

A fine romance

Heather Smith *reflects on* Genesis 24:34-38.
42-49. 58-end

The question of their children's life partners makes many parents anxious. Ideas about what kind of person might be suitable will vary, but most parents just hope for someone who will make their child happy. Abraham wanted just that for Isaac, but he also felt the burden that this child carried. He was the promised child who would make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations. No wonder he wanted to find a suitable wife for his son. What follows is effectively an arranged marriage. It is arranged by Abraham in the sense that he has a specific family in mind. Although he does not know the details of all the family members, having left a long while before, he sends his servant with strict instructions about who would be suitable.

The servant must have felt a great weight of responsibility. He turns to God and asks that the right woman will offer him a drink at the well. But will Rebekah agree? She does, going back with the servant to meet her future husband. Everyone is happy and the multitude of descendants of Abraham moves on a generation.

It's hard not to suspect that Abraham feels he has to give God a little help with fulfilling the promise – just as he did when it seemed that Sarah couldn't bear a child and Hagar was a better prospect. Nevertheless, God worked with his insecurities, and does the same with ours. God can bring the best out of whatever situation we create for ourselves. ☺



Lord, teach us to rest in the knowledge that you will bring about the best for us. Help us to believe that we need not fear for those we love because they are safe in your hands. Amen.

Climbing Kilimanjaro – part IV – reaching the summit

by John Witcombe

John Witcombe concludes his account of climbing Kilimanjaro.

We were roused from our sleeping bags at ten o'clock on Saturday night and set off slowly to climb the gruelling final 1,200 metres to the summit. Extreme altitude makes thought and movement difficult. Each step takes huge effort and

progress is painfully slow. Nausea and headaches are overwhelming, and the determination to succeed competes with the knowledge that to press on through the symptoms of altitude sickness can be fatal.

Then, after seven hours of putting one foot in front of another, we reached Stella Point on the edge of the volcanic cone. Across to our left were the tops of the glaciers tinged pink in the sunrise. An hour's walk round the rim got us to the summit, 5,895 metres.

I'm very happy that my sixtieth year started on top of Kilimanjaro. Now I'm back to the day job, scaling the challenges and heights of being Dean of Coventry Cathedral. But it doesn't take much for me to think myself back to the mountain and a journey fulfilled. ☺

Cities of the Bible Ephesus

by Caroline Fletcher

Ephesus was a wealthy city in Asia Minor, current-day Turkey. It was an important commercial centre with a harbour bordering the Aegean Sea.

Today its impressive ruins attract many tourists. Among these is a single column – the remains of the once magnificent Temple of Artemis, which was one of the Seven Wonders of

the World. Ephesus associated itself closely with the goddess Artemis, but during the two or so years that the apostle Paul was based in this city, he clashed with artisans who made money from this idol worship. The theatre in which a frenzied crowd railed against Paul for discouraging idolatry (Acts 19:23-41) can also be seen today.

Ephesus has further New Testament links. Tradition holds that the apostle John lived in Ephesus and was buried there. Also, Paul's companion Timothy oversaw the Ephesian church and there is a New Testament epistle written to the people of Ephesus. ☺

“Prayer is simply a two-way conversation between you and God.”
Billy Graham (1918-2018), evangelist

Connecting faith and daily life



The power of imagination

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Isaiah 55:10-13

Sometimes reason will not do. Sometimes logic fails us. Sometimes we look around us and hope and faith desert us. Sometimes only imagination can help us. Then what we need is Isaiah.

The poet responsible for the central section of the book of Isaiah was addressing a defeated people. They had lost their land, their king, and their faith in their God. They lived in exile in a foreign land. Many of them could not even remember Jerusalem. Hope for a return had long gone, and they were making the best of life in Babylon, as reason and logic told them to do.

But along comes the poet. "My word", says the Lord, "... shall not return to me empty... you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace". The mountains will sing, the trees will applaud. The whole world will rejoice as God's people go home.

