

Witney Congregational Church

R CROSS A D S

Witney Congregational Church is a crossroads where we:

meet God in worship

meet one another in friendship

meet our community and world with the love of Jesus



WHAT'S ON GUIDE

Witney Congregational Church offer a whole range of activities through which we seek to Worship, Work and Witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in this community today

MINISTER

Rev Dr Jason Boyd

ASSOCIATE MINISTER

Rev Judi Holloway

WORSHIP

| | | | |
|-----------------|---------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Daily Worship | 9.30am | Mon-Fri | Short time of Prayer and Reading |
| Saturday Praise | 11.00am | 1 st Saturday of the month | |
| Sunday Services | 10.30am | | |
| | 6.00pm | 1 st Sunday of the month | |

Communion is held twice during the month at the first Sunday evening and third Sunday morning services

PRAYER

The Church is open each morning for Prayer

STUDY & FELLOWSHIP

| | | |
|---------|---------|--|
| Tuesday | 12.15pm | Light Bite Piece of the Word (1 st Tuesday of each month) |
|---------|---------|--|

YOUTH ACTIVITIES

| | | |
|--------|----------|--|
| Sunday | 10.30 am | Crèche, Noah's Ark & The K.I.C.K. on Sundays |
| Monday | 10.00 am | Noah's Ark – Infant Group for babies and pre-school children |

OTHER ACTIVITIES

| | | |
|----------|------------|---------------------------|
| Tuesday | 7.30pm | Monthly Deacon's Meeting |
| Thursday | 10.00 am | Weekly Coffee Morning |
| Saturday | 10.00 am | Weekly Coffee Morning |
| Sunday | 12.00 noon | Bi-Monthly Church Meeting |

SUNDAY LINK

Weekly bulletin for all Christians providing stimulating thought along with news and notices concerning our Church

St ANDREW'S BOOKSHOP

Opening Hours: Monday – Saturday



01993 709429

09.00 am – 5.00 pm

CHURCH WEBSITE

For further information, please visit our website:

www.witneycongregational.org.uk

MAGAZINE EDITOR

Terry Powlesland

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Further information can be obtained from the Church Office: 01993 709 992



Talk about time flying - Nearly halfway through the year already!! Over the last month or so the weather has been more than reasonable and as you read this the schools have just finished half-term which means that holiday time is nearly with us again, and, even though some cannot bear the heat, the increasing good weather and longer days (but it won't last!!) has to be encouraging for most of us. Whatever your circumstances, hopefully it will be a chance for most people to take a break of some kind.

On 21st June there is the Summer Solstice (longest day) – and the days will then start to shorten, so let's all make the most of this! And, for us men, Don't forget the 17th June – Father's day.

Turning now to the magazine, you will see that I regularly include articles written by Canon David Winter, who used to be at St Bartholomew's Church Ducklington, and mentioned by David Kinchin at our last church meeting; there are two again this time, one looking back at 1918 and the other on people being negative; Lesley Barter has given us an insight on her recent visit to India and Elaine Kinchin writes on Jesus is Lord to name but a few. These articles stand alongside the standard pages, but for those who are on Rotas, don't forget that these have been removed due to the updated GDPR, as mentioned in the last edition, and a copy for those on this rota will be available from the Church Office.

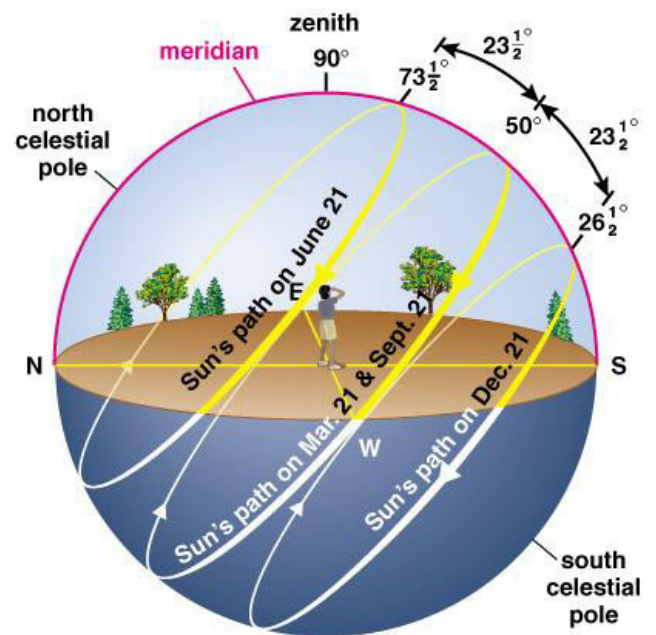
Many thanks to those who have contributed for this edition, but would

encourage anyone to consider submitting article(s) for the next edition via E-mail: terrypowlesland@uwclub.net

or just plainly written on paper, which can be typed up.

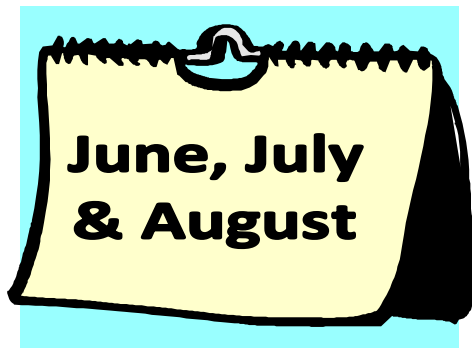
The next 3-monthly Autumn edition, covering September, October & November is due on **Sunday 2nd September**

Your Editor



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Daily Prayer Time:

Mon-Fri 9.30 am

Services

10.30 am weekly & 6.00pm on first Sunday of the month and will normally be led by Rev Dr Jason Boyd unless advised below

June

| | | | |
|------------------|----|-----------------|-----------|
| 3 rd | am | Cafe Church | |
| | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |
| 10 th | am | Morning Worship | |
| 17 th | am | Morning Worship | Communion |
| 24 th | am | Karen Brusch | |

July

| | | | |
|------------------|----|------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 st | am | Morning Worship | |
| | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |
| 8 th | am | Morning Worship | |
| 15 th | am | Morning Worship | Communion |
| 22 nd | am | tba | |
| 29 th | am | Morning Worship | |
| | pm | Madley Park Residential Home | 3.00pm |

August

| | | | |
|------------------|----|-----------------|-----------|
| 5 th | am | Morning Worship | |
| | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |
| 12 th | am | Morning Worship | |
| 19 th | am | Morning Worship | Communion |
| 26 th | am | tba | |

