peace; perhaps somebody would be there to help, perhaps one of those who tended the tombs.

The graves drew near. Our pace flagged further, unwilling as we were to face the final evidence that Jesus had been taken from us. Then there was an audible gasp from one of my companions: the stone had been rolled away. Grief was temporarily given over to disbelief and foreboding. Surely nobody could have looted the grave. Did the cruelty of the last few days never end? Beside ourselves with anxiety, we scrambled into the open tomb. We could see the cloths in which Jesus was laid. Nothing else. How could anyone have taken him?

We stumbled out, tears flowing at last, blinded by the light that shone about us. Had we been so slow that day had fully broken? But then came the voice, a voice like springtime but with such resonance and power, a voice that seemed to echo inside my head, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but risen."

Now our voices cried out from the edge, from the shadows,
longing for justice
aching to show our love to the bruised and battered body
of the victim of this world.

But still, that glimmer of hope.

We were together.
Together we would be heard.
Together we would be strong.
Together we would respond, again, to love's call.

All this will happen.
Justice will come.

But not yet.

Tonight we wait in the shadows
for it is not yet time for dawn to break.

Then I remembered the reason for that glimmer of hope.

Someone – was it him? – once told me
that for a shadow to exist
there has to be light, somewhere,
even if we can't see it.

So tonight, of all nights,
we wait
and we cling to the hope
that the light is still shining
somewhere
and that even the darkness of death
cannot extinguish it.

Sarah Brewerton

Becoming

inspired by John 1:1-14

In the beginning there were no words. There was only bliss,
indescribable harmony, endless being. The Godhead was
One, communing with itself, infinite light, warmth, radiance.

Then there came a Word, "Be". And there was a lessening in
the brilliance and a contraction of the horizon. The Godhead
knew the loss and felt it - but there, in the space created for
it, hung a world, still forming, incandescent with lava flows,
ripples running across its surface, continents forming and
splitting apart.

The Word came again, "Live". And over time, the earth
cooled, herbs and grasses grew, fish and reptiles filled the
seas and plains. The Word was spoken tenderly and the
Spirit hovered over the quivering planet.

Then another Word, "Knowledge", and soft, fragile, smooth
beings crept out of the moist earth, human beings, gazing in
wonder at the fiery sky. The Godhead gazed at the new
creation, and in its loss of self, knew joy.

Time passed, and the new beings were quick to learn. They
made families and communities. But they seemed trapped in
their own desires and need for power. More creative effort
was required.

This time the Word a whisper, "I'll go there".
A violent wrench; the radiance faded, the Word of God
confined in a small dark space, only a glimmer of vision, the
thud of a heartbeat. A howl of anguish, cold air stinging the
skin, confusing noise hurting the ears. But then a tender
touch, the tear-filled, loving eyes of a young woman, and the
protective hands of a man.
"Let us call him Jesus", she said.

Sue Rowe

Scaling ladders

inspired by Genesis 28:12; Genesis 19:1; Genesis 18:1-15 and Genesis 22:1-12

It's a bit of a bind, this going down and up ladders in the dreams of rotten so-and-so's like Jacob, who don't deserve to have visions.

Why do people imagine we've got wings?
If we existed with wings we'd be flying from heaven to earth and back, swooping like doves, soaring like eagles, not struggling on rickety ladders, risking bad falls.

A couple of mates got into a pickle, just the other year, in Sodom.
They were lucky to escape intact, without learning first hand how certain ways of behaving came to be named!
Believe me, with no ladder to hand, they'd have flown! if they'd had wings.

I'd been with them only the evening before, sitting under a tree, feasting by Abraham's tent. He knew how to welcome his guests! His wife, dear soul, found it hard to believe when I told her she'd soon have a child.
She secretly laughed: 'Too old, we're both too old: we'll never have joy.'

When I asked why she'd laughed, she lied:
'I never laughed,' she said.
'O yes, you did,' I said, but I didn't blame her for doubting the impossible.
'When you laugh next time,' I said, 'it'll be for joy, I promise.'

So Isaac, her laughing boy, was born, and grew up ineffectual like many a son of a successful father.
Jacob, his own son, the younger of twins, is a right go-getter, determined to reach the top of the ladder, even if it means enraging his brother to the verge of fratricide.

I would wait
but not patiently – oh no!
Pushed to the edge, into the shadows
my voice cried out for justice
impatient to take my rightful place.
Not even the darkness of death can overshadow my love
and I must respond.

There were other women there with me.
Like me they had been distanced,
excluded at first from the circle of discipleship.
But he had brought them, like me, in from the edge
to be his friends and companions
to be witnesses to the gospel.

Together, we followed him.

And now, we followed again
all the way from the country to the city –
huddled together as darkness fell
faithful to the very end.

As we clung together
all through the following day and dreadful night
there was nothing to do but wait.
We talked, in hushed voices, and recalled what he had said:
that he would never leave us alone.
Even when our voices were silenced with grief
at the injustice of it all
and the room was filled with weeping
even then
in the shadow of death
there was a glimmer of hope.

He had called us to be his friends.
He had been with us.
The dawn *would* come.
And then, in his memory, and in the strength of one another
we would take our rightful place again.

But not yet.

Not yet

inspired Luke 23:48,49,55,56

I stood and watched, knowing my place, as a woman, was to be there,
That day, of all days, that was my place.
There was no other place to be.

I wanted to be closer, but they had pushed me away,
pushed me away to the edge,
forced me to watch from a distance.

So often that had happened.
Right at the beginning, men had tried to stop me going to him.

"You have no place with him." they had said, stones in their clenched fists.

I remember his stern rebuke and the meeting of angry eyes.
Then he crouched down beside me
his eyes now gentle on my fear
and raised me to my feet
with soft words of healing and forgiveness.

I stood, whole and free
brought in from the edge to the place where I should be.

But now I was on the edge again
kept at a distance.

I waited until the end
the very end
in the gathering darkness
in the shadows.

There was nothing else to do.
If my place was to be at a distance
in the shadows, then so be it.

I would wait, with my oils and spices
for the first glimmer of dawn
and then I would be no longer at a distance
but would take my rightful place again.

But not yet.

He'll never scale this ladder, though.

He needs to wake up.

That's why we have to do this chore:
down, up, down, up, to make him realise,
when he does wake up: 'Good grief, God's here, and I didn't know!'

