



THE
RECORD

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HOPE

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WELCOME TO THE MARCH RECORD



THE COVID VACCINE ROLLOUT CONTINUES AND LOCKDOWN EXIT PLANS HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED BY BOTH THE UK AND SCOTTISH GOVERNMENTS. The Scottish government's announcement includes plans for the return of 'communal worship'. These developments afford the hope that there is light at the end of the pandemic's tunnel.

Hope is at the core of the Christian's character. We are those who 'set [our] hope fully on the grace that will be brought to [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1:13). It is the hope we have in Jesus that enables us to walk through the valley of shadows.

We address some difficult issues in this month's Record. Our fallen world simultaneously contains the violent repression of the government of China and the personal tragedy of miscarriage and infant loss. You will read about both in the following pages (see pages 16 and 36). To contemplate such things would be overwhelming were it not for the fact that we can rely on the finished work of Christ. 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (Romans 8:32).

As we pray for an end to sickness, oppression and loss, we also remember that those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength (Isaiah 40:31). ●

If you have any news articles please send them to dayspring.macleod@icloud.com.

Yours in Christ

John

That in all things he might have the pre-eminence
Colossians 1:18

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LEVIATHAN

THE ESCALATING BRUTALITY OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

力威亞探

BY THE EDITOR



THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH IN THE COMFORTABLE WEST IS, FOR THE MOST PART, DULL AND INACTIVE IN THE FACE OF ATROCITY. The physical distance between us and those who are most sorely oppressed may have explained this in the past. It is no excuse in the Information Age.

Our world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent. There are huge benefits to this from trade, to learning, to evangelism. Interconnectedness brings responsibilities, too. It broadens the scope of the answer to the question: 'who is my neighbour?' It means that the 'World's Factory' and second economic superpower, though 4,000 miles from its nearest Free Church, requires a Christian response from us when we vote, when we consider buying its products and as we seek justice for those who are oppressed.

FAMILY MATTERS

It is getting harder to be a Christian in China. On *Open Doors'* World Watch List, China has risen 26 places in only three years, and is today considered the 17th most difficult country on earth to be a Christian.

In the last month alone, Christian Solidarity Worldwide has reported on the incarceration of Christian activist and citizen journalist Zhang Zhan; the disbarment of a human rights lawyer who recently defended her; and a significant increase in hostility towards Christians online, which has been allowed despite strict controls on other online communications.

In the past six months, *The Record* has shared reports on the suppression of Christian publishing in China, the state extorting money from churches, forcible removal of crosses from people's homes and demands that Christians pray to President Xi instead of to God.

2020 saw the Chinese government demolishing churches, putting up surveillance cameras around places of worship and removing clergy from their positions to install government-approved replacements.

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is targeting young people, in particular, when it comes to the suppression of Christianity. A regulation passed in 2020 prohibits under-18s from attending church. Meanwhile, *Bitter Winter*, a magazine which reports on religious liberty in China, last month revealed that school curricula specifically teach believing in God is abnormal and dangerous. Students are encouraged to inform on family members who attend church. Christian parents have told the magazine that their children have returned from school frightened because they have been told by teachers that Christians are prone to setting themselves on fire.

Reports like these are troubling. But, sadly, they are far from the worst excesses of the oppression perpetrated by the Chinese government. *The Record's* 'World News' section reports on the worldwide church. That is our area of interest and our primary concern. But it does not, and cannot, provide a complete picture.

As Christians, the church around the world naturally has our affinity. Our hearts go out immediately to those persecuted brothers and sisters with whom we share our eternal inheritance. But too parochial a view of the world carries a serious risk. If we only gaze at the stars, we may miss the looming iceberg.

'THE DARKNESS DEEPENS'

The UK Conservative Party established a Human Rights Commission in 2005. The Commission's remit is to highlight human rights concerns in order to 'inform, advise and enhance the party's foreign policy.' Unfortunately, it has had little influence on the government's approach to China.

The Commission published a new report in January entitled *The Darkness Deepens* which, having gathered written and oral testimony from expert observers and eye-witnesses, describes the true horror of the atrocities being perpetrated by the Chinese government. The details are profoundly distressing.