September

| | | | |
|-----------------|-------|-----------------|-----------|
| 1 st | 10.00 | Creative Church | |
| 2 nd | am | Cafe Church | |
| | pm | Evening Worship | Communion |

The following events are given for your particular attention:

June

| | | |
|------------------|---|---------|
| 5 th | Lite Bite piece of the Word | 12.15pm |
| | Deacon's meeting | 7.30pm |
| 9 th | Prayer Chain meeting | 9.15am |
| | Congregational Federation Annual Assembly | |
| | Union Chapel, Islington | 10.00am |
| 10 th | Youth Group | 12.30pm |
| 23 rd | WICS Concert – How Great is our God | 7.30pm |
| 24 th | WICS Concert – How Great is our God | 6.30pm |
| 29 th | Christian Aid Concert – The Sorcerer | 7.30pm |

July

| | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| 3 rd | Lite Bite piece of the Word | 12.15pm |
| | Deacon's meeting | 7.30pm |
| 6 th /7 th | Youth Group BBQ & Sleepover | 6.00pm |
| 14 th | Prayer Chain meeting | 9.15am |
| | WRAG Sewing Group | 1.00pm – 5.00pm |
| 22 nd | Church meeting | 12.00pm |

Aug

7th

Lite Bite piece of the Word

12.15pm

11th

Prayer Chain meeting

9.15am

Sept

4th

Lite Bite piece of the Word

12.15pm

Deacon's meeting

7.30pm

June 07 Matthew
 14 Norline
 19 Jonathan
 23 Peter G
 June
 25 Juliane
 26 Viviane
 Val
 Barbara
 28 Maureen
 30 Jacqui



July 04 Wout
 05 Bob
 25 Harry
 26 John B
 Jennie
 30 Irene
 31 Jason

Aug 02 Janet
 06 Declan
 13 Melissa

Sept 01 Theo
 Devon
 02 Gail
 Claire

Witney Inter-Church Singers
present

How great is our God!

A concert of two halves!
 'Greater than Gold' by Roger Jones
 (the true story of Mary Jones and her Bible)
 - followed by a wide variety of Christian music -

Saturday 23rd June at 7.30 pm
 Sunday 24th June at 6.30 pm

at the Congregational Church, Witney

Tickets: £7.50 from St Andrew's Bookshop
 or from choir members

PROCEEDS TO CHARITY

The Kennington & District United Church Choir
PRESENT

The Sorcerer

By Gilbert & Sullivan

ON FRIDAY, JUNE 29th 2018
 AT 7.30 P.M.

AT WITNEY CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
 WELCH WAY

ENTRANCE IS FREE

COLLECTION
 FOR CHRISTIAN AID

AN EVENING OF MUSIC,
 SPARKLE AND FUN
 FOR ALL THE FAMILY!

A WELCOME TO ALL

WWW.KENNINGTONCHOIR.ORG.UK

Pastor's Paper

The 'Dreams and Visions' meetings have stirred up questions such as, 'Who are we as a congregation? What is the church for?' Some have agitated for action and others have longed for a much needed rest. A recurring theme through all the conversations is the centrality of prayer in nurturing our relationship to God and one another.

There was a general agreement that our mission statement expresses who we are and our purpose:

Witney Congregational Church is a crossroads where we meet God in worship; meet one another in fellowship; and meet our community and world with the love of Jesus.

Making this vision as reality occurs as we are immersed in the life of prayer. What does this mean in practice?

Having listened to and reflected on the conversations we've shared, it seems to me that nurturing relationships in our church is very important. The quality and depth of our relationship with God and with each other is the fertile soil for growing our faith and inviting others to follow Jesus.

A retired United Church minister and his wife visited us earlier this year. He met with me and remarked that though it's impossible to make a reliable judgement on the basis of a brief time with us, he felt that there was something special about our community. This echoes the comments made during the meetings that our church feels like a family.

During the conversations I've had with the diaconate and with the 'Dreams and Visions' gatherings, I've heard from those that we are good at offering a warm welcome. Yet there is room for growing our hospitality as those who have joined

our fellowship find it difficult to get involved and feel they are a part of things. It would seem that it is about more than being included on rotas. It is about becoming a participant and belonging in a meaningful way.

Over and over again, people have talked about getting to know one another better. We recognise that we don't know one another's stories, especially stories of faith. In particular, those who have been part of the church for decades have talked about this church's struggles and achievements. It appears to me that the congregation was strongest when it had a clear sense of direction and purpose as it moved from place to place and finally built the current church. Though Church Meetings were lively and tensions arose, the congregation had the energy of a common vision. The question arises in my mind: What is it that energises us?

At the March Church Meeting it was immediately stated that our most urgent need was to grow. We need to grow spiritually and numerically. But is the aim of this growth simply to shore up church membership numbers to keep our doors open? If it is then the aim of our growth is self-preservation. The reason for growth is that Jesus called us to make disciples.

Growth happens as we actively invite people to come and see Jesus; to consider his life, death and resurrection and respond to his call to turn from sin towards God; to have life that is truly life.

By the time the *Crossroads* is in your hands, we will have had our Café Church. The focus will be Dreams and Visions. We will explore further the kind of people God is calling us to be and how he is calling us to act and speak into our community and world. I hope that we will be able to unpack the life of prayer as the energy for our action. I recall the title of a book by Ronald Dunn, *Don't just stand*

there! Pray something! Prayer is profound action.

I have noticed that with the 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative and the 'Quiet Days' for prayer, there is a coming together of Christians. There is energy in gathering together and planning prayer spaces. I do not have to cajole, prod, prompt or drive this. Prayer draws us into the life of God; into a life of love for Jesus; into a life of love for others and ourselves. Prayer is Spirit work. Prayer is joining in with what God is already doing! It is joining in with the prayer God is praying already through the sighs and groans of the Spirit.

The conversations we've had over these past few weeks convince me that the core task of our congregation is to pray and in the praying to deepen our fellowship. Activities such as the WRAG sew-ins are concrete activities that express our life of prayer and the love of God in practical ways. It fosters the sense of being together and pulling in the same direction.

One of the ways I am seeking to strengthen our sense of community and mission is to set up Growth Groups. My aim as your pastor is to invite all members and adherents to consider joining a Growth Group that will meet once per month to share life, prayer, scripture and social activity together. The aim of these groups will be to grow the group and make another Growth Group. There will be a monthly gathering of all the Growth Groups in order to avoid cliques and to share with each other the good things that God is doing. This is my aspiration for the congregation.

