

Daily Reflection for week beginning Monday 11th May by Rev'd David Munchin

The reflections this week are therefore following a Christian Aid week devotional resource. You can find it at [Christian Aid week devotions](#) These reflections are my own using the bible passages they suggest for each day.

Monday 11th May

This week is Christian Aid Week, and although we cannot collect in the normal way, the need to help the world's poor, who are often the least able to cope with COVID19, is greater than ever. Please consider giving via our fund-raising page which can be found [here](#) and/or come to our Zoom Virtual Quiz on Saturday 16th at 7.30pm – details on our website <https://www.welwyn.org.uk/covid-19-updates>

Matthew 25:31-36: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Last week I read a biography of Martin Luther, the German monk responsible for starting the Reformation. Luther's moment of revelation in reading St Paul, was when he realised that in order for us to be in good standing with God, what is required is not good works or religious duties (the medieval world was full of religious good works that could earn you a heavenly reward) but faith.

That Reformation reached different parts of Northern Europe and indeed these shores in a variety of forms. Here the Church of England reconstituted itself after its break with Rome under Henry VIII. However that quite correct understanding of 'justification by faith' should not blind our eyes to the fact that faith entails and includes a working out of itself in acts of mercy and generosity. Matthew's gospel is our proof text here (along with the Epistle of James) giving emphasis to this other side of the coin.

At this point in Matthew's gospel we are just about to enter Holy Week. Jesus has told them that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees (7:20), that we will be repaid for our deeds (16:27) and that mercy is more important than Law (9:13, 12:7, 18:3). Now in this parable, that message is laid out in full. Acts of mercy will be *the* distinguishing feature of those who are right with God.



Tuesday 12th May

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Matthew 12:46-50: While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' ⁴⁸But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

Looking over a bible commentary on this passage, John Fenton gives it the subtitle 'Jesus disowns his family.' That's a pretty strong description – after all what we do make of people who 'disown their families'? Of course, frankly, we admit that there are some families whom we ought to disown, where serious abuse is occurring for instance. However this doesn't apply in Jesus' case, where although human, his not-much-mentioned family is portrayed as loving.

And of course Jesus does have a particular care for his family – the care of his mother is particularly on his mind at the end (to the beloved disciple 'Here is your mother' John 20:27), and his brother James is a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church.

Christians have probably got in wrong in both directions. I remember reading 'The Imitation of Christ' by Thomas a Kempis as a teenager (didn't all teenagers do that?). This best selling medieval devotional manual was written particularly for those entering the religious life, and therefore there was a lot about the disowning of family and friends – frankly for that reason it appalled me. There have also been radical protestant groups that have seen the disavowal of family ties as a necessary part of Christian discipleship.

On the other hand there have been some who have so over identified Christianity with family values, that the family has become almost an idol in itself. Leaving those from abusive or unusual families, or those who have had to flee their families because their Christian conversion has left their lives in danger (and I have lived in a country where that was a reality), feeling that somehow they are to blame.

Matthew takes this text from Mark, and makes an interesting alteration. In verse 50 he changes Mark's 'Will of God' to the 'Will of my Father.' Often Matthew, the more devout Jew, does this to avoid writing the word 'God', but here of course it has an extra dimension – whether we have a large happy family, a dysfunctional abusive family, or no family, we are all called to belong to a family under God.



Wednesday 13th May

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Revelation 22:17: The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Leviticus 19:33-34: When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

We hear a lot recently about the 'winning the war against the virus' or 'joining the fight against the virus.' This of course is largely metaphorical – the virus has not declared war, it doesn't have any conscious military aims against us, and there are limited things we can do to fight it. However as we emerge from this pandemic, we will be talking about our victory over the epidemic, the cost of that victory, and subsequent 'reconstruction' effort.

They say history is written by the victors and there is nothing we like better than to celebrate a victory over the enemy. I write this a day before VE day, and whilst I guess for the sake of relations with our European neighbours we might try to avoid too triumphalist a tone, that isn't quite so true if we are watching Henry V sock it to the French at Agincourt.

The bible is no different. You can read about the great military victories which, with God's help, established the people of Israel of the promised land (see principally the book of Joshua). But as so often in the bible there is a counter melody to the main theme. We see it here enshrined in the Levitical law codes. This (and there are other passages which suggest this in the bible) suggests a more gradual assimilation, and therefore an increased tolerance towards the 'indigenous' people (the 'alien') still living in the land.

The same is true at the other end of the bible. Revelation is full of swash buckling terrifying battles (it's where we literally find Armageddon) and the language of Christians as 'conquerors.' But this is deeply metaphorical – not least because the churches of Revelation are small, frightened communities living under severe Roman persecution. Their 'victory', their 'conquering' is not through violence, but by accepting the gift of living water which God offers to them.



