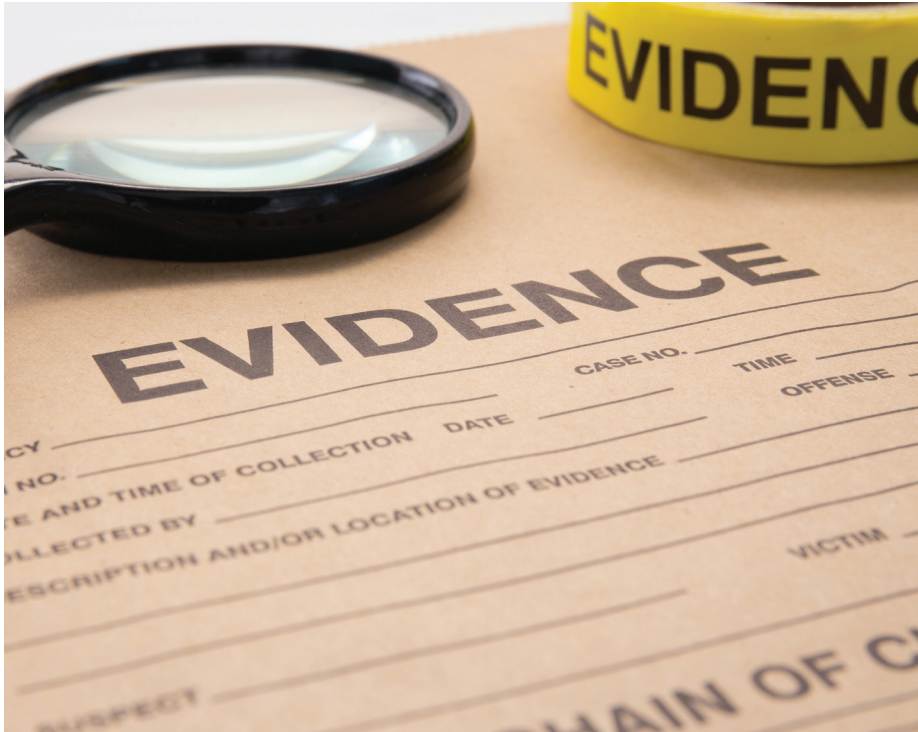


Looking at the evidence



Gillian Cooper *reflects on* John 20:24-29

Doubting Thomas, he's usually known as, but I prefer to call him "Honest Thomas". Here is a saint for our scientific age. He knows what is possible and what is not, and when someone is dead, they're dead. Thomas has seen death often enough to recognise it, and he believes the evidence of his eyes. Jesus is dead and that's that. Sad, but best to face facts. Better than indulging in fantasy, as his friends seem to be doing. Someone has to keep a grip on reality, and think seriously about what to do next. Thomas would like it to be true, of course he would, but he won't pretend to believe it when he doesn't.

Faith means believing that the impossible can happen. But Thomas shows us that it is not about believing nonsense. There is an integrity about Thomas' refusal to believe. There is nothing wrong with wanting evidence, nothing wrong with working one's way to the truth through honest doubt. Jesus doesn't condemn Thomas, but gives him the evidence he needs.

The evidence will be different for us, who have not seen, but we need to seek it honestly in order to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and God. 🙏

Plants of the Bible

Thorns

by Caroline Fletcher

The Bible mentions thorns frequently, although it rarely tells us what spikey plant it is referring to. Thorns tend to be used more symbolically to represent something negative. In Genesis 3:18 they are linked with the curse on Adam – the earth will produce "thorns and thistles" instead of Eden's abundance of fruit-bearing plants. Humanity would have to constantly battle these prickly weeds if it was to feed itself;

struggle was to be unavoidable in the fallen world.

As well as being associated with judgement, thorns also represent pain. For instance, Paul talks of his "thorn in the flesh", a possible physical affliction. They symbolise evil and temptation too – Jesus describes thorns choking young wheat in the parable of the sower.

Christ's crown of thorns may seem purely negative too. Yet it reminds us that Christ's death dealt with the evils thorns symbolise, restoring the broken relationship between God and humanity. 🙏

“Kindness is the noblest weapon to conquer with.”

Thomas Fuller (1608-1661), churchman and historian

Lord Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life; give us the courage to seek you with honesty of heart and mind, and in seeking to find you that we may know ourselves loved by you, our Lord and our God. Amen.