There is no logic in the words of the prophet. Trees do not clap their hands. Jerusalem is in ruins. Return will be hard and painful. But still the poet sings of salvation, because only imagination will give the people back their faith and hope. The poetry is designed to bypass their brains and get into their hearts – and into ours too, when we need it. 🌈

God of hope and love, speak to our hearts and fire our imaginations, that we may hear the singing of the mountains and the applause of the trees, and ever trust in your power to save. Amen.

Christian writers and thinkers

part I – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

by Caroline Hodgson

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit priest, theologian, philosopher and scientist.

During years spent teaching, studying and researching he combined his knowledge and developed a strong interest in the evolution of humankind. Following the publication of *The Phenomenon of the Spirit* in 1937, and an article in the *New York Times* which characterised him as

believing that humans descended from monkeys, his work became increasingly controversial. From the 1930s until many years after his death his work was banned by the Catholic Church.

In his holistic view of humankind and the universe he had, and continues to exert, a considerable influence on New Age thinking. He wrote: "science, philosophy and religion are bound to converge as they draw nearer to the whole". He envisaged the universe as an evolutionary process in which the movement is always towards systems of greater complexity and higher levels of consciousness. Everything, he believed, moves towards a fulfilment in which all things will be gathered up in God. 🌈

“Faith, as Paul saw it, was a living, flaming thing leading to surrender and obedience to the commandments of Christ.

A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), pastor, author, magazine editor and spiritual mentor

Malala Day and World Youth Skills Day

by Lisa Tulfer

This week are two occasions to reflect on education and vocation for young people – celebrating advances that have been made in recent years, and committing to do more in the future.

Today is Malala Day, honouring Malala Yousafzai who, as you may remember, was shot in 2012 as part of the Taliban opposition to girls' education. She survived and went on to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of seventeen, and to speak at the United Nations.

Malala's campaign to promote schooling for girls links to World Youth Skills Day on Wednesday, which promotes technical and vocational education and training for the world's 1.2 billion people aged between fifteen and twenty-four. Young people are over three times more likely to be unemployed than adults, and giving them opportunities to learn is one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Like his father, Jesus was a carpenter; Paul was a tent maker; Simon Peter and Andrew were fishermen – all skilled in their particular trades. Is there anything we can do to help someone fulfil their God-given potential? 🌈

A grounded God

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob does not deserve to meet God at the place he comes to call Bethel, House of God. He has cheated his brother Esau out of the status and blessing that are the right of the eldest. Now he is running away, afraid to face the consequences of his behaviour. But as he sleeps on the ground, a ladder appears, with angels going up and down. And then there is the voice of God, not, as we might expect, at the top of the ladder, but right down on the ground, next to Jacob. The voice speaks a remarkable message. Despite everything, Jacob will inherit the promise made to his father and grandfather. He will carry forward the destiny of God's people. He is the chosen one, guaranteed God's presence with him always.

God does not always use the deserving. God does not choose the more generous, more deserving Esau. Sometimes God stands beside the least likely people and calls them to be agents of God's purpose in the world. That is good news for all of us.

And by the way, Old Testament angels do not have wings. That is how they can be entertained unawares. And they need a ladder to get from heaven to earth. ☺



Generous God, you are always ready to overlook our weaknesses, and forgive our failings. Help us to believe in your calling, that, undeserving as we are, we may be ready to fulfil in the world the purpose to which you call us. Amen.

Christian writers and thinkers

part II –
Karen Armstrong

by Caroline Hodgson

Born in 1944 in Worcestershire, Karen Armstrong has written two books about her experience of being a religious sister. The first, *Through the Narrow Gate*, describes the time she spent in a convent, while *The Spiral Staircase* describes her subsequent spiritual awakening.

Since leaving religious life she has gone on to lecture and teach,

and has written over twenty books on faith and the major religions, studying what Islam, Judaism and Christianity have in common and how faith has shaped world history. For example, in *A History of God*, she traces the evolution of the three major monotheistic traditions, along with Buddhism and Hinduism, from their beginnings up to the present day. In her introduction she describes the book as a history of “the human idea of God”.

Famously, Armstrong has said that: “Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed.” ☺

Margaret of Antioch

Margaret of Antioch is commemorated on Monday in the Common Worship lectionary. Julian Smith looks at this remarkable woman.