Thursday 14th May

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Isaiah 58:6-7: Is not this the fast that I choose? to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

In our heads we all have our idea of what Utopia would be like. But the title of Thomas More's book literally means 'no place' – so it could equally well mean something like 'lovely as this all is, there is no place like it.' This passage from Isaiah is rather Utopian. Many scholars date it to the time that the exiles were returning from Babylon and reconstructing the waste places of Jerusalem. After the devastating experience of exile, this represents a chance of a new start, and the chance to build a new society under God, where 'we will be his people, and he will be our God' (Jer 38:32).

One important question to be addressed, now and then, is: what are the relative merits of social responsibilities and religious duties? Some people point to passages like this (and the prophets contain numerous passages like it) and divide the question into an either /or. They will say something like: 'what is important is being socially responsible (looking after the poor and sick eg) not performing empty outward religious observances (like fasting).'

But that would be to misunderstand what the prophets were saying. Religious observances such as worship, prayer and fasting were not distractions, but commands given by God. As they are for the Christian church – 'Do this in remembrance of me' at the last supper, is not a take it or leave it offer by Jesus, it is a command. However what the prophets do say, is: 'If you perform religious observances without love, mercy and justice – then they are worse than useless. They are ephemeral distractions.'

Jesus is not a softy on religious and moral duties – our righteousness is to 'exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees' (Matt 5:20). That is a tough call and a tough demand. We might fall short and need ourselves to ask for mercy and forgiveness, but it is that level of mercy and kindness to which we are called.



Friday 15th May

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Today's bible passage is Mark 5:24-23 – Jesus heals the woman with a haemorrhage (too long to reproduce here)

In this healing miracle the woman comes to Jesus with a constant vaginal flow of blood due to continual uterine haemorrhaging. This would have placed her as a permanent outsider in society (Lev 15:25-30) being ritually impure constantly, rather than for a few days a month. Men, and perhaps women too, can be rather squeamish about a woman's monthly menstrual cycle. Many societies, not just Judaism, see this as making a woman somehow unclean for a certain period. I remember I was surprised growing up, to hear some of those opposed to the ordination of women express concern about a menstruating woman serving at the altar – I had heard various arguments against the ordination of women, but that one had never crossed by mind until someone said it.

In developing countries, particularly those where hygiene products are not readily available, a woman's menstrual cycle can interrupt her education, her work and her social interactions. Attitudes towards women can see them sometimes permanently excluded from activities. Simple low-cost measures can alleviate this problem for girls and women, and can be life transforming. Moreover, it can be transforming for the whole of those societies, men and women alike.

There is another detail in the story in verse 26: 'she had spent all that she had.' Recently we have had greater cause than ever to reflect on the benefits of a National Health Service which is free at the point of delivery. In many parts of the world, not only is health care expensive, and sometimes prohibitively so, but often there are stark choices to be made. Food on the table today, education (again not provided freely by the state), care of the elderly and disabled, paying off debt, health care – these all have to be paid, and priorities need to be drawn up accordingly. For the woman her sickness had not only made her ill, and an outsider, we are also told that it had made her poor – a vicious cycle that it is hard to get out of. But Jesus shows us the way – he heals the woman, giving her not only physical well-being, but also a chance to reintegrate into society and regain financial security. It is that same work that Christian Aid is doing today.



Saturday 16th May

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Luke 4:18-20: Jesus said: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

It is worth noting the unfolding context of this passage in Luke. Jesus has returned home from Capernaum to his home in Nazareth. Here he takes his turn in reading from the Hebrew Scriptures and then preaching upon them. Here he chooses a passage from Isaiah 61 announcing the Lord's jubilee. He then begins his sermon 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' At first the congregation is full of enthusiasm: 'they spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words.' But soon their discontent begins to show: 'Is not this Joseph's son?' and finally in v29 they try and murder him.

Firstly I wonder what we are to make of the 'this has been fulfilled' opening to the sermon. Has it? The poor are still poor, the blind still blind, and there is plenty of oppression around the world. There is a sense in which the proclamation has been made in Jesus. God has delivered his verdict: it is that he is on the side of the poor, the blind and the oppressed. Yet whilst that proclamation has been made, it then becomes an exhortation to us to 'go and do likewise' (Luke 10:37).

Secondly it is also true that whilst initially the whole project sounds rather wonderful, when it comes to actually putting it into practise, it has all sorts of implications which perhaps we might be rather less enthusiastic about. It reminds me of the famous words of Dom Helder Camara, the Brazilian Archbishop: 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.' I am certainly no communist, but I do want to ask why the poor have no food (ironically it may well be because they live under a communist dictatorship). And maybe at that point for many of us, the answers are a bit less comfortable.