Setting the scene, Christian Solidarity Worldwide told the Commission, 'Human rights defenders inside and outside China agree that there has been a rapid and significant decline in the human rights situation in China since President Xi Jinping took office'. This is being underpinned by frightening misuse of modern technology.

When the threat of surveillance and the power of indoctrination fail to ensure compliance, the full depravity of the regime is soon in evidence.

Dr Yang Jianli, an exiled dissident and founder of Citizen Power Initiatives for China, told the Commission that the fast-paced development of the state surveillance system in China is 'the root cause of human rights violations,' and has turned China into a 'virtual gulag'. Similarly, Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) say that, 'President Xi Jinping is intent on trampling human rights in China. Pushing for his vision of a dystopian digital surveillance state, Xi wielded his largely unfettered powers to suppress those aspiring for and promoting a vision of China with respect for universal human rights. The space for rights advocacy has rapidly closed under Xi's iron fist.'

The Commission concludes that the CCP regime is using drones, satellites and artificial intelligence-equipped cameras among other means in an attempt to exert 'total control' over the Chinese people. In Xinjiang region, where this technology has been most completely implemented, cameras on lampposts read people's faces to analyse their emotions and police trucks eavesdrop on conversations, while artificial intelligence constantly analyses people's activity online to determine their loyalty to the regime.

In addition to using surveillance to coerce conformity with the CCP, China's leaders are pursuing indoctrination. Charles Parton, Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, describes a CCP document entitled 'Outline of Patriotism Education in the New Era' as 'Xi's manifesto for totalitarianism,' with education 'the main tool for achieving it'. Human Rights Watch has described the government's 'ideological grip' on schools and universities. Harking back to Mao Zedong's cult of personality, the study of 'Xi Jinping Thought' is now mandatory and the expression of views critical of Xi or the CCP results in reprisals.

When the threat of surveillance and the power of indoctrination fail to ensure compliance, the full depravity of the regime is soon in evidence. The details of the inhumane treatment of those who have been brave enough to oppose the government are sickening, and the worst are not repeated here. Yet it is important for us to be aware of what is going on.

Human rights lawyers and defenders are on the frontline in China. Those who seek to protect others who have been abused by the regime are at risk of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment or 'disappearance'. In addition to being deprived of their liberty, many are tortured with the intention of coercing confession, obtaining information or achieving 're-education'. It is thought that ill-treatment while in custody led to the death of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo in 2017. Human Rights Watch is aware of a number of similar cases of lawyers and rights advocates dying in, or shortly after leaving, prison. Simon Cheng, a British Consular employee, described first-hand to the Human Rights Commission the physical and psychological violence he was subjected to after having been accused of spying. The Commission concludes that 'torture is endemic, widespread, systematic and conducted with impunity'.

Religion, philosophy and worldviews deemed incompatible with the CCP are a constant target. One of the most deeply shocking findings in the Commission's report is that a separate, independent tribunal held recently in the UK has concluded 'beyond reasonable doubt' that the Chinese state is murdering people in order to harvest their organs and supply the country's transplant industry. Most of the victims are practitioners of Falun Gong, a modern religious movement which has been persecuted in China since the late 1990s. The independent tribunal noted that the existence of forced organ harvesting means those who engage with the current Chinese government 'do so in the knowledge that they are interacting with a criminal state'.



'There has been a rapid and significant decline in the human rights situation in China since President Xi Jinping took office.'

More widely known, but no less egregious, is the Chinese government's assault on Uyghurs and other Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The Conservative Party's Human Rights Commission found that over one million, and possibly as many as three million, Uyghurs are currently detained in concentration camps. Detainees are subjected to physical abuse, sleep deprivation, forced medication and solitary confinement, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide. There are numerous reports of deaths within the concentration camps. The Commission heard from one witness that her cousins had been sent to 'the children's concentration camps' when both of their parents were incarcerated.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has found evidence of the mass transfer of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities from Xinjiang to factories across the country. The conditions in these factories, including the installation of watchtowers, razor wire and a constant police presence, strongly suggest 'forced labour' — in other words, slavery. According to the report, Uyghurs are working in factories which supply 'at least 83 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing and automotive sectors, including Apple, BMW, Gap, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Volkswagen.'

Chinese state media has openly stated that the intention of the government's action against the Uyghurs is to 'break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections and break their origins'. Among the measures enacted to achieve this end have been the forced sterilisation of women and forced abortions. One doctor told ITV news in September 2020 that she had personally carried out at least 500 to 600 such operations on Uyghur women.