Finding God in Ordinary Time Part V – making the ordinary extraordinary

by Caroline Hodgson

Now you've looked in depth at your "ordinary" activities, think and pray about how to make a real change in your life. And be determined that from now on your daily life is going to be anything but mediocre and mundane. If making that change means having a difficult discussion with someone, don't shirk from it, but do pray

that God shows you a way to communicate with tact, integrity and, above all, love. This is about getting our relationships out of a rut, as well as our lives. And if you've decided that it's appropriate, stick with it and keep finding fresh approaches to everyday activities.

It will take practice and faith to really hone this skill, but a chore done prayerfully can – truly – be transformed into a pleasure. 🙏

A kingdom for all

Janice Scott *reflects on* Luke 10:25-37

Jesus trained seventy ordinary people to spread the message that God's kingdom was near. Perhaps the lawyer resented that such knowledge seemed to be hidden from him, for he asked Jesus what he must do to gain access to eternal life. Jesus answered in terms the lawyer would understand, asking how he interpreted the law. The lawyer responded correctly and Jesus commended him. But this was not enough for the legalistic man, so to press home his story of the good Samaritan, Jesus used a popular debate of the time about whether all Jews or only some needed to be considered as neighbours. In the story the two religious leaders – the priest and the Levite

– stuck rigidly to the law which proclaimed that if they touched a dead man they would be ritually defiled and have to undergo a period of cleansing before they could resume their normal duties. Assuming the injured man to be dead, they gave him a wide berth. Only the Samaritan – despised and seen as a religious deviant by orthodox Jews – offered comfort and healing.

The lawyer could not fail to understand the point of the story but, even so, could not bring himself to voice the dreaded word "Samaritan". Jesus pushed him to see beyond the literal interpretation of the law and to recognise that all who show God's love can enter God's kingdom. ☺



Shared prayer

Part I – creative prayer

by Caroline Fletcher

Caroline Fletcher considers different ways we can pray together.

Praying creatively can remove barriers and encourage everyone to get involved. Here are a few suggestions:

- Writing prayers down or representing prayers with drawings. Post-it notes can be placed on a prayer board, or you could create a prayer tree – written prayers tied onto the branches, perhaps on leaf-shaped paper.

- Bubbles. Everyone says or thinks a short prayer and then blows bubbles into the air to symbolise prayers ascending to God. This works particularly well with children.
- Moving about. Set up prayer stations around the church or room, each with a different idea for what to pray about and how to pray. Ideas might include lighting a candle or using modelling clay to symbolise what is being prayed for.

These are a just few ideas. Why don't you see what you can come up with? ☺

“If you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.”

Mother Teresa (1910-1997), Roman Catholic nun and missionary

God of love, save us from falling into the trap of assuming that we do your will when we keep to the rules. Help us to learn and inwardly digest your greatest law, that of love. Amen.

Characters from the lectionary

by Julian Smith

St Swithun, bishop, is commemorated on Friday. Julian Smith looks at his life and legacy.

Immortality is assured when a rose is named after you. St Swithun has a "large, strongly-scented, soft-pink blooms of more than a hundred petals" to his name.

But his fame does not depend upon a rose. Nor does it depend upon knowledge of his holy and humble life, his ten years as Bishop of Winchester in the mid-

tenth century, or his time as an adviser to King Egbert. Swithun is remembered for the legends that attend the moving of his body.

According to his wishes Swithun was buried in a simple grave outside his cathedral. When a new cathedral was being built it was planned to move his remains to a shrine within the building. Despite dire warnings of storms and tempests Swithun's remains were moved on 15 July 971 and forty days of storms ensued.