Folks! Do you see what I see? Do you sense my excitement? Will you join with me and commit to be a church that is actively, purposefully sharing the love of Jesus Christ with others?

Before I sign off, I am going to share a 'picture' and a prayer. The picture was given to me by Eddie Lyle, President of Open Doors, as he was praying for me. He saw an antique clock being taken to pieces. The clock had been perfectly made but age means that it isn't keeping time as well as it once did. The clockmaker carefully dusts all the parts and oils the workings. It is put back together again and works again like new.

As he shared this with me I wondered: is this a picture for me and for us as a congregation? This is a well-made fellowship fashioned by God that has 'something special about it'. Are we at a point in our history in which God is taking us apart, brushing away the dust that inhibits our workings? Is God oiling us with his Spirit and putting us back together to be alert to God's *καιρος* – God's time for action? I wonder...

A prayer given to me by Judi Holloway has been sustaining me throughout our conversations. Will you join me in praying this prayer attributed to St Brenden, Patron Saint of Seafarers:

Help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown.

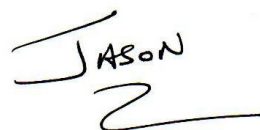
Give me the faith to leave the old ways and break fresh ground for you.

Christ of the mysteries, I trust that you are stronger than the storms within me today. I will trust you in the darkness and know that my times even now are in your hands.

Tie my spirit to the music of heaven and somehow make my obedience count for you.

May God bless you and refresh you over the summer months.

Shalom

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JASON" in all caps, with a stylized flourish underneath.



PRAYER LETTER

No 185

Jesus and Prayer

Come Walk with Me (Jesus)

The Disciples of Jesus asked Him to teach them how to pray having frequently watched him retire to a quiet place to pray. He then taught His disciples how to pray with the words we now refer to as The Lord's Prayer.

This familiar prayer is divided into sections;

1. **To praise and glorify God**
2. **To ask God to supply our needs (not wants)**
3. **To pray for our moral and spiritual needs**

The Week of Global Prayer, Come Walk with Me, in May highlighted the need and opportunities to pray individually and corporately. The Churches Together in Witney set up Prayer Stations in our Sanctuary which was open 24/7 for anyone to be inspired, to meditate, to reflect, encouraging prayer to God our Father in Heaven.

Each Prayer Station had a theme and focus points to guide one's thoughts and prayers. The following were the Themes of the Prayer Stations.

- A Large Wooden Cross where prayers could be folded in the upright and crossbeams
- Witney and the Countryside
- Witney and the various organisations
- Footsteps in the Sand
- An enormous fishing net with lines linked to the name and date established of each Church or Fellowship in Witney and surrounding area
- A labyrinth in the Sanctuary
- A labyrinth in the garden was designed by Viviane and made by Viviane and Jeremy. This can still be used as a prayer space.
- A Bible Society video of The Road to Emmaus and relevant activity

The majority of the Prayer Stations invited some kind of prayer activity as well as concentrated 'quiet time' praying.

So many people of all ages came in during the day and night to spend a little or a lot of time, looking, reading, reflecting and praying. One teacher who came in on her own was so inspired she asked her Head teacher if she could bring her class down for the experience. This was allowed and was much appreciated by the children. There were other examples of people coming in who had no Church connections but who felt the need to pray.

The majority of prayers written were of praising and thanking God for so many things and situations in peoples' lives but also for the people in Witney that they may know Jesus and walk with him.

As Christian followers of Jesus prayer needs to be part of our lives every day as we have so much to thank God for, also the need for forgiveness and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we follow Jesus on our journey of life.

Do make time to pray, not just on Sundays or special events but every day. Remember prayer is a two way relationship with God. Make time to listen to God.

May God bless you all on your spiritual journey,
Every Blessing – Beryl

Please note that for up-to-date prayer requests contact Beryl (703717)

Footprints in the Sand

One night a man had a dream.
He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand:
one belonging to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him
he looked back, at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of his life
there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it:
"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you,
you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

The LORD replied:
"My son, My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you,
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

The following space has been left for you to put your thought(s)

The following article has been submitted by Lesley Barter, and is entitled:

Five Weeks in India delivering Women's Empowerment

When I retired I promised myself that I would go to India on a voluntary project of some sort. Partly because I am not of a generation that took 'gap years' and partly because I am acutely aware of our good fortune to be born here in the West and more particularly to lead comfortable lives in Witney. In my case, a comfortable life since birth.

My interest in the subject of Women's Empowerment is, I daresay, shared by us all. It is particularly worrying to see the restricted lives that many women lead in India, where the economy is growing and opportunities for some women are growing too. Not so in rural India and not even so in the relatively rich state of Kerala, where I was based. Hidden shackles remove the ability to make the kind of decisions that we take for granted.....the friends that we mix with, knowledge about the family income and access to a realistic share of it, even the free access to information about our health and the treatment we may need. So what was my part in the project to influence thinking for the better? I can't think of a more effective way to explain it than by reproducing some excerpts from my diary:

I'm afraid I did not rise to the challenge of dormitory accommodation! Together with the three other 'mature' ladies who arrived last week we took the decision to get single rooms a few minutes away from the main base. One look at the student house, bunk beds, unreliable Aircon and no hot water or personal space, was enough. Our rooms here are pretty basic but at least we have a proper bed and our own shower (utter necessity when you need about 3 a day). There is even hot water and electricity most of the time! It has been non-stop activity from the moment I arrived a week ago and the

temperature is pretty hot –35 degrees on average.

Here's what I have been doing: After a two day orientation training we have been working a full timetable, starting at 9am or earlier. After a morning briefing we travel by tuktuk to one of a number of our partner organisations and deliver a training session there. Back for lunch then either off again to another partner or spend the afternoon writing a lesson plan for the following day. Evaluation session at 4.30 and debriefing meeting at 5.30. Work ends about 6 after which whoever is on duty cooks for the team...could be about 15 people. It is my turn tomorrow and given the limitations of the kitchen - no oven and one working hob - it will be a bit like my Girl Guide days. Considering you can eat out well (and deliciously) for £3or £4 I shall probably sneak out sometimes.... but I suppose it's all about teamwork.