There is a growing willingness among international relations observers to follow the lead of a Canadian parliamentary committee in categorising the extreme persecution of Uyghurs as genocide.

It also seems that the CCP's abuse of human rights is not contained by China's borders. Dr Sophie Richardson, China Director of Human Rights Watch, described 'assiduous efforts to undermine the international human rights architecture especially at the United Nations,' upon whose Security Council China is a permanent member. The surveillance technology which has been developed in China is being sold to other authoritarian regimes. The Commission recounts the case of Chinese-born Swedish national Gui Minhai — a bookseller in Hong Kong — who was abducted from his holiday apartment in Thailand in 2015. He was sentenced to ten years in prison in China in 2020 for 'illegally providing intelligence overseas'.

UNCONSCIONABLE OBSEQUIOUSNESS

The Conservatives' Commission praises the UK government's decision not to invite Huawei to invest in Britain's 5G technology infrastructure, given that the company collaborates with the CCP on state surveillance. Our government has also offered nearly three million Hong Kongers a route to British citizenship. Yet, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is still desperately seeking to strengthen trade links with the Chinese government. Johnson told the media in late February that he is 'fervently Sinophile' and wants to improve ties to China 'whatever the occasional political difficulties'. This sounds much the same approach as his predecessors. David Cameron declared a 'Golden Era' of UK-China relations during his time in office, which included Chinese state investment in Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant in Somerset. Theresa May seemed less enthusiastic about close ties,

but advocated working with China in order to reason with the CCP. But, clearly, the CCP are not susceptible to being reasoned with.

The Scottish Government, too, boasts of its 'commitment to a strong, long-term, bilateral partnership with China'. Its 'China engagement strategy' touts meetings between high-level officials and an annual St Andrew's Day ceilidh in Beijing, before an oblique reference to 'balancing' economic development with human rights.

This continued policy of appeasing a brutal regime in the hope of gaining access to the riches of its economy is craven in the extreme. There is no moral high ground left: the argument that free trade makes free people has long-since had its day. When Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy was the 'final form of human government' and was poised to take over the world, and the process launched the neoconservative movement that gave us the Iraq war, he did so in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse, with the USA as the world's sole superpower. China's continuing economic strength does not suggest a repeat. Freedom is not winning in China, oppression is increasing. Since the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, the voices of moderation and reform have been shut out of the government. Rather than the internet and information technology bringing openness to the country, the CCP has succeeded in using it to construct a surveillance state with the power to quash resistance. To date, the world's democratic governments have no answer.

SPEAKING OUT

We have seen this before. The President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews wrote to the Chinese ambassador in July 2020 that she sees 'similarities between what is alleged to be happening in the People's Republic of China today and what happened in Nazi Germany 75 years ago: People being forcibly loaded onto trains; beards of religious men being trimmed; women being sterilised; and the grim spectre of concentration camps'. Given the evidence now before us, it is in no way an exaggeration to draw a parallel to the 1930s.

That being the case, the Christian church in particular should remember Martin Niemöller. The German Lutheran pastor is renowned for his confession in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War: 'First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak out for me.'

Christians are severely oppressed in China. The church must never forget them. But it is others who are bearing the worst of the CCP's brutality. It is time for us to speak out for them.

But what can we do against a superpower? The Jewish community in London has drawn the attention of the international media by staging a weekly protest at the Chinese embassy office in Hampstead. This resilient resistance began with a single protestor two years ago. 'I'm not an activist,' he told *Haaretz*, but 'I had to do something'. Our governments have too easy a time appeasing China — we should demand better, and vote accordingly. We should learn which companies are using the labour of enslaved people and refuse to buy from them whenever that is possible.