Margaret of Antioch, Marina in the Eastern Church, was one of the most venerated saints of the Middle Ages. Although her experience was a common one during the centuries of the Church's persecution, it has been much elaborated to encourage the faithful in their trials.

Margaret dedicated her life and virginity to Christ and suffered martyrdom for rejecting the advances of a pagan prefect at Antioch. Legend has it that the devil appeared to Margaret in the guise of a dragon who swallowed her, but then spat her out unharmed. Hence Margaret is the patron of pregnant women and childbirth. She is one of a group of saints known as the Holy Helpers and spoke to and inspired Joan of Arc.

Margaret reminds us that we each have stories to tell of our journeys of faith and that in the sharing of them we can encourage others in their pilgrimage. ☺

“Alone with none but thee, my God, I journey on my way.
What need I fear when thou art near, O king of night and day?”

St Columba (AD 521-597), Irish abbot and missionary evangelist to Scotland

The shade of a tree



Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Matthew 13:31-33. 44-52

If a flood was coming your way and you had to evacuate your house, what would you save? Some police forces recommend keeping a packed “grab bag” with useful stuff in it – torches, basic food, medicines, and so on, but few of us are that organised. So what would you grab? Photos? Documents? Jewellery? Your phone?

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus explores the value of things. The kingdom of heaven, he says, often seems really small, but actually it is the most precious thing in the world. It is like a buried treasure for which it is worth sacrificing everything else. It is like a single pearl that a collector would give all their wealth to buy. It is like yeast in bread dough. It is hidden, almost invisible, and yet it is the very core of our existence, the essence of the universe.

We cannot put the kingdom of heaven in our grab bag. We do not need to, because it lives inside and all around us. We can look for its signs, and nurture them, until the tiny seed of the kingdom of heaven grows into the magnificent tree in whose shade we will sit and eat with our creator. 🌿

Give us wisdom, O Lord, to know where our true treasure lies, and there to set our hearts, that we may see the signs of your kingdom in the world and play our part in nurturing them, until the whole world acknowledges you as creator and king. Amen.

Christian writers and thinkers

part III –
Benedicta Ward

by Caroline Hodgson

Benedicta Ward is a theologian and historian of early Christian spirituality. She is a Supernumerary Fellow at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, and a member of the Anglican religious community the Sisters of the Love of God.

Dr Ward’s life and work show that she is drawn to eremitic life, with threads of silence and solitude running throughout. This, however, is not to be confused with insularity.

She has written extensively about Anselm of Canterbury and St Bede, and is particularly known for her research on the Desert Fathers. Her 2018 publication, *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom*, brings together the spirituality of Cuthbert, Bede and the Psalter, Anselm the monastic scholar, Julian of Norwich, twelfth-century hermits, medieval pilgrimage and seventeenth-century preachers. In her Introduction she refers to them as “a stream of ever-moving pilgrims going towards the life of heaven”. She continues, providing a glimpse into her own fascination with early English Christianity: “We are all engaged in this pilgrimage with them, and there is refreshment in such companionship.” 🌿

Summer holidays

by Andrew Lyon

I can remember as a small child seeing my Catholic friend wave to me from her window as I passed by en route to school one morning, holding my mum’s hand. “Jill’s not going in today,” Mum explained. When I asked why, she said, matter-of-factly, “It’s a holy day.”

I was instantly fascinated and quizzed my poor Methodist mother unceasingly until she

was released at the school gate, pending further enquiries. Being the piously inclined child I seemingly was, that us “Protestants” clearly weren’t joining in with something that had about it a tangible sense of the sacred, saddened me. I wanted in.

“Holy day” is where we get “holiday” from, and so all holidays are special, not just because we’re away from work for a bit. Holidays are sabbath writ large. Let’s relax, but let’s also use the time to think more about our faith and pray. Or I’ll see you after school. 🌿

“ He left His Father’s throne above, / So free, so infinite His grace; / Emptied Himself of all but love, / And bled for Adam’s helpless race; / ‘Tis mercy all, immense and free; / For, O my God, it found out me.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), leader of the Methodist movement and hymn writer