The people we are teaching have varying levels of English, so improving that is one of our objectives. We are also putting across some fairly complex ideas.....health issues (menopause, sexual health, breast cancer, osteoporosis etc), the importance of healthy diet and attitudes. Many women here put themselves last, so if they become ill, for instance finding a breast lump, they won't tell anyone and they certainly won't go to the doctor without their husband's permission. After all, the medicine will be expensive and who will look after the family? Sadly, there is also an element of shame involved.

We also delivered an interesting session about Consent to a young men's group. For instance, what rights does a husband have regarding sex with his wife? Should a husband allow his wife to have male friends? Should the couple have a joint bank account?

And we talk about abuse. What it is and how to recognise physical, mental and financial abuse.

As you can guess, we are cutting across some difficult cultural traditions so the responses are diverse.

We do get weekends off after we have cleaned the HQ base, which means buckets and mops. No labour saving devices. Also India doesn't seem to have heard of anti-bac spray or wipes. I am paying someone to do my washing too - otherwise it's the buckets again. The excessive heat does produce a lot of washing!

Like most others I am taking the opportunity at weekends to explore a bit. Last week a friend and I travelled to Munnar, high in the mountains behind Cochin where the tea plantations are. Bright green terraces as far as the eye could see, densely planted with tea bushes. We went to a factory to see how the different types of tea are made: black tea, green tea and powdered tea. Then we visited a nearby factory employing only disabled people, where textiles are dyed. We watched the different processes of batik, organic printing and block prints. All done by hand with great skill. One of my enduring memories will be of the evening sitting on the balcony at our homestay, watching the fireflies dancing in the leafy hillside canopy overhead. This is an India that is lightyears away from the dirt, noise and chaos of the cities.

The last two weeks of my stay coincide with the beginning of the summer holidays in India, so we are delivering a holiday club for 40 young teenage boys in a school in Cochin. We are introducing them to some life skills, which are not normally part of the curriculum: yesterday I did a session on Teamwork and today one on Tackling Problems. Under our guidance, they will be making video films, interspersed with lots of challenge activities. Tomorrow we start to help the boys with scriptwriting and film production. I think that will be my personal challenge activity!

I hope that gives a flavour of my adventures in the frustrating, vibrant, colourful country that is India and yes, I would do it again. I should like to have called this article 'Five Weeks in India that Changed Lives'. Realistically, it is never as simple as that. The problems are as complex as the rich traditions from which they are born. Often it is the restrictive family structure that inhibits women's freedom and many of those women are still willing victims. Anything that can be done to offer them a choice is well worthwhile.

The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Can you find 30 books of the Bible hidden in this passage?

This is a most remarkable puzzle. It was found by a gentleman in an airplane seat pocket, on a flight from Los Angeles to Honolulu, keeping him occupied for hours. He enjoyed it so much that he passed it on to some friends. One friend from Illinois worked on this while fishing from his John-boat. Another friend studied it while playing his banjo. Elaine Taylor, a columnist friend, was so intrigued by it, she mentioned it in her weekly newspaper column.

Another friend judges the job of solving this puzzle so involving that she brews a cup of tea to help her nerves. There will be some names that are really easy to spot. That's a fact. Some people, however, will soon find themselves in a jam, especially since the books are not necessarily capitalised.

Truthfully from answers we get, we are forced to admit it usually takes a minister or scholar to see some of them at the worst. Research has shown that something in our

genes is responsible for the difficulty we have in seeing the books in these paragraphs. During a recent fundraising event, which features this puzzle, the Alpha Delta Phil-Lemonade booth set a new sales record.

The local paper, the Chronicle, surveyed over 50 patrons who reported that this puzzle was one of the most difficult they had ever seen. As Daniel Humana humbly puts it, "the books are all right here in plain view, hidden from sight". Those able to find all of them will hear great lamentations from those who have to be shown. One revelation that may help is that books Timothy and Samuel appear without their numbers. Also, keep in mind, that punctuation and spaces in the middle are normal. A chipper attitude will help you compete really well against those who claim to know the answers. Remember, there is no need for a mass exodus, there really are 30 books of the Bible lurking somewhere in these paragraphs waiting to be found and the answer can be found on another page within the magazine

The following article has been submitted by Elaine Kinchin, and is entitled:

Jesus is Lord

At the 'Vision and Dreams' meeting I attended in May, it was suggested that some people found our simple version of the creed, i.e. JESUS IS LORD is inadequate. Perhaps they need to have JESUS IS LORD explained.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.' (Matthew 5:17 NIV). Later on in that Gospel, Jesus is asked:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment'. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matthew 22:36-40 NIV)

Don't be confused! Jesus summarises the whole of the 613 laws that the Rabbis had expanded from the Ten Commandments into just two - that sound simple but those two new commandments encompass all the rules that Christians need to obey.

In the same way, JESUS IS LORD sounds simple but it actually means that by agreeing to follow Jesus, we keep his potted two commandments. Is it simple or inadequate to love God with every fibre of our being? How hard do we find it to love others as we love ourselves?

JESUS IS LORD is all we need to believe - it covers the faith a child has, it expands to allow the deepest Biblical scholar's beliefs; it makes sense of God for the simplest of people, it allows God to be explored by someone with a Masters degree in Theology!

Let us not tinker with those three words, which in our relationship with God mean everything, just as 'I love you' is the most important phrase in our relationships with other people.

JESUS IS LORD: let's believe it, let's live it, let's share it!

The following article, written by Canon David Winter, who is saddened by the widespread 'negativity' around, has been extracted from Church News Service, and is entitled:

'People nowadays'

‘Everyone seems to be against *something*’, someone said to me the other day, and I had to agree. ‘What I can’t stand is . . .’ can be followed by almost anything, from babies screaming in the coffee shop to people who will say ‘Take care!’, junk mail, careless parkers or even someone’s accent or hair style on television.

Identifying ourselves by what we are *against* is an ancient but ultimately soul-destroying attitude. Older people like me have our own version of it: ‘People nowadays . . .’ followed by our particular dislike about modern ways. ‘People’ are us, actually, and I dare say our little foibles equally irritate some younger citizens.

The answer, someone suggested to me, is to replace ‘What I can’t stand is . . .’ with ‘What cheers me up is . . .’ I worked out my own list, including children laughing, a dog’s devotion, ‘Hiya David’ from a neighbour, a favourite hymn in church, and the supermarket check-out person who has just beeped their five hundredth item of the day but still smiles and says hello as though she means it. Come to think of it, I quite like the dismissal, ‘Take care!’ I need to.