Above all, we must pray. We cannot draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook, but we appeal to the One who can do all things (Job 41-42). As ever, the Psalmist gives us the words. *'Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted...Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer; call his wickedness to account till you find none...O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.'* (Psalm 10:12ff.) ●

WORLD NEWS

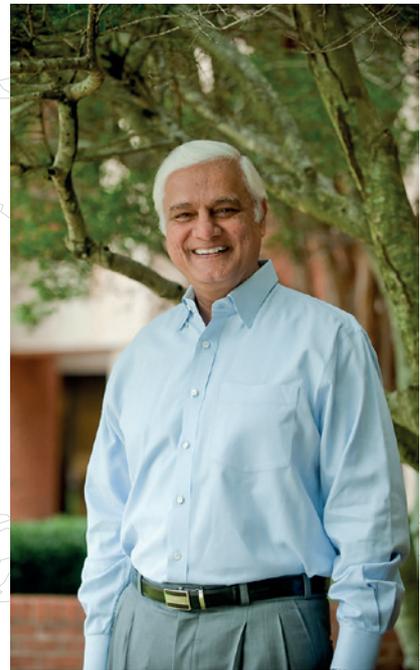
AMERICAS AFRICA EUROPE ASIA AUSTRALASIA

THE LATE RAVI ZACHARIAS FOUND TO HAVE ABUSED WOMEN

A four-month investigation by law firm Miller & Martin has found 'sufficient evidence to conclude that Mr. Zacharias engaged in sexual misconduct,' said Lynsey Barron and William Eiselstein, the lawyers hired by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) to investigate the claims.

The famous apologist abused massage therapists in the USA, Thailand, India and Malaysia, and used funds from his ministry as leverage against his victims. The RZIM board released a statement along with the investigation's report. They wrote: 'Ravi engaged in a series of extensive measures to conceal his behaviour from his family, colleagues, and friends. However, we also recognize that in situations of prolonged abuse, there often exist significant structural, policy, and cultural problems... We were trusted by our staff, our donors, and the public to mentor, oversee, and ensure the accountability of Ravi Zacharias, and in this we have failed.'

The UK board of the Zacharias Trust, which runs the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, has unanimously agreed to separate from RZIM and choose a new name. Currently the largest apologetics organisation in the world, RZIM is expected to shrink significantly in the coming months as international branches follow the UK board in disassociating themselves. ●



©Image by 6 of Four 2008

AUTHOR APOLOGISES FOR STATEMENT ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Author and pastor Max Lucado has apologised for a previous statement on homosexuality following a petition protesting his invitation to preach at Washington National Cathedral, Washington D.C. — an Episcopal church. The petition states, 'Lucado's teachings and preaching inflicts active harm on LGBTQ people. To cite one example, in 2004 he wrote of his fears that homosexuality would lead to "legalized incest" and likened same-sex marriage to incest and bestiality.'

In response, Lucado wrote, 'In 2004 I preached a sermon on the topic of same-sex marriage. I now see that, in that sermon, I was disrespectful. I was hurtful.'

'I should have done better. It grieves me that my words have hurt or been used to hurt the LGBTQ community. I apologize to you and I ask forgiveness of Christ.'

'To be clear, I believe in the traditional biblical understanding of marriage, but I also believe in a God of unbounded grace and love.'

'LGBTQ individuals and LGBTQ families must be respected and treated with love. They are beloved children of God because they are made in the image and likeness of God.'

'Over centuries, the church has harmed LGBTQ people and their families, just as the church has harmed people on issues of race, gender, divorce, addiction, and so many other things. We must do better to serve and love one another.' ●



500 CHURCHES SIGN UP TO WELCOME HONGKONGERS

A UK-wide initiative was launched in February to help welcome Hongkongers who migrate following increasing restrictions being placed on the city. The website, UKHK.org, was launched by Krish Kandiah, founder of *Home for Good*, and the Bishop of London, Dame Sarah Mullally. More than 500 churches have already signed up, committing to help welcome those who take up the UK Government's invitation to those with British National Overseas passports to migrate.

Krish Kandiah said, 'Moving continents is difficult at the best of times but it is particularly challenging during a global pandemic. That's why we want to welcome the new arrivals here today.'

'In normal times, we would also have liked to put on special events.... As it is, we will have to make do with Zoom calls and virtual bonding for now.' ●



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN FRANCE



A law which seeks to end 'Muslim separatism' in France, introduced in the wake of recent Islamist terror attacks, is raising concern among Christians. The proposed 'Law to Uphold Republican Principles' has provoked much debate and has seen more than 1,700 amendments put forward. The bill would increase monitoring of religious associations and require them to sign a contract of 'Republican commitment'. It would also limit the funding churches could receive from abroad and allow government officials to monitor sermons for hate speech.