It'll shake him! Not quite as much as his dad was shaken though, lying there once, with a knife at his throat, till I shouted his father's name, and screamed, 'Not this! Not this! Don't hurt the boy, I don't want this!' Because, you understand, God doesn't come down ladders, or plead in so many words.

God comes in angels: wingless, except in preposterous dreams, or windows.

So if, wide awake, you see a stranger, male or female, ugly or beautiful, struggling down or up steps, rush in and lend a hand.

It could be me, and if it is, aiding an angel unaware, you've clapped your eyes on God.

Alan Gaunt

From violence to forgiveness inspired by 2 Kings 5:1-4

I was twelve years old when it happened.
I was at home with my mother and my baby brother. My mother was baking. The sharp smell of yeast and the hot fragrance of freshly baked bread filled the little room and made my mouth water. I swept the floor. My brother was in his cradle, thumb in mouth, cheeks all rosy with sleep. A miracle child, my mother called him. She thought she would never have another child after me. But then one day a prophet called Elisha, a man of God, came to our house, and spoke strange words and said prayers. His eyes were twinkly and kind and he liked our little house, and didn't mind that we didn't have much. After that – how my mother and father laughed for joy! Another baby – and a boy at that!

We were so happy, until

As I went out to shake the mats I saw soldiers coming and heard their great boots on the stone flags. I ran back inside and tried to shut the door, but they were stronger than me. They came in and overturned the table. The bread rolled about on the floor and they trampled on it and kicked the little stool where I used to sit. Then they grabbed my mother and took her out the back, and I heard her screaming and screaming. I was screaming too and sobbing and crying, and standing in front of the cradle so that they wouldn't see my brother. But all the noise must have woken him and he whimpered and cried out. One of the soldiers pushed me aside. Another one took hold of me and dragged me away. I don't know what happened to my brother or my mother, or my father out in the fields. I never saw them again.

They took me away through the streets of our village. All around me was desolation and confusion : houses burning, people running and shouting, children crying.

All that night we were on the rough dusty roads, the rugged

I wouldn't go.
I waited
again
until they took his body down
from the wood
and the nails
and delivered it into my outstretched arms.

I wiped away the blood
and stroked his cheek
and kissed his head.

His pain was over, thank God,
but mine remained, and always will.

But despite it all
through it all
love persisted.

Love surged
overwhelming me
with its intensity.

He was my child, my boy, and I loved him.

As at the beginning
and now at the ending
blood and tears mingled
staining my clothes and stinging my eyes
as I held him to me.

Love once born can never die.

No wood
or nails
can put an end to love.

Love lives on
through death
and on into eternity.

It was *not* over.

Sarah Brewerton

And nails

That was when I couldn't look – when the nails went in.

The women held me
trying to shield me from the worst.

Then strength came from somewhere.

I raised my head
and looked up at him
in the gathering darkness.

Our eyes met,
a sword pierced my soul
and hell itself was opened up to me.

I stood
and watched
and remembered.

The night that he was born
in that smelly, dirty shed,
the pain and blood and tears and sweat were all mine.

Now they were his
and there was nothing that I, his mother, could do
other than be here.

And be here I would.
I had brought him into the world
and I would be here, whatever it took,
to deliver him into the next.

The hours were endless,
the rain cold,
the wind relentless.

And then it was as if the natural order
turned upside down.
Darkness fell in the middle of the day
and I witnessed what no parent should :
the death of their child.

“Come on, come away, it's over.”

hills. I screamed and struggled, scratched and spat, but then they beat with great sticks until fresh terror overwhelmed me and I was silent.

They took me to a strange city, with grand buildings and sweeping courtyards. The food tasted strange; I didn't understand the language. I was frightened and alone in a foreign land. I prayed to God to keep me safe.

Soon I was sold, as a slave, to a man called Naaman, who was commander in the army whose soldiers had destroyed my village. How I hated him! I blamed him for everything that had happened. I distrusted him and feared him, and didn't want anything to do with him.

I also actually distrusted myself and feared what I might do, so it was just as well that I didn't see him much. But she – his wife – was different. Although I was her servant she treated me more like her own child, the child she had never had. She reminded me a little of a my mother. She was kind and gentle and looked after me. Night after night I would cry out and lie trembling in my bed, re-living the terror of when the soldiers came. She would come and hold me and rock me till I was quiet, and tell me I mustn't be afraid anymore. Soothed and comforted, I gave thanks to God for the kindness of a foreigner.

As the weeks and months went by, I picked up the language, worked hard, and even began to smile once more. It was as if I found myself again. And I grew to love my mistress. As for Naaman, I avoided him and wasn't sorry that he hardly noticed me. I still feared and distrusted him, but I also knew how much my mistress loved him. I tried to learn to tolerate him for her sake, particularly when she told me he was ill – his skin was dry and itchy and got sore – and she said it made him cross.

Then I remembered Elisha the prophet, who had come to our house. He would help Naaman, surely. I wanted to help my mistress –she had been so kind to me – so I told her, and

she told him. Then he went away and was gone a long time.

My mistress told me that he had gone to Israel. Not more killings, surely! She saw the look on my face. “No, no, he has gone to Elisha, to be made well.” she said. Naaman was a proud man, accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. I wondered what he would make of Elisha, who thought nothing of status and honour, and what Elisha would make of him.

When Naaman returned, I was eager for news. But I was not prepared for what happened next. When he came to into the room where my mistress and I were, I tried to creep away out of sight, but he came right up to me. Then he crouched down in front of me and held out his hands for me to touch. I felt his skin – firm and dry and strong. That was miracle enough, but there was more to come. His eyes met mine, and he whispered “Thank you.” His eyes went all wet, and although he didn’t say it, I believe he felt sorry for what had happened to bring me to him.

I knew then that my God had dealt kindly with him. He was changed, repentant, humble, thankful to the God of a foreign slave girl – a God who was now his God too.

Sarah Brewerton

his face lined with pain
from the whipping;
his head bleeding
from the thorny branches.

I thought I might scream or shout or fall but I didn’t.
For an endless moment I was rooted to the spot
wordless at such atrocity.
Then I came to myself and started to go to him
but the guards pushed me away.

“Let her go to him, for God’s sake.” someone shouted –
“She’s his mother.”

They didn’t hear, or didn’t want to.

I didn’t care.
Nothing that anyone said or did
would stop me.