The following article, written by Paul Hardingham, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

World Cup Fever

The former Liverpool Manager Bill Shankly famously said, ‘*Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that!*’

This month sees the start of the World Cup in Russia; a truly global event watched by billions on television. Yet this competition illustrates some key points about the Christian life. As Paul writes: ‘*But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God*

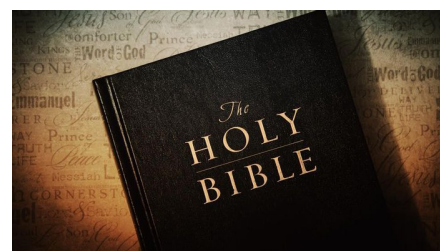
has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.’ (Philippians 3:13b,14).

A prize to be won: The dream of every player in the competition is to be able to hold up the World Cup themselves. For us the prize is the eternal life, God’s gift of relationship with him for now and eternity through Jesus. But there’s an important difference between football and the Christian faith. To win the World Cup you have to be good enough, while Christ’s love for us is underserved and is not dependent on how well we’ve done.

Training to be undertaken: If a team is going to win the World Cup, they have to train hard beforehand. Our training, as Christians, starts the moment we accept the gift of God’s life. On a daily basis, we train ourselves to say no to the wrong things in our lives. As we build up our *godly muscles* we are better able to choose to do what is right in God’s eyes. To enable us to do all this we need to engage in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, studying the Bible and being part of a church and small group. How is your training going?

Answers to the books of the Bible, as they appeared in the passage, are as follows:

Amos, Mark, Luke, John, Joel, Judges, Job, Hebrews, Esther, Acts, James, Ruth, Romans, Titus, Matthew, Genesis, Philemon (spelt Pillemon in passage), Chronicles, Daniel, Nahum, Hosea, Lamentations, Revelation, Timothy, Samuel, Numbers, Malachi, Peter, Exodus, Kings



The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Fathers' Day Time to celebrate male role models

In the UK, USA and Canada, the third Sunday in June is Father's Day. It's a good time for sons and daughters to take their father to his favourite restaurant, or to watch a favoured sport, or whatever else he enjoys doing.

How will you celebrate it this year? If your own father cannot be with you, is there a 'spare' father somewhere in your church or your circle of friends whose children cannot be with him, and who would welcome some special treat on the day?

How do these special days ever get started, anyway? Well, Father's Day began because way back in 1909 there was a woman in Spokane, Washington, named Sonora Louise Smart Dodd. That year she heard a church sermon about the merits of setting aside a day to honour one's mother.

Mother's Day was just beginning to gather widespread attention in the United States at this time. But Sonora Louise Smart Dodd knew that it was her father who had selflessly raised herself and her five siblings by himself after their mother had died in childbirth. So the sermon on mothers gave Sonora Louise the idea to petition for a day to honour fathers, and in particular, her own father, William Jackson Smart.

Sonora Louise soon set about planning the first Father's Day celebration in Spokane in 1910. With support from the Spokane Ministerial Association and the YMCA, her efforts paid off, and a 'Father's Day' was appointed. Sonora Louise had wanted Father's Day to be on the first Sunday in June (since that was her father's birthday), but the city council didn't have time to approve it until later in the month. And so on June 19, 1910, the first Father's Day was celebrated in Spokane.

Gradually, other people in other cities caught on and started celebrating their fathers, too. The rose was selected as the official Father's Day flower. Some people began to wear a white rose to honour a father who was dead, and a red one to honour a father who was living. Finally, in 1972, President Richard Nixon signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day - a permanent, national holiday.

Today, Father's Day is a great time to celebrate any sort of male role models, like uncles or grandfathers, as well as dads. Certainly Father's Day has become a day for greeting card companies to rejoice, and sales of the most popular gifts for Dad (shirts, ties, and electric razors) increase considerably. Perhaps most telling of all, though, is how children continue to see their fathers: in America, for example, more 'collect calls' to home are recorded on Father's Day than on any other day of the year!

Be with you

The vicar at a local church experienced some technical problems with the sound system one Sunday. Instead of starting the service as usual with 'The Lord be with you', he said: 'There's something wrong with this microphone.'

Not hearing this, the congregation responded: 'And also with you.'

Too late

First friend: 'It took me forty years to discover I had not the gifts for Holy Orders.'

Second friend: 'Goodness, whatever did you do when you found out?'

First friend: 'It was too late to do anything. By then I was a bishop!'

Bible Study

In this edition, and with permission from Ken & Marjorie Lee's family, and in memoriam to Rev Ken Lee, a series of Bible Studies, written by Ken and first submitted back in 1999, will be re-produced and is entitled:

MEANDERING IN MARK

"Meander" means "To wander deviously or aimlessly". Perchance this is not too accurate a description of these studies; it is hoped that they are not too devious nor totally aimless. However, the term "meander" is used to indicate an approach which takes its time, stops as needful to let a thought, an idea, an insight develop - all with the purpose of seeing what the Lord has to say to his people. May He speak, and to Him be the glory.

5. Mark 2:1-12

After some days of preaching and healing throughout Galilee, Jesus returns to Capernaum. Mark is not specific as to where Jesus makes his base but simply records that it was reported that Jesus was at home. Was this Simon's house? Or had Jesus taken up residence elsewhere in Capernaum? Had some of the family of Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum to provide a home there for Jesus between his travels? Or was this an inn or a lodging house where Jesus came to stay? Mark gives us no indication - for him such matters are unimportant as are questions as to who, later in this story, was to have to repair a damaged roof and pay for that work. Mark is concerned with the Good News and with people's reactions to Jesus and his teaching.

Jesus is in a house and news of his presence spreads. Crowds gather. First they appear to enter the house until there is no more room. Still more people gather round the

door. Jesus is "speaking the word" to them.

The content of his speech is not recorded although the phrase which Mark uses is one which became common in the Early Church for the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus is telling the Good News of the love of God. But, as has happened before, his teaching is interrupted by human need. Some men arrive outside the house carrying a paralysed man. The man is described as being on a pallet or mat - most likely a matting base supported by two long poles like a stretcher. Those bringing this man seek to get near Jesus. Finding this impossible because of the crush of people they carry the man up onto the roof and, with supreme indifference to the damage they cause, dig a hole through the roof, breaking up the clay over the lathe and straw framework which they pull apart to create a large hole. One cannot but help wonder what those within the house thought as bits of clay and straw began to drop onto their heads. We can also picture the owner of the property getting increasingly annoyed at what is happening, but being unable, because of the crowd, to get outside and up onto the roof to stop this act of vandalism.