The head of the Foundation of Islam, an organisation established to improve relations between the state and the Muslim population, told *Associated Press* that the law is 'unjust but necessary'.

However, some Christian leaders are worried. 'This is the first time, as president of the Protestant Federation of France, that I find myself in the position of defending freedom of worship,' said François Clavairoly. 'I never imagined that in my own country something like this could happen.'

Clément Diedrichs, general director of National Council of Evangelicals in France, said that 'this law will allow the prevention of religious expression in society.... Some who would perhaps agree with us are opting for the security of the country. Especially in electoral terms, this choice pays better dividends.'

Christian concerns have been heightened by the recent words of Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin, who told TV broadcaster *C News* that 'Evangelicals are a very important problem,' adding to radio station *France Inter*: 'We cannot discuss with people who refuse to write on paper that the law of the Republic is superior to the law of God.' ●

CHURCHES JOIN MYANMAR PROTESTS



Christians in Myanmar have committed to pray and protest the military coup which took place in early February. Despite making up just 5% of the population, Evangelicals are the largest religious minority in the majority-Buddhist nation. Those used to gathering online for worship during the current pandemic are currently prevented from doing so by a nationwide internet and telephone shutdown. Nevertheless, Michael Koko Maung, who leads Nehemiah Ministries, a church-planting network, told *Christianity Today*, 'Our friends and relatives are unreachable, but they will not succeed in suppressing our voices.'

'Our brothers and sisters will continue their movement of peaceful civil disobedience, the drumming of pots and pans, peaceful mass marching demonstrations, and the chants of condemnation to the military. Abroad, we will let the world know that we are fighting back.'

'Christians in Myanmar are not timid and coward, but Christians might fight with [their] greatest weapon, prayer and Jesus himself... [there is a] time to pray, time to wait, time to keep silent. But it's time to shout.'

Ellis Craft, who works for American missions organisation *Reach a Village*, said, 'The churches that are growing the fastest in Myanmar, like Nehemiah Ministries, are nearest to the ground and are active in the communities. It makes sense that they are the ones out there standing up to injustice.' However, he also expressed concern that this could make church leaders a target for the military, who have used deadly force in the past.

Maung concludes, 'We also request all of you who sympathise [with] us, pray for us in this fight to overcome sin and Satan's schemes.' ●

ERITREAN CHRISTIANS FREED



Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that 70 Christians have been released from prison in Eritrea. They had been imprisoned for between two and twelve years. There has been speculation that the Eritrean regime has taken this step in order to distract attention from its role in the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

CSW President Mervyn Thomas said, 'CSW welcomes the release of these Christians in Eritrea, who were detained without charge or trial, and should never have been incarcerated. However, this good news must not obscure the Eritrean regime's continued complicity in egregious violations of human rights, both within its own borders and now in Tigray. We call on the international community to press Eritrea for the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained arbitrarily on account of their religion or belief. We also call for urgent action to arrest the unfolding crisis in Tigray, including by imposing arms embargoes on the warring parties, and sanctions on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who bear ultimate responsibility for human rights violations that are allegedly being committed with impunity by their respective forces.' ●

CHURCH LEADERS URGE WITHDRAWAL OF CONTROVERSIAL SECTION OF HATE CRIME BILL

A N UNPRECEDENTED ALLIANCE OF EVANGELICAL AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADERS ARE URGING THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO DROP PART OF ITS PROPOSED HATE CRIME AND PUBLIC ORDER (SCOTLAND) BILL TO ALLOW TIME FOR 'DETAILED CONSIDERATION OF CRUCIAL PROVISIONS'.

The Bill, which would potentially criminalise criticism of some ideologies, has been criticised by the Free Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Alliance.

In a letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Humza Yousaf, the church leaders call for greater protections for freedom of expression, writing:

'We believe that people should be completely free to disagree with our faith in any way, including mocking and ridiculing us. We are convinced that our faith is true and has a sufficient evidential basis to withstand any criticism, we therefore welcome open debate.'

By contrast, concerns are raised that any disagreement with, or criticism of, certain beliefs

and identities could fall foul of the new law, if it is passed in its current form.