I knew my place.
As a mother my place was here
so be here I would
no matter what.

I gathered the other women around me
needing their warmth and strength
and urged them to come with me.
Together we followed, out of the city
to the hill.

The sky was clouding over,
the sun obscured.
A wind started up
and we shivered and huddled together.

The journey, short though it was
had aged him.
He looked weary beyond measure
and not just from the carrying the cross
but as if he was weary deep inside
in his spirit.

Wood, harsh and rough.

A soul pierced

inspired by John 19:25-30

Wood and nails.

How many times I told Joseph
“Don’t let him play with those! He’ll hurt himself.”
He loved going into the workshop,
examining the smoothed wood,
fingering the sharp roughness of metal,
and asking endless weary questions.
Joseph didn’t mind.
He doted on the lad,
proud that he wanted to know about the family trade.
I’m glad Joseph’s not here to see this.

Wood and nails.

They came to him once,
asked him to provide what they needed for the executions.
They’d make it worth his while, they said.
He flared up, his mild face suddenly full of anger and disgust.
“Never, never will I do that. I would rather go begging on the
streets. I don’t want your blood money.”

I loved him for that.

And I’m glad that he’s not here to see this.

But me? I had to be here.
There was no other place to be.

All through that week I was there
with the other women
waiting, watching on the edge
where the crowds cheered
and then jeered
baying for his blood.

I was there In the courtyard
clinging on to the others
fearing the worst
dreading
the wood and nails.
Then he was brought out

Marrying out

inspired by Ruth 1:1-18

The famine had been predicted for years. Magic makers
and sorcerers would wander these parts, looking to the
sky for signs and wonders, and speak hard words of
impending disaster. Whether or not I really believed them I
don’t know. But I did what I could. My husband, my sons
and I worked hard to put by what we could. But in the end
it wasn’t enough. The rains did not come, the sun’s heat
was harsh, the land grew dry and hard. The crops
withered in the parched ground, and the harvest failed.
Our rations began to run out.

One day, when all there was left was a few vegetables to
make a thin broth, I set the meagre meal out on the table,
sat down with my family, and spoke.

"I have only enough flour to make a few more loaves. After
that there is no more left. If we stay here, we will starve.
We must go, leave this place, and find food. We must
cross the river and go to Moab. I know that it is not the
place for us Jews - but we must pray for God to be with us,
even in a foreign land, and to help us."

It was not what I wanted, what any of us wanted, but what
could we do? There was nothing else to be done.

I rose early the next morning and baked the bread,
scraping every last bit of flour from the bottom of the jar,
hoping and praying that it would be enough to last us
through the long journey.

And a long journey it was - hot days, and restless nights
under the stars. When sleep would not come, I would gaze
up at the heavens, and wonder if God, the creator of all
things, had abandoned us and would leave us to die.

But then, as our journey neared its end, and we still had a
little food left, my spirits lifted a little and my faith in God
was re-kindled. For God had NOT abandoned us. God had
been our guide and companion, even if he sometimes felt
to be a distant one, and God was bringing us to a new
land, and a new start.

Not that it was easy, not at first. The strange customs and
foreign ways took some getting used to. Moabite folk were

suspicious, wary. But we worked hard and proved ourselves, and slowly but surely we were accepted in the little village where we made our home. God was good to us, and we never forgot him. We prayed together, and worshipped our God as best we could in a foreign land.

In the meantime, my sons were growing tall and handsome, and this did not go unnoticed. But then came other worries - enough to banish from my mind thoughts of foreign weddings - for my husband was suddenly taken ill. For many weeks I nursed him. Other women from the village came and helped me. It no longer mattered that I was a foreigner - they came and helped me and brought food and herbs and potions.

Everything was done that could be done, but the illness was too much for us. The women came again and sat with me all that long night, and mourned and wept with me when he died. And I wondered again if God had abandoned me.

Strange how these things happen. Two of the my new women friends used to bring their daughters sometimes. Beautiful young women, they were, their hair long and thick, their eyes dark and shining. No wonder my sons watched out for them and smiled at the sight of them. More and more often they came, long after my husband died, with little gifts of fresh olives wrapped in cool green leaves, or posies of scarlet flowers that bloomed wild and free in those parts. I didn't mind that their little kindnesses - genuine though they were - were often brought at a time when they knew my sons to be at home.

I was not surprised, then, at the double wedding. It was a time of great joy and celebration in our village, and I thanked God for the gift of these two lovely young women.

I hoped, oh! more than anything, for grandchildren. But none came. I couldn't understand why. Was God angry with me, after all, for leaving Israel? Was he punishing me? It began to feel like it. And as I watched and waited, my heart would sometimes grow cold. My sons - dearer to me than life itself - were they weakening? Their strength

Last best hope? inspired by Mark 15: 40,41

It wasn't as though I hadn't warned her, hadn't explained all the comings and goings, all the court intrigues, the growing anger. She'd chosen to ignore it, this sister of mine, burying her head in the sand, stubborn, as she was. Mary had ignored the obvious and here we are, watching my poor nephew crying and dying and nailed to a cross.

Unlike Mary, Clopas was terrified of the Romans; my husband's reputation as much smeared by Jesus as was the reputations of all of his followers.

Guilt by association.

The Romans thought us all revolutionaries. Oh, how they misjudge our power. Simply standing here in the cold, trying to support my sister, trying to make sense of these events; we are about as capable of revolution as the mules in the fields. Beaten by poverty, taxed into submission and shivering now, as our last best hope flits in and out of consciousness.

But to my sister he is just her boy, the oldest, the brightest and the strangest, and he is fading away before our eyes.

I want to rage at this foolishness, this waste. I want to scream at the callousness of the soldiers - but he'll be gone soon anyway, and we will, as women have always done, pick up the pieces of wrecked lives and unrealised dreams, turning the other cheek just as he asked.

We will wrap him and anoint him and bury him when this is done, and turn to each other for comfort the remaining days of our lives.

But for now, in the growing cold and dark, we simply witness.

Alma Fritchley

God! You should have seen the state of him once the soldiers had finished - beaten and bruised, his back red-raw from the lashes. Blood was pouring down his face from the thorns on the make-shift crown they'd placed on his head, and his blood-soaked clothes, only just about made him decent.

They tried to make Jesus carry his own cross, but the torture had made him too weak. So one of the soldiers grabbed someone from the crowd and made him carry it instead. Poor sod!