Never mind the rose, Swithun is remembered for his link to the weather and his day anticipated with trepidation. ☺

Mary and Martha



Janice Scott *reflects on* Luke 10:38-end

Like the Gentile was always on the side of those on the margins of society – those who were poor or outcast as well as women – so he emphasised that Jesus came for all. Jesus sent the seventy to proclaim the good news to all sectors of society, and he told the lawyer that God’s love is for everyone, even the despised Samaritans. Now he crosses Jewish cultural boundaries. It is tempting to sympathise with Martha, rushed off her feet trying to offer the required hospitality to the gathered group. Why should Mary be allowed to do nothing but sit at the feet of Jesus, listening to him? You can almost hear the sibling rivalry and resentment in Martha’s words. She expected Jesus to remonstrate with Mary, but Jesus responded unexpectedly. In commending Mary, Jesus flouted normal convention. He was alone with a woman who was not his relative; he allowed a woman to sit as one of his disciples and he taught her in her own home. It is difficult today to imagine how shocking such behaviour was in first-century Judaea. It seems as though Jesus was rejecting Martha in favour of her sister, but he did not reject Martha’s ministry, only her busyness. Martha was unable to relax and merely accept Jesus, while courageous Mary sat loosely to social rules, determined to learn all she could while Jesus was with still them. ☺

Understanding God, remind us that taking time out to sit in silence with you is more beneficial for us than constant work. Give us the patience to take Mary’s role, rather than always busying ourselves with doing more and more. Amen.

Shared prayer Part II – prayer days

by Caroline Fletcher

Prayer days may be organised when there’s something specific to pray about, although the idea of a whole day of prayer can be daunting. So how to encourage everyone to become involved?

- Communicate. Explain clearly in advance what is involved.
- Enable people to drop in. Most people can find at least some part of the day to get involved.

- Set up prayer stations. Areas designed to encourage and inspire prayer might include a giant sheet of paper for writing prayers down, or spaces displaying pictures and playing music.
- Provide prayer ideas. Pointers are helpful, and might take the form of a short talk, video clip or PowerPoint.
- Vary prayers. Different types of prayer include thanksgiving, praise, confession and intercession.
- Pray in different ways throughout the day – for example in small groups, out loud, silently meditating on scripture, kneeling, standing, or walking outside. ☺

Characters from the lectionary

Elizabeth Ferard (1825-1883) is commemorated tomorrow. Caroline Hodgson looks at her life and legacy.

Elizabeth Ferard was born into a prominent Huguenot family and it was a family friend, Archibald Tait, then Bishop of London, who encouraged her to visit deaconess communities in Germany. In 1856 she went to Kaiserswerth on the River Rhine, where she witnessed deaconesses teaching girls and ministering to the sick – a practical and religious lifestyle for women who didn’t want to become religious sisters.

Back in England in 1861, the help of a wealthy relative, Ferard founded the North London Deaconess Institution near King’s Cross. The women dedicated themselves to teaching and caring for those who were sick, without taking formal vows. Ferard was ordained a deaconess in 1862. She later ran a convalescent home for children in Redhill.

The community she founded still exists as the Community of St Andrew in Westbourne Park. The focus of ministry for community members includes prayer, evangelism, pastoral work and hospitality. ☺

“Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author

Connecting faith and daily life

The Lord's Prayer

Janice Scott *reflects on* Luke 11:1-13

The Lord's Prayer is part of what defines Christians. All Christian communities, no matter what their differences, are bound together by the reciting of the Lord's Prayer. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. The Lord's Prayer was the result, yet it is very short and seems to bear little relation to the long periods of silent meditation which so characterised Jesus' ministry.

Luke's version of the prayer is shorter than Matthew's (the one we normally use), yet it still contains everything that is necessary for Christians to commune with God. We are invited into a personal relationship with God our Father and we respect his name. In the ancient world names were thought to be extremely powerful and to act as a manifestation of a person or deity. Hence the Jewish reluctance to use the proper name of God in Hebrew writing or speech, as well as the belief that spiritual power could be summoned by invoking a god or spirit by name. We look forward to the coming of God's kingdom where barriers of wealth, gender and ritual cleanness will no longer exist. The two final petitions are concerned with our everyday needs: our need for food and for God's protection from evil forces.

What else is necessary? Perhaps only to recite this prayer often, slowly and meditatively. 🙏

God our Father, help us to pray the Lord's Prayer with meaning and understanding, and through it, to grow closer to you. Amen.

Shared prayer

Part III – prayer partners

by Caroline Fletcher

While whole church prayer meetings are important, they are rarely suitable for sharing personal worries. Prayer partnerships enable two or three people to meet regularly. So how can we form successful prayer partnerships? Like all relationships they need working at, but they are worth the effort.

- Pray for God's guidance about suitable prayer partners. They need to be people you feel

comfortable with, can relate to and trust.