The hole is made - a large one. Ropes or cords, or maybe unwound turbans, are produced from somewhere and the paralysed man is lowered down at Jesus's feet. Somehow people managed to squeeze back enough to make room for him. Is it not amazing how the threat of something heavy landing on people's heads produces space where there is no space! The man lies at Jesus's feet. Jesus asks no question, he makes no comment, but he sees. Mark records "When Jesus saw their faith". Such is Mark's shorthand for what Jesus must have indeed seen. He saw the paralysed man in all his need to be whole, he saw the determination of the man's friends to get him to Jesus, he saw the expectation that

was in them that Jesus could and would do something positive about the paralysed man's condition. All this Mark sums up in the one word "faith". Surely here is a definition of that word, a definition in line with that to be written a few years later by the Apostle James, that faith without works is dead.

Jesus looks at the man and speaks: "Son, your sins are forgiven." The words were totally unexpected and opened up a realm of controversy and dispute. There were among those gathered in the house a group of scribes, experts (at least in their own opinions) in the Law of God; they were the people to whom one would turn to find out whether a certain course of action or even form of words was "religiously correct". When they heard Jesus say, "Son, your sins are forgiven", they were shocked, horrified. Apparently not one of them said anything but their faces must have spoken volumes. The air became thick with disapproval. Practically everyone there must have been aware that Jesus had dropped a bombshell. They knew that the forgiveness of sins was God's business, not that of human beings. Further, the forgiveness of sins was something for the future, for the Judgement Day, not for the here and now on earth. This Jesus was usurping the place and the timing of God. Such was blasphemy in their eyes. Yet was it blasphemy, is it blasphemy? Or is Jesus here questioning the accepted doctrine that the forgiveness of sins is SOLELY the prerogative of God and must wait until the Great Day?

Why did Jesus bring up the subject of sin anyway? The obvious need of the man was for healing of his paralysis. Admittedly the commonly held belief was that such an affliction was punishment for sin. If Jesus had simply healed the man of his affliction, then the "religiously correct" could have drawn the inference that God had allowed

Jesus to be an instrument of healing and to remove the earthly consequences of the man's sins. Everyone would then have been content with the situation and there would have been no controversy. Jesus however appears to deliberately raise the question as to who can forgive sin while making the claim that sin can indeed be forgiven during this earthly life. "Which is easier," he says, "to say, 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" Which indeed is easier? To a very large extent the answer to that question depends upon the meaning given to the word "easier". If the word is construed in the sense of avoiding trouble, then it is easier to not to raise any question concerning sin but simply to heal the man. Yet, if the man believed that his paralysis was due to his sin, then, from the man's point of view, it was easier for him that Jesus should go straight to the heart of the problem, the sins. Maybe this is why Jesus took the approach which he did, because he realised that the man needed the assurance that the cause, as he believed, of the paralysis was removed before he could be healed. Certainly, as Mark records the story, the man makes no attempt to move on receiving the assurance that his sins are forgiven; he only does this when Jesus says to him "Stand up, take up your mat and go home." Then he does just that, apparently without saying a word. Somehow, I feel, there must have been a bit more response from the man than simply picking up his mat and going home. Mark however does not record any other response from the man.

So it is that by his manner of recounting this story, Mark focuses our minds upon the highly controversial question which has been raised: Who has the authority on earth to forgive sins? The scribes claim that it is God alone and they do not expect such forgiveness while here on earth. Jesus

however claims for himself the authority to forgive sins here and now as he says; "Son, your sins are forgiven." The scribes see in those words the blasphemous claim to be equal with God, or possibly even to be God. One can understand their horror if this is indeed what Jesus is claiming. Maybe, however, Mark is intending that his readers should understand that by this action, these words, Jesus is making plain that he is "Jesus Christ, the Son of God". But would this have been Jesus's intention at this stage in his ministry? To make such a public claim now does not fit with the picture Mark has previously given of Jesus silencing the man in the synagogue who would proclaim him as the Holy One of God, nor of Jesus forbidding the healed leper from publicising his healing by Jesus. Mark records Jesus as saying that he spoke in the way he did to the paralysed man "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."

Quite clearly Jesus is here claiming that there is authority for sins to be forgiven on earth in the here and now. Jesus makes the healing of the man dependent upon his sins being forgiven. The fact that the man is healed, as Mark presents the story, is evidence that sins can be forgiven on earth. The question remains as to who can so forgive sins. Jesus says "the Son of Man", or is it "the son of man"? Most, if not all translations, use the capital letters, although the Greek manuscripts do not make a distinction between upper and lower case lettering. So we must ask: Is Jesus using these words as a Messianic Title for himself and thus claiming the ability to forgive because of who he is? Or are these words simply the literal Greek translation of an Aramaic original used as a somewhat emphatic form of "man", with the possible meaning of "every man" or "all men"? Could this not be a reminder to us that each one of us is a child of Adam -

"Adam" being the Hebrew for "Man". If so Jesus could here be teaching that each of us has the power to forgive. It could be that I read too much into these words, yet I cannot help but see in them a reminder that so much of the unhappiness in our world today is perpetuated by the blaming of people for undesirable events and situations, coupled with a failure to forgive past mistakes and wrongs even when it is well within our power so to do. Is it easier to say "Your sins are forgiven," or to say "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? Perhaps many of us are unable to say the second of these two sentences because we are unwilling to say the first.

The question is out in the open: Who has the authority to forgive sins, and when can they be forgiven? God alone can forgive sins. The scribes were quite certain of God's ability and willingness to forgive sins, but for them such forgiveness must await the future judgement. Jesus claims, and demonstrates, that such forgiveness can be a present reality here "on earth". Certainly he claims to have the right and the power to forgive here and now. In so doing he is demonstrating the reality of his first proclamation of the Good News: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mk. 1:15.) Forgiveness now is at the heart of the Gospel. The Son of Man has the power to forgive that which offends against God. Surely each "son of man" has the power (and the need) to forgive that which offends against them. Jesus is to spell this out more precisely later in his ministry (Mk. 11:25), but at the present juncture the whole question of forgiveness is raised. With Jesus the forgiveness of God has come very close and with it a reminder that without forgiveness there is no healing of dis-ease. However this issue of "Who can forgive?" brings with it the beginning of opposition to Jesus and his ministry.