They took him to Golgotha, just outside of the city, and there they crucified him - hammering nails through his hands and feet into the rough hewn wood. I'll never forget the sound of his screams!

I didn't want to watch - couldn't bear to watch, but somehow, I couldn't help myself. Every how and then, Jesus said something. I wasn't near enough to hear the words, but once or twice he was offered a drink from a sponge on a stick.

Gradually, it became darker, even though it was the middle of the afternoon, until in the end it was almost as dark as night. I moved a little closer and we all stood there watching - those of us who had the bottle to stay. Maybe we were expecting something miraculous to happen - for Jesus to save himself perhaps.

Then we heard the words, "It is finished!", and he was dead!

It was done, the agony, the awful, awful death. But like I said, "It might be finished, but it's far from over!"

Lyn Gallimore

seemed to be draining away. Was all that hardship in Israel taking its toll? They had often gone hungry when they were young - just when they most needed nourishing food. Had it weakened them? Or maybe it was the foreign climate - was it too hot, too dry, or too cold, too damp? Why had God brought us here?

I thought my heart would break when they died. I could hardly contain my own grief, let alone the grief of my dear daughters-in-law. At that moment I hated God. I felt bitter, desolate, abandoned. I wanted to run, run away from everything, from everyone, from God.

Then I heard that there had been a good harvest in Israel. God was no longer here with me in Moab; I would go back, back to my homeland, back to the people I knew. Perhaps there I would find peace, find God again. There was nothing for me here, not now, or so I thought.

But how wrong I was! For both my daughters-in-law wanted to come with me. I shook my head in disbelief and tried to talk them out of it. One of them did eventually stay behind. The other, Ruth, was determined, even stubborn. She loved me, she said, she wanted to stay with me, wherever I went, whatever I did. And - she said - I have seen how your God has been with you and cared for you. You have shown me your God. I want your God to be my God.

I wept with joy and held her close. I no longer felt abandoned by God. In spite of - or maybe because of - a long and arduous journey, I had found God again, through the love and devotion of a foreign girl. Her God, and my God.

Sarah Brewerton

Believing in angels

inspired by Matthew 2:1-15

If it hadn't been for the angel, I wouldn't have believed her.

She came to me that day - that never to be forgotten day - her face pale, her eyes troubled. Pregnant, she said. "But how...?" I said. "We haven't... Mary, what has happened. Has someone ... attacked you?" Her tale about an angel was strange indeed. I didn't believe her, and was going to break off our engagement, but then the angel came to me and told me what was to happen. The Son of God, the Messiah - here with us? I held Mary close and promised to look after her. I felt her blossoming body close to mine, and felt the baby stir and move and kick.

I loved him as soon as he was born - his little body all wet and slippery from the birth, his eyes wide and dark. I loved him fiercely, tenderly, and would give my life for him. But I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be. Deep in her heart, Mary knew, but again I didn't believe her. I thought she was just being over-careful, over anxious. She would never let the baby out of her sight. Many a time I noticed her hot tears falling on his little head as she held him to her breast. Something bad was going to happen, she said. I began to worry about her. I had heard about women growing thin and anxious following a birth.

Then, one day, some visitors arrived, traveling from far off parts.

They wore bright and wonderful garments and brought strange and costly gifts. They spoke about going to Herod - asking him the way, and their words filled me with terror, though I didn't really know why.

That night, I couldn't sleep. As I tossed and turned, the visitors' talk of Herod went over and over in my mind. I imagined him, first curious about these foreign folk, then angry at hearing of the birth of a king, his rival - or so he would think. The first glimmer of dawn was brightening the sky when I fell asleep at last. Then suddenly - the dream ... or was it a dream? It was as if the room was filled with a clear, dazzling light - too bright for an ordinary sunrise. It was just like before - when the angel had appeared and told me about the pregnancy. And now, there was the voice again - with a different message. "You

Cliffhanger

inspired by John 19:30

"It is finished!" That's what he said. It might be finished, but it's not over, not by a long way!

The priests and leaders of the temple might be breathing a sigh of relief, thinking they've finally rid themselves of the man who has plagued them forever, with his challenges and his so called, do-gooding. His refusal to give them a straight answer to any question they've ever asked him. After months of scheming and planning, at last, they'd seen the back of him. Weeks, trying to trick him into saying something they could hold against him. They even tried to push him off a cliff, but got no where.

Then finally, they found someone willing to double-cross him. It's amazing how, so called, friends find betrayal easy for a few pieces of silver! I heard he was full of remorse, once he realized what would happen - took the money back, I'm told. Of course, it was too late by then. I heard he took his own life, couldn't live with the guilt I suppose! But then, could any of us?

After that there was no stopping it - Caiaphas, the high priest, the Council, Pilate, Herod - they were all involved.

But in the end, it was the people who decided, with a bit of encouragement from others. Pilate gave them the choice - "Jesus or Barabbas? Who should he set free?"

"Barabbas!" the crowd shouted.

"What then, should be done with Jesus?" Pilate asked.

"Crucify! Crucify him!" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Surely, these were the same people who, just a few days before, had welcomed Jesus to into Jerusalem?

They were incited by those in the crowd who had no intention that Jesus should be freed and so Pilate had no alternative, but to do as they wished.

But it wasn't just that – there was something about the way he spoke to the other criminals, something about his words of forgiveness when he was torn with pain, rather than the hate and anger we usually hear. And most of all, something about the desperate way he cried out to God that got to me. Maybe he wasn't just a trouble-maker after all ... and I have a feeling that we haven't heard the last of him.

Jan Berry

are in great danger, Joseph - you, Mary and the baby. You must get up, now, and go - away from here. Herod's men will be here soon. They will look for you. They want to kill the child. Go, now, to Egypt, where you will be safe."

And so we went. I wondered how Mary would react - she had been so preoccupied and anxious - but she heard what I had to say very calmly. She looked at me, nodded, and simply said "Yes, I know. I was expecting this."

The journey to Egypt was long. I felt frightened, always looking over my shoulder, expecting to see Herod's men at every turn of the road. The nights were the worst, trying to find somewhere safe and out of sight to rest, shivering with cold and fear. Mary, though, was different - changed from being nervous and jumpy at every noise. She was quietly confident, and often told ME not to worry, that God would protect us and take care of us.