The letter marks the first time Roman Catholic, Free Church and Evangelical Alliance leaders have jointly petitioned the Scottish Government. They are seeking a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. The letter concludes:

'The Parliament now has approximately four weeks to complete the passage of the bill. This is extraordinarily tight and risks inadequate and ill-thought through legislation being passed. No workable solutions to issues of freedom of expression have so far been suggested. If no such solutions can be found we hope the Scottish Government will now consider withdrawing the stirring up hatred offences in Part 2 of the bill to allow more detailed consideration and discussion and to ensure freedom of expression provisions, which enshrine free and open debate, are afforded the scrutiny they require.' ●

GARRABOST FREE CHURCH INDUCTION

BY **DAVID MURRAY**

THERE WAS A REAL SENSE OF ANTICIPATION AND EXCITEMENT AMONG THE CONGREGATION OF GARRABOST FREE CHURCH on Friday 22nd January when the Western Isles Presbytery met (some physically and some virtually) to induct the Rev. Iain Thomson to the pastoral charge of the congregation. Due to the Tier 3 restrictions then in place, only 50 people were permitted to be physically present in the church building. Almost two hundred of the congregation, friends and

colleagues joined in by Zoom to watch the service of induction.

The Garrabost Free Church congregation was formed in October 2017, when the previous congregations of Knock and Point were re-united by the Western Isles Presbytery into a single charge. The Rev. Andrew Coghill, minister of Scalpay Free Church, served the congregation throughout its vacancy.

The service was led by the Rev. David Macleod, minister of North Harris Free Church, who is the

present Moderator of the Western Isles Presbytery. He preached from Psalms 114 and 115, focussing on God's power and God's glory. Following the sermon, with the questions having been answered satisfactorily and the formula having been signed, the Moderator engaged in prayer and inducted Mr Thomson to the pastoral charge of the congregation. Rev. Malcolm Macleod, Shawbost, addressed the new minister and Rev. Andrew Coghill, newly relieved of his 3½-year term as interim moderator, addressed the congregation. Presentations were made to Mr and Mrs Thomson and to Mr and Mrs Coghill from the congregation before the service concluded with a pre-recorded singing of Psalm 72.

Rev. Iain Thomson is a native of Point and had served the Free Church congregation of East Kilbride since February 2001. He is married to Connie and they have three adult children and eight grandchildren. Iain said, 'I feel highly honoured to have been called

back to the people where I grew up. I received my first spiritual milk here and Connie and I received many blessings through the people of this district. We are both looking forward to settling back home and ministering to the people.' ●



UPDATE FROM WOMEN FOR MISSION

BY **FIONA MACASKILL**

SNOW IS LYING ON THE GROUND OUTSIDE AND IT'S A CHILLY DAY BUT SIGNS OF NEW LIFE ARE APPEARING ALL AROUND. The snowdrops are pushing their heads up through the frozen earth, making our thoughts turn to spring. In many ways it feels like the last year was one long winter despite the lovely warm days of lockdown. There have been many days when we have felt like those bulbs lying dormant under the earth just waiting for spring to come. God is still at work, though, even in these tough times, and it is so encouraging to hear of the green shoots which are appearing daily in his work in the projects we are supporting this year.

We recently compiled some prayer points from the groups we are supporting through our 'Embracing the World' project and would like to share them with you so that you can join us in supporting them in prayer. You can find the prayer points on our website and our social media pages.

As it looks unlikely that large meetings will be taking place in May this year we have taken the decision to hold the WfM AGM online. Further details will follow but please put the date of 22nd May at 11am in your diaries. The meeting will be around an hour long and as well as the official business we will be hearing a little about this year's project and launching our new project for 2021/22. Please keep an eye on our social media and website for further details.

We are looking for a new committee member with



a particular skill set. Our current treasurer is leaving us to have a baby and she is a hard act to follow. She has brought the WfM accounts into the 21st century and is leaving behind a well-oiled machine! If you feel this is something you would be able to help with, then please get in touch with Sarah Lyttle at contact@womenformission.org We would love to hear from you if you have accounting/bookkeeping experience.

Our Heart for Home fund has been running for several years now and has provided grants to groups and individuals in need. The fund is available to all Free Church groups or individuals wishing to show Jesus' compassion to those around them in their communities. From book translation to parent and toddler groups, from painting and decorating to training a nail technician, this fund has enabled people to show