- Everyone needs to consider whether they have time to meet regularly and, if so, how often (weekly or fortnightly is usually best) and for how long – an hour is generally ample.
- The meetings need to offer a safe environment where people can share openly without feeling judged or criticised.
- Build things slowly. You may need to start by simply having a chat and getting to know each other. 🙏



Characters from the lectionary

James the Apostle

by Caroline Hodgson

James and his brother John were among the first disciples to join Jesus. It was they who asked Jesus to grant them seats on his right and left in his glory (Mark 10:35-45), although Matthew's Gospel (20:20-28) tells this slightly differently, in that the request comes from their mother. In both accounts Jesus rebukes them, asking whether they were ready to drink from the cup from which he was going to drink. The brothers were also rebuked by Jesus when they

proposed calling down fire on the Samaritan village which didn't recognise Jesus.

It's easy to sit in judgement of James and John, to think we would have done things differently. But it's also wonderful to have flawed role models. Had they never put a foot wrong we would have no hope of following in their footsteps. And Jesus evidently bore them no grudge, for it was James and John who, along with Peter, were chosen by Jesus to witness his transfiguration. 🙏

“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Job 1:21

Sharing the wealth



Lord of all, keep me mindful that real happiness can never be found in having barns full of grain. Teach me to value love, compassion and generosity over material wealth and assets. Amen.

Shared prayer

Part IV – praying as a church throughout the week

by Caroline Fletcher

Today we're thinking about how we can pray together as a church throughout the week:

- A prayer diary. Each page of a booklet represents a day of the month, and contains prayer suggestions for individuals, church activities, community organisations, etc. The booklet can be kept in an accessible place in church, or a week's worth of suggestions could be listed in the notice sheet.

- A prayer chain. This is used for urgent prayer needs. A group of people commit themselves to this ministry, one of whom acts as co-ordinator. Someone with a prayer request contacts the co-ordinator, who contacts the next person in the chain, and so on.

- A prayer board. This is simply a board in church to pin prayer requests.

All these activities need to be publicised and kept fresh in people's minds through announcements and notice sheets. Over time people will the message that you are a community alive with prayer. 🙏

“ True religion is not about possessing the truth. No religion does that. It is rather an invitation into a journey that leads one toward the mystery of God. Idolatry is religion pretending that it has all the answers.”

John Shelby Spong (1931-2021), American bishop of the Episcopal Church

Caroline Hodgson *reflects on* Luke 12:13-21

A rich man takes steps to shore up his assets, thinking that the security he gains from knowing that his barns are brim-full with grain will give him freedom to relax and enjoy life. Jesus is unequivocal – the man is mistaken. But, you might think, isn't he simply doing what millions of us do all our working lives? His modern-day equivalent wouldn't build barns, but she might take out a pension plan or put her money into savings or investments. In the not-too-distant past, various pensions scandals left many people worse off – with some facing real poverty instead of the comfortable retirement they had planned and saved for. One way to interpret this passage is to

see these events as Jesus' words becoming reality. So where does that leave us? Should we cancel our pension policies and withdraw the funds from our bank accounts?

I don't think that's what's at the heart of the message. The key lies in how the rich man addresses himself – notably, he speaks to his soul: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.” The sin, perhaps, is not in building barns or saving prudently, but in believing that we can derive real peace from accumulated wealth, when true peace of mind comes from learning how to be “rich towards God,” and the way to do that is to be rich, loving and generous towards one another, whatever form that may take. 🙏

The books of the Old Testament

1 Kings

by Trevor Dennis

It opens with David nearing death. Back in 2 Samuel, Bathsheba and Nathan the prophet played a key role in David's decline. Now they collaborate again to ensure that Bathsheba's son Solomon succeeds David. David settles old scores, including killing a man who once cursed him. This sordid business reminds us of his other side, that the books of Samuel exposed.

After that the books of Kings talk of David as a saint, who followed God “with all his heart”. They claim that Solomon

“excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom”, merely touching upon the other side of his story – riding roughshod over tribal loyalties; breaking people's backs with taxes, forced labour and military service. Things are so bad after David's death that the kingdom splits in two. But Solomon builds the first Jerusalem Temple, which for the writers of Kings warrants giving him a halo.

The final chapters tell wonderfully vivid stories of conflict between the prophet Elijah and king Ahab. Their significance endures, for they are about speaking truth to power. 🙏