At last we arrived in Egypt. Safe from Herod though we were, I felt far from comfortable in this strange foreign land. We didn't speak the language, their ways of living were not ours, and it was hard to get the sort of food that we could eat. We didn't look the same as the local folk either, of course, and some people shunned us. But others were kind. It was the baby that did it, I think; few people can resist a smiling, gurgling baby. Then news came about the killing of the children in Bethlehem, and people looked at us, saw that we were Jewish, and understood that we'd had to escape.

The news filled me with horror. I imagined the terror, the blood, the screaming, and grief of the parents. One night it became too much, and I lay sobbing in Mary's arms. She stroked my head and kissed me and comforted me.

"We are safe here" she said. "Herod will not find us. God has promised to protect us and be with us. He will keep his promise."

And so it was that we settled in Egypt. We worked and made a life for ourselves. Our child grew and spent his early years in a foreign land.

Except of course, that by then the Egyptians were no longer foreigners to us, but friends, and God was with us, through the kindness and friendship of foreigners who became friends.

The journey

inspired by Genesis 35:16-21 and Luke 2:1-6

Like so many others at that time
we were travellers –going to our home town to register.

But unlike others, I carried a precious burden –
my unborn child.

I was frightened : I was so near to my time.
What if the baby came, here and now?

I was frightened
because I remembered my ancestor, Rachel,
whose story I had been told many times
and who was travelling on this very road
when it happened.....

Her labour was hard
pains coming fast upon pains
fast, too fast
and then nothing but pain
overwhelming
crushing
defeating.

Fear engulfed her.
There was something unreal about this
something not right.
She had expected pain
but not this much.
She had expected blood
but not this much.

The pain and the blood kept on coming
draining her
of energy, of courage
of life.

Table-turning

inspired by Mark 11:15-17, Luke 23:43 and Mark 15:34

Yes, I admit it – I was there to watch him die. I knew he was
trouble from the moment he rode into Jerusalem on that
donkey, with his motley crew of followers throwing down their
scruffy cloaks and cheering as if he were some kind of king!

But even I wasn't prepared for what happened next – when
he came into the Temple courtyard and threw me, my
husband and the other traders all out, turning over the tables
and yelling something about a den of thieves and God's
house. What did he think he was playing at? We've worked
really hard at building up that business – offering a service to
the Jewish pilgrims whilst trying to keep on the right side of
the Romans. He could have caused a riot that would have
got the whole place shut down! And we lost nearly a whole
day's takings – and that's no small matter in this time of
recession, I can tell you.

So when I'd heard he'd been arrested, I was relieved – that's
the end of that, I thought. I was there in the streets when
Pilate offered to release him. I didn't actually join in the
shouts of 'crucify him' – well, only a little – it's hard not to go
along with the crowd. Not that I think Barabbas is much
better – he's another terrorist that calls himself a freedom
fighter!

So I went along to the execution, with a bit of a sense of
satisfaction. Served him right, for stirring things up – just
another trouble-maker who'd got what he deserved.

But somehow, it wasn't quite what I'd expected, although I'm
not sure why. After all, I've watched crucifixions before –
they're a bit of a public spectacle around here. But this felt
different. To begin with, I was very conscious of the other
women standing there, and that uncomfortable reminder that
he was someone's son, someone's friend, someone's lover.

Of course I didn't go – Golgotha was a God-forsaken place, on a rubbish heap, full of unimaginable suffering: I stayed on my bed all afternoon. Then word came that he was dead – quite quickly, it seemed; that at least was some sort of relief.

Still I couldn't escape those eyes, that face: but what else could I have done? My unease persisted.

A few days later my servants came back with some very strange reports- that the tomb was empty, that Jesus had appeared to the women, that something very odd was happening.

I dreamed again – again that face, those eyes: but now I saw that there had never been reproach, only sadness, and that now the sadness had been replaced by joy. And compassion...there had always been, and always would be, compassion.

Sue Rowe

Other people were around her
a sea of faces
consoling her
cajoling her
encouraging her
willing her
to give birth, to give life.

But she was tired –
oh, so tired
and this felt different from other births.
Life was being thrust into the world
while life was being drained from her.

Death was close
as was life.

The birth would come
all too soon.

The nine month wait would soon be over
and then
nothing.

Life was beginning
and ending.

She cried with the pain
but also with sadness
for she would never lift him
from her body into her arms, to her breast
to feel the tiny lips
tugging
sucking
caressing.

The child was born
of pain

into pain.

She named him.

The last thing she did and said
was to give him his name:
Benoni – “Son of my sorrow”.

With those words the cord was severed
suddenly, violently
and her soul departed.

And he, what became of him
the child’s father?

He lifted his voice in the agonies of grief.

He lifted her body gently in his arms.

He took the child with him
the son of her sorrow
and buried her near the city
and marked the place for everyone to see
lest anyone forgot.

He grieved for her
but in the midst of his grief
he rejoiced in his son
and gave him another name :
Benjamin – “Son of my right hand”
my precious one.

.....

So it was that I, my unborn child and the child’s father
were on a journey
nearing the town.

We stopped at the gravestone
and remembered our ancestors.

The dreamer

inspired by Matthew 27:15-26

The dream again: that face, those eyes, just looking into
mine. Sadness, compassion...reproach?

The face of the preacher, Jesus of Galilee. I had heard of
him, of course, as had my husband. And the servants talked
of little else – how he had healed a man by the pool of
Bethesda, how, just this week he had created a fuss in the
temple, losing his temper and turning the tables. Not a place
I’d ever been – as a Gentile, I was forbidden – but I had seen
him once, in the street.

Looking out behind the curtains of my palanquin, my maid
servant pointed him out; scruffy, with a rough looking group
of friends, but with a compelling gaze – that gaze I couldn’t
forget, which haunted me even in my dreams.

And now, as I looked out of my window, trying to shake the
feeling of foreboding which still persisted, there he was
again, but this time being manhandled up the steps outside.
He looked drawn and exhausted. I couldn’t see the
expression in his eyes. What had he done now? And yet
there was one thing I felt sure of – that he was not a criminal,
that there had somehow been a mistake, and that my
husband must be careful, careful not to allow another
miscarriage of justice to add to the other debits against his
record in this place.

So I sent word, quickly, telling him not to get involved. I
wasn’t confident that he would listen.