Nevertheless Mark records that at the healing of the paralysed man, "They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'" We may question the "all" and we may ask, "Anything like 'what', the healing, the forgiveness of sins, or the claim of Jesus?" As in any crowd, there were no doubt mixed reactions and differing reasons for both the amazement and for glorifying God. Certainly, from this time on, a major reaction of many people became one of questioning and even of opposition. The first shadow, a shadow which was to grow cross-shaped, has appeared in the Good News story being told by Mark. Forgiveness of sins caused controversy and opposition; it still does so today.



The following article, written by Canon David Winter, has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is entitled:

Diary of a Momentous Year: June 1918

An interesting piece from the archives of the *Church Times* a few weeks ago vividly illustrates the way the war on the western front changed in 1918. For years the Church Army, like the Salvation Army, had run what they called 'huts', close behind the trenches, where soldiers could find on their free time a meal and hot drinks, comfortable seats and company, offering emotional and spiritual support.

These 'huts' were very popular with the

troops, and for years most of them remained in place, indicating how static the whole conflict was. But in one month, April 1918, the Church Army lost 57 of them, as German advances overtook their positions. In most cases the land was recaptured, but the huts needed rebuilding. The war had changed. It was no longer a static battle of soldiers with rifles and bayonets charging batteries of machine guns, but an increasingly fluid conflict involving tanks and aircraft.

Although at first the Allied generals were slow to recognise it, the new style of war suited them best. Over the years they had built a formidable war machine, involving thousands of tanks and tens of thousands of aircraft, with tactics to match. Not only that, but the arrival of the Americans in large numbers, added to the vast number of troops from the Empire (now the Commonwealth) meant that casualties could be replaced in the Allied ranks. The Germans and their Austro-Hungarian allies had no such source of fresh manpower, turning instead to younger and older men to fill the depleted ranks.

The German generals were aware of the situation, and desperate to make inroads before it was too late, in the hope of achieving a relatively 'neutral' peace agreement in due course. On June 9th the German General Ludendorff launched a major offensive in Flanders. Like so many, it gained several miles, but cost many lives and eventually petered out.

There would be several more such attempts, some of which threatened to succeed, but in fact the eventual outcome was becoming clear. The German people were disillusioned with the Kaiser. Their troops were exhausted. The civilian population were restless. There would be, as we shall see, battles to come, but there would barely be time to rebuild those huts.

The following is the final in a series of Sermons submitted by Rev Dr Jason Boyd

Steadfast Faith

I Peter 4:12-14; 5:5b-11

The tears of those who've suffered devastating loss in the bombing in Manchester has brought a city together. People across the nation prayed and sent messages of support and sympathy. It would be a callous heart that could not be moved to tears with the sufferings of this week. The violence of Manchester joins with the brutality of numerous places where terrorism has wreaked havoc.

Radical forms of Islam mean that there are raised tensions as ordinary Muslims fear the backlash of public anger. What do we do in the face of a deeply chaotic world in which there is a clash of ideologies? What do we do to protect ourselves against an enemy which is invisible?

Add to this the reality that Christians are being severely persecuted in places like Syria, Egypt and parts of Africa. Beheadings and crucifixions are gory evidence that being a Christian in certain places may bring death.

So what does this letter have to say to say about suffering – the sufferings of those who follow Jesus?

These words from this first letter of Peter are particularly apt as we reflect on Jesus' continuing presence with us after his ascension through the giving of the Holy Spirit. Those early disciples endured suffering because they were faithful in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. As the numbers of those who believed in Christ grew so did the opposition. This letter was addressed to a number of churches described as 'exiles of the Dispersion' (1 Peter 1:1). These churches were probably experiencing varying degrees of persecution for their faith from

outright violence to the more subtle forms of discrimination and mockery. This is why this letter continues to be relevant to modern Christians who face persecution either as overt hostility or subtle marginalisation. How do we live our faith in Jesus Christ when the cost is high? Peter reminds his readers/hearers that **we have been given the Holy Spirit in order to help us to trust God with our lives.**

Christians shouldn't be surprised by persecution. He refers to their difficulties as a 'fiery ordeal'. The word for fiery ordeal is the same as that used in Proverbs 27:21 where we read, "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold..."¹ Persecution is not only to be expected, it also serves to refine Christian character. Just as gold and silver are purified in the heat, so Christians are purified and strengthened through difficulty and trials.²

Are you startled when you hear the writer speak of the joy of suffering? Suffering is not to be seen as something to be borne with a stiff upper lip. Rather, we are to rejoice in suffering. However, it is not just any old suffering. It is 'sharing' in Christ's sufferings. Christ suffered for us to give us life in all its fullness. It is a privilege and joy to suffer with the One who has given everything - even his own life for us. We share in Christ's suffering knowing that when 'his glory is revealed' - when he comes again - we will 'be glad' and will 'shout for joy'.

Does sharing in Jesus' sufferings invite us to share in the sufferings of others? Does suffering with Jesus mean suffering with the people of Manchester and of every place that weeps over acts of evil? Does suffering with Jesus mean looking into the

¹ Wayne Grudem, **1 Peter (Tyndale N. T. Commentary)** (Leicester, England, IVP: 1988), 178.

² Ibid.

faces of those who bring about your death and praying, "Father forgive?"

When hearers are verbally abused (reviled) because they bear the name of Christ, they must be assured that they are indeed blessed. They are blessed because 'the spirit of glory' - the Spirit of God - is resting upon them. The author may have in mind the Shekinah glory of God made visible in the cloud. This cloud led the Israelites to the Promised Land and rested on the tabernacle and then the temple. Just as the Shekinah glory of God rested upon the people of Israel, so now we have the spirit of glory - the Holy Spirit - resting upon us. Those who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus Christ are not alone. The Holy Spirit is God present with us. He is the one who strengthens us when we are up against the enemy.

As we share in Christ's sufferings, our lives are to be marked by humility and discipline. Let's look at humility first. We are to 'clothe' ourselves with humility. What is humility anyway?

Wayne Rice tells a story called ***Palm Monday***, which provides a good starting point for our understanding the nature of humility. "The donkey awakened, his mind still savouring the afterglow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride.

He walked into town and found a group of people by the well. 'I'll show myself to them,' he thought.

But they didn't notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no mind.

'Throw your garments down,' he said crossly. 'Don't you know who I am?'

They just looked at him in amazement. Someone slapped him across the tail and ordered him to move.

'Miserable heathens!' he muttered to himself. 'I'll just go to the market where

the good people are. They will remember me.'