In fairness, he tried; he sent him to Herod first, but Herod
sent him back. Then my husband tried to get him released,
but the crowd had their blood up by then, and there was no
chance. So Jesus was sentenced to be crucified. My
husband knew it was wrong: but somehow events had run
away with themselves – there was nothing to be done, not
now. Human power has its limits.

A sound... a groan with the depth and resonance of an earthquake escaped both men as the cross was moved and Simon took over.

Cries of 'Shame!' go up. Whilst some say quietly 'Well, he's not from here.' I feel a deep sadness and I cradle my boys closer and kiss their heads. 'Don't worry. Papa is the strongest man in the world. He can do it!'

Up the hill now. It is gruelling but Simon doesn't falter while Jesus all but crawls behind and the people are silent.

We are used to punishment; men and women are stoned to death all the time. Why does this touch very my core? I have a profound sense of loss, misery and injustice. The air weighs heavy. I know I won't be the same again.

The cross is laid down and Simon touches the man on his head, strokes his face, turns and walks past us down the hill ...we follow.

The four of us are now in our lodgings, Simon sits bruised and scratched, his clothes stained with blood and sweat, his own and that of Jesus.

He opens his arms to us and beckons me to cradle him; he too buries his head and weeps. And now I love him. Rufus and I speak of what we know. It's not enough and yet it's too much.

We are all silent in our room.

Thoughtful; together; but somehow each one of us alone.

And then the sky went dark.

Michelle Haller

And then
by some strange and cruel coincidence
my labour started.
I was frightened
frightened that I might lose my hold on life
that I too might have to die
before life was born.

We were getting close to the town.
Here at least there would be shelter
somewhere warm to lie
and rest my weary body.
Here would be people to help
who would know what to do
who would bring blankets and water
and food and drink.

Oh yes, there were people
but too many people
too many busy people
and there was no room anywhere
not even for me
and no-one to give help
not even to me
as I struggled to give birth.

At last, at last, somewhere was found –
a shed in a back street with animals and dirt
but I was past caring.
Weeping with pain and exhaustion,
I lay on the straw
and felt that I would die.
as pain came fiercely upon pain.

And then, just as I felt I could bear it no more
when my strength seemed to be draining away,

with one last effort it was over.
Through pain and blood and tears
life was born.
My cries mingled with another cry
feeble at first, then lusty and strong and beautiful.
Suddenly my energy and life surged back
and I lifted him
from my body
to my arms
to my breast.

Someone brought water and rags
and some strips of cloth to wrap the baby.

I lay back on the straw
thankful it was over
thankful that my life had been spared.
I remembered my ancestor who had died
in order to bring life.
I remembered her child
the son of her sorrow.
I looked at my own child
sleeping peacefully in a makeshift cradle
my precious one.
How would he grow up?
What would become of him?

A fleeting sense of foreboding crept over me.
Would he be the son of my sorrow?
Would my soul be pierced
as I witnessed his life,
his death?

I lay, half dozing in the warm drowsiness that follows birth
and the night sky suddenly cleared
bright and dazzling with angels' wings
and it was as if all the joys and sorrows of heaven and earth
were opened up to me.

and he is pinned to the ground. As the whip sounds Rufus
loses courage and comes back to me.

People are on all sides, none take care of where they tread -
I can just see Simon - his head is now uncovered, his face
anxious, shiny with perspiration. His height has always been
an advantage. He stands firm.

The soldiers try to get people to help the fallen man, trying to
take people from the crowd.

'No, not me, he is unclean.'

'What an insult! How dare you try to bring me so low.'

'This is a Roman way – let a Roman help him.'

No one helps him, where are his people? His mother, father,
where are the ones he befriended? The tax collectors or the
fishermen? Whatever he's done my stomach churns as I look
at the near naked and huddled figure, every limb contorted in
pain.

The crowd crushes in on us once more as people refuse to
help and move away. Alex stumbles and I am lost in fear and
cry 'Father father please help me.' Rufus is screaming 'Abba!
Abba!' I drag Alex bloodied and dusty out of the melee and
heave him into my arms. I hear Simon's voice boom through
the crowd. I look and he has seen us; he raises his hand to
wave and as he does so two soldiers their daggers drawn
insist that he helps with the cross.

We reach him as he turns to look at the man...his concern
for us had made him oblivious to what was happening. Alex
has buried his face into my neck, covered his head with my
scarf. Rufus and I with one voice plead 'Abba help him!'

I loved Simon when I saw him ease the cross from the body
of the broken man...I saw him look into this man's eyes, this
Jesus, and somehow encouragement came to both.

What is going on? I'm worried I'm beginning to lose sight of Simon who seems oblivious to the tension in the air. The boys and I are pushed to the edge the crowd and they cling to me closer.

'Woman, where's your man? You're not from these parts. I'd get out of here if I were you.' I look for the source of the words and a Roman soldier looks over my head as he speaks, I dare not answer. I kneel and tend to the boys and glance at him; will he say more?

'There are crucifixions today, one man is a heretic and tempers are running high. Don't know what he said, but he mixed with the wrong sort of people...tax collectors, fishermen, unclean women, down and outs and the like, you know.. ruffians.'

'He said all people are the same according to God. He said rich people would find it hard to do what was right to enter heaven.' a quiet female voice came from the shadows. 'He called our teachers hypocrites and said he was the Son of God.'

'Yes, and that your God would help everyone who asked, not only Jews. Now the teachers have stirred everyone up and people want this Jesus crucified - you know nailed to a cross. They even let a real villain go rather than him.'

As I stand Rufus cries 'Mamma, I can hear Papa calling me.' And he starts heedlessly into the crowd. I gather up Alex and push into the crowd after him. The sound of his fathers voice has made him bold.

Not far from us in a small clear space something moves through the crowd. It's a huge wooden cross. I can't quite see how it's been moved. Stop start....stop start. We press closer - is that a person? Broken, bruised and gashed carrying, no, dragging the means of his own death?

One more heave, a stumble and the cross tilts, creaks, falls

I was filled with a wild and surging hope
that because of this child
all would be well.

Just as I had shed blood and tears
in order to bring life into the world
so the pain and bloodshed that he would know
would herald the birth of hope, joy, new life.

The son of my sorrow
oh! but also of my joy –
a joy that was hard to put into words or even understand
but a joy that was beginning and stirring within me
and that soon was be let loose
into the world.

I slept, at last
a deep and dreamless sleep
and was at peace.

Sarah Brewerton

Stirring it

inspired by Matthew 3:13-17

You've probably heard of me. I'm the one who makes a guest appearance, a sort of supporting actor role, in some of the gospels. Even before I was born, Jesus was causing a stir in my life and so, as I became increasingly convinced by God that the Messiah was on his way, I went out into the desert to preach. In those days, that was a pretty radical thing to do. No attendance at temple or ordinary job for me; no following in the footsteps of my father to become a priest but rather a life as a voice in the wilderness crying 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' And people were listening, they were coming in their hordes to hear me preach and baptise them. It wasn't easy, mind, this radical lifestyle; there was always run-ins with various people and, as you may know, a grisly end to life for me. But, anyway, enough of me, back to the story of the day.

So here I was, preaching repentance and changing people's lives and suddenly my cousin comes along. Now, I've always had a suspicion that he was special and God's beloved. In fact, I thought he was the one that I've been pointing people towards and preaching about. There was a murmuring in the crowd and I looked up and saw Jesus coming towards me. So I stopped baptising for a minute to greet him but he came straight down through the crowd and asked me to baptize him; I mean really, he asks me to baptize him. How could I do such a thing? How could I, John the Baptist, be expected to baptise the Messiah?

Firstly I had to ask Jesus, did he need to be baptised? For what purpose did I baptise him? As the Son of God, surely he was sinless? It's a question which has vexed many Biblical scholars over the years and numerous people have written about it. There's some who think Jesus' baptism was all to do with us; that, by being baptized, Jesus was saying, I'm the same as them, I need God's forgiveness or, through being baptised, he showed that he was at one with the sinful nature of humans. But I'm not really sure about that. I like to

Foreign aid

inspired by Mark 15:21

My fine sons, Rufus and Alexander, and their friends have come home for rest and to renew their energies. They and their friends have travelled far to spread the Word. The word of a 'villain' who was crucified. Tell us once more what happened in Jerusalem when we were children. It's difficult because the memory is vivid almost too strong. But I begin...

I close my eyes and yes I'm there, the noise of the people and the animals ringing in my ears and smell of the food, the dust on my tongue and in my throat. There we are moving through the crowd. My golden boys Alexander and Rufus hold tight to my robes and we follow Simon as he pushes ahead. Simon, who my father thought the perfect match. A thoughtful man who despite the passing years I could not say I really knew.

Mmm... how did I feel about him before that day? A little uncertain and nervous? Yes. Proud? Yes. Love? No...not at all.

We travelled from Cyrene trading with fellow travellers along the way and enjoying the change as the air cooled as we travelled west. Jerusalem was always stifling though. I am happy, I love the throng of people at Passover, the business of the markets. The sense that we are God's special people, celebrating the escape from Egypt, hopeful that Elijah will return. I like the city at Passover. We always come here - I insist on it. I have to cover my hair more than I would at home but that's ok, and Simon strides out ahead and I don't call him back, and that's ok too.

There's something different today though. More soldiers than I've seen for a long time, and lots of different groups of men moving in and out of the crowd. Someone jostles and pushes past and a cry goes up 'There's one!' And the crowd surges. 'Crucify him, crucify him!' The words gouge the air.

fickle us humans can be. How we can be swayed by a crowd!

Anyway, by the time we made our way through the throngs of people and arrived in the city, it was getting quite late. By the time we had returned the colt to its grateful owner and made our way to Bethany to find Jesus and the others, we were ready for our supper and our beds.

I slept soundly that night, but I've often wondered if Jesus slept, knowing what the days ahead held for him?

Lyn Gallimore

think it was more about Jesus' relationship with God. His baptism was a marker on the journey of God saying, I am for you; a point where Jesus and God showed us what it means to be like him.

Secondly, and more to the point, who am I to baptise him? I mean, I said to him 'Surely I need to be baptised by you and yet you come to me?' I was only the messenger and not the actual Christ. I suppose that's something that we all think sometimes 'Who am I?' Am I worthy to be loved so much by God? Is it possible that I might be the one that God needs at this time? And probably, you, like me, may have tried to shy away from it. Surely God can't mean that he'll use me with all my faults and failings, you try eating locusts and honey for every meal. You've got to admit I'm a bit different from your average Jew in Jesus' time and did you see how old my parents were! It can be a common problem for people, not ready to accept that they are created as amazing people with creativity and beauty. Perhaps, in coming to be baptised by me, Jesus was saying it's not about whether you're qualified or important in your community but it's about being able to say Yes when God calls and taking your place in God's plan.

Jesus' reply? Well it was simply 'let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' He didn't really even acknowledge my excuse or concern but rather said, this is what I need you to do for me now.

Now, I'm still not sure what he meant in that statement. How his baptism could be the way to 'fulfil all righteousness?' Was I cleansing him of his sin? Was it a way of saying that his baptism was the start of a new justice in the world? Was he saying that I needed to baptise him so that God could continue to move?

So I did it, I baptised him just like I'd baptised everyone else, one dunk in a very muddy River Jordan. And then something very strange happened. A dove came down and a voice from Heaven was heard ...

Stewart Graham

Queue jumping

inspired by Matthew 3:13-17

People tend to miss out the bit about how Jesus came through the crowd and got to the front to be baptised. I was a little bit annoyed at first, we'd been waiting for hours to be baptised and here's this guy coming but the crowds seemed to recognise him and part for him and actually I joined in. We made some space so he could get to the front.

We'd heard of John's preaching for a while and decided that we should go out and hear him for ourselves. Find out what all the fuss was about.

Somebody said that we might not like what we heard. For, in listening to John's voice, what we'd actually do was face the facts about ourselves and our communities. We'd listened, for a change, to the voices which were crying out from injustice and pain; the people who struggled to face another day or who didn't know where their next meal was coming from. And those facts hurt a bit, I suppose they do for you as well; hearing what's actually going on in the world and not just what people want you to hear. Really listening to the voices which are crying out in pain and injustice. Even when we're doing our best, feeling that there will always be pain in this world that we can't do anything about. That, however hard you try to protect yourself or others, things happen that you can't plan for.

But John's teaching taught us something. It taught us a new way of living, a chance to repent from the things we'd done wrong and start afresh with God and with our neighbours. Being baptised gave me a sense of being wiped clean. I was no longer just an ordinary person, but someone who had heard God's words of love and said, yes, show me how to live.

And then, we watched Jesus being baptised. At first, John rejected the idea that he should do the baptism but Jesus

Storm clouds gathering

inspired by Mark 11:1-11

One of the aspects of being with Jesus is you never knew what was going to happen. Every day was different, and that can be both exciting and daunting, depending on the kind of person you are.

We'd all been with Jesus for some while, probably longer than any of us realised, and as time moved on, Jesus spoke more and more about his death. How the Son of Man would be betrayed to the religious leaders and would be sentenced to death.

We didn't really understand what Jesus meant, or if we did, we buried our heads well and truly in the sand. It couldn't possibly happen, not to Jesus, we said to one another. Or could it?

So that day when Jesus sent us off to fetch the colt, little did we realise that it was the beginning of the last week of his life. Even if we had, there was nothing any of us could have done to stop, what in the end, seemed inevitable. The owner of the colt was a bit short with us at first, running out of his house, his face full of anger. "Oi, what are you up to?" he asked. When we told him, "The Master needs it", his attitude changed completely and he was more than pleased to let us take the animal. We took it back to Jesus, threw some cloaks over it and helped Jesus get on. It couldn't have been very comfortable, but Jesus didn't seem to mind, and we started off towards Jerusalem.

As we neared the city people began to spread cloaks, and branches from the trees on the road and then they started to shout, "Hosanna!" "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" I recall wondering later, if Jesus knew that the same people who greeted his coming into the city on that day with shouts of "Hosanna!" would be shouting, "Crucify! Crucify!" just a few days later? It's amazing how

The Apprentices

inspired by Mark 1:19,20

I've got two fine strapping lads, James and John. Ever since they were little I've been teaching them the family business. It's a tough job, fishing, not for weaklings. There's the weather to contend with for a start, from squalls and storms to no wind at all, and the long nights waiting, watching. Not forgetting keeping the boats in good order, repairing the nets and sails.

When they were little I sent them to the Rabbi, like we all do in these parts, to learn the Torah. They did their best, but you could see they weren't natural scholars. They stuck at it for a few years. They'd memorize huge chunks but then they'd forget and have to start all over again. They much preferred to be out in the boats or running about.

But now I can't quite believe it. The Rabbi Jesus came here. He's the one who's been preaching in the synagogues and healing the sick. Not like the usual Rabbis.

He called my lads by name. How he knew them I don't know. As soon as they heard him they stopped work and followed after him.

Now these Rabbis usually only pick the brightest and the best. The more academic ones who can learn the Torah off by heart, word for word. And here is this Rabbi calling my kids.

I've never heard of a Rabbi picking ordinary working people before. Never. Why didn't he choose the really clever ones? Surely he's made a mistake?

Sue Shaw

simply told John that he was worthy enough to baptise him. That gave us hope. Maybe we could be good enough for God as well, maybe God could use us in weird and wonderful ways; maybe, in being baptised by John, our lives could change. Of course, they didn't completely. In hindsight, while there was a new sense of purpose and being, there were still the day to day running of life; Jobs continued to need done, difficulties continued to come up; but there was a sense that we were different, that God was now by our side; supporting us through the difficult times.

And then, when the dove came down, we knew we had seen something special. God had met us in a special way. Jesus' baptism was one of God's many ways of saying, I am for you. It was a marker of God saying you are my beloved, in you I am well pleased. If we'd only known it was the beginning of something and where Jesus' ministry would end, perhaps we would have tried to do something to stop it. But, then again, perhaps not; I mean Jesus was interesting but I'm not sure I wanted to get messed up in all his radical thinking and life-changing plans...

Stewart Graham

Fulfilment

inspired by Matthew 3:13-17

And so it begins, the next stage on my journey. I was ready for it, 30 was quite old for someone like me in Palestine in the 1st century. You probably don't know much about my growing up but nobody felt it was important to tell you about it compared to the last 3 years of my life.

How did it make me feel? This sense that I should go and be baptised? Well, nervous for a start, I knew God's plan for me but I wasn't sure I wanted to carry it out.

In you I am well pleased.

What did those words mean? I hadn't even done very much yet but at the beginning God was saying, in you I am well pleased. It certainly made me feel good, to realise that even before I had started on my ministry, God was well pleased in me. Even when things seemed difficult or hard, he was well pleased in me. And, in saying that to me, God said it to everyone. That even when the road is tough or we don't know the next step of the journey, God is pleased in his creation. We may find ourselves far away from God, but abundant grace can bring us back to God. It did make me think though, what could I do to make God more pleased? How could I change so that others might see that God is pleased with them as well? Or indeed see that God loves them through my actions.

My baptism was also one of the many things that Matthew used to show that my life was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. Right from the beginning, when Matthew concentrated on my family tree, he was keen to stress that I was the one who the world had been waiting for and, in being baptised, Matthew saw me as being the one who Isaiah speaks of as having the Spirit of the Lord resting on him; the one who God's soul delights in.

One of the things my baptism really said though is that my ministry and my life was radical. I came with a mission, to change the world, as Isaiah said,

'to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, to establish justice on the earth.'

Now this mission has been used for good and bad, some have taken it to mean establishing justice for one group over injustice for others or freeing those who agree with us and being blinded to the pain of others but I, God's servant as Isaiah described, see it rather as a challenge to a world which is often harsh and painful; a world where greed and jealousy are heard more loudly than love and peace. What would the world look like if people took up my message to open eyes that are blind? How would the world change if my radical life of sacrifice, love and justice was at the core of communities and people around the world? It's difficult to see how it might work but it certainly gives me pause for thought.

My baptism started the beginning of my ministry, from this point on I was no longer just a carpenter hidden from view in Nazareth but rather a preacher; a leader; a challenge to the hierarchy of priests and kings. I had taken my rightful place in the community and stepped out into a world which I was unsure of. My baptism was the start of something new being created in me and in the world.

The whole idea of baptism has been changed and altered over the years, some see it as an infant thing, others as an adult thing and some have had major disagreements and arguments about it. There's many ways to see it but perhaps you should consider it as a marker on the journey, the moment at which each person hears the words 'You are my beloved, in you I am well pleased.' Words which say, no matter what you have done, I am for you.

Listening to my story can remind you of when you followed in my footsteps and got baptised yourself; or encourage you to do so if you haven't already. But I should let you know, it might be a bumpy ride. I'm not promising it'll be easy but I'll be with you every step of the way.

Stewart Graham