But the same thing happened. No one paid any attention to the donkey as he strutted down the main street in front of the market place.

'The palm branches! Where are the palm branches?!' he shouted. 'Yesterday, you threw palm branches!'

Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother.

'Foolish child,' she said gently. 'Don't you realise that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?'"³

Humility is the recognition that without God we are nothing. Humility is an attitude of complete and utter trust in God. Humility is a right understanding of oneself in relation to others. The humble person does not have to look out for 'number one' because they trust that God will look out for them. Because of this trusting disposition towards God, the humble person is able to put others first.

The opposite of humility is pride. The proud person does not trust in God but in themselves. The proud person has to watch out for their own interests because if they don't, who else will?

God delights in people who trust in him. God's grace is only available to those who recognise that they are undeserving. This is why "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." It is the difference between the donkey who wants recognition and glory, and the donkey that realises that his only worth is in relation to Jesus Christ. This is why the author calls his readers/hearers to humble themselves under the mighty hand of God. It is only those who learn to rely utterly on God who

³ Wayne Rice, ***More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*** (Grand Rapids, Youth Specialties, Zondervan: 1995), 138.

will be truly exalted. Our pattern for such humility is Jesus Christ who was humbled through his obedience to death on a cross and is now risen and exalted at the right hand of God.

The life of humility - the life of complete trust in God - means that we will unload all of our worries and concerns onto God. It is the humble trust that God cares about everything in our lives. Note that the life of humility is a life of freedom from anxiety because we trust in God's watchful care.

Our lives are not only to be marked by humility but also by spiritual discipline. Peter tells his audience that Christians have a very real and personal enemy in the devil. Wayne Rice tells the story of **The**

Reasonable Hunter: "Winter was coming on and a hunter went out into the forest to shoot a bear, out of which he planned to make a warm coat. By and by he saw a big bear coming toward him and raised his gun and took aim. 'Wait,' said the bear, 'Why do you want to shoot me?'

'Because I am cold,' said the hunter, 'and I need a coat.'

'But I am hungry,' the bear replied, 'so maybe if we just talk this over a little, we could come to a compromise.'

So the hunter sat down beside the bear and began to talk over the pros and cons.

In the end, however, the hunter was well enveloped by the bear's fur, and the bear had eaten his dinner."⁴

We must be alert to the devil. He is like prowling lion seeking to devour us. He looks for every opportunity to bring us spiritual death. He wants to destroy us. We cannot be passive towards him. We cannot sit down and negotiate. Through persecution and suffering the devil seeks to get us to give up our trust in God. We must resist him, remaining steadfast in our faith.

Peter's want his readers/hearers to know that we are not alone in our struggle. We are not alone in our suffering. Other believers are going through the same kinds of difficulties.

We not only take comfort that we have partners in suffering for Christ, but we also have the assurance that God will vindicate us in the end. The God of grace who has called us in Christ to take part in his eternal and glorious plan will see to it that we are restored, supported, strengthened and established. Any losses we may have suffered in this life will be more than compensated. We may have confidence that this will happen because God has all the power to do so.

Today we remember all those who suffer: those who suffer because of evil; those who suffer for their faith in Christ. Are we conscious of the Spirit of God resting upon us, enabling us to rejoice in suffering with Christ? Have we heard the call to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand - to turn from self-trust to trust in God's sufficiency? Are we living on the alert - vigilant in our fight against the devil? Do we have the assured hope that God will vindicate us in the end?

Baptism

A father is in church with three of his young children, including his five year-old daughter. As was customary, he sat in the very front row so that the children could properly witness the service.

During this particular service, the minister was performing the baptism of a tiny infant. The little girl was taken by this, observing that he was saying something and pouring water over the infant's head. With a quizzical look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked: 'Daddy, why is he brainwashing that baby?'

⁴ Ibid., 146.

The following article has been extracted from Parish Pump, and is a sobering story of just how hard it is to be a Christian in China, and is entitled:

Coming storm for Chinese Christians under 'Emperor' Xi

A leading campaigner has warned of a gathering storm for persecuted Christians in China. Release International partner, Bob Fu, says the persecution of Christians has worsened dramatically under President Xi Jinping, and is set to get worse now Xi has been declared president for life.

Bob Fu said: 'Churches have been totally destroyed under President Xi's rule. There is a new spiritual storm coming to the Chinese Church. It may even be worse than during the Cultural Revolution.'

President Xi has imposed tough new restrictions on religious freedom, which came into force on 1st February. These are already beginning to bite.

The latest crackdown has been in Luoning County, where the authorities have banned preaching and gathering for worship and have been arresting Christians. Officials have smashed windows, torn religious murals from homes, removed crosses from churches, cut off electricity and confiscated property. They have even stationed security guards in private homes to prevent family prayers. 'It feels like another Cultural Revolution,' one Chinese Christian remarked.

'Since February, even organising a prayer meeting in your home is totally forbidden,' said Bob Fu. 'If you disobey, your home will be subject to destruction. According to the new regulations you cannot share religious messages with anyone under 18. And students, young people and Communist party members have been forbidden from entering churches.'

Persecution is likely to increase in the coming months and years, believes Fu, who

has advised presidents Clinton and Obama on US relations with China. The signs are that the Communist party is tightening its grip on the nation under President Xi Jinping, who was proclaimed president for life in March by the National People's Congress.

'Expect to see more control. The word is Sinicisation, [this is the process of making more Chinese in character or form] which aims to bring the churches under the absolute control of the Communist party. Even registered churches are being forced to install face-recognition cameras and provide office space for Communist party members to monitor the church.'

'Already we are seeing Christians labelled as belonging to 'evil cults', simply because they have been found reading books like Pilgrim's Progress and Streams in the Desert,' says Bob Fu.

One target of the Communist party is to curb the rapid growth of the Church. When the party took power in 1949 there were around a million Christians in China. By the 1980s, the Church had grown ten-fold, despite attempts to eradicate the faith during the Cultural Revolution. Today, the number of Chinese Christians is estimated at more than 100m. There are now more Christians than members of the Communist party in China, and that figure is set to more than double.

Says Bob Fu: 'Sociologists estimate that by 2030, the number of Chinese Christians will reach at least 224m, even at the slowest projected rate of growth.' This is the real reason for the clampdown, he believes. Release International is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Through its international network of missions, UK-based Release serves persecuted Christians by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners and their families, supplying Christian literature and Bibles, and working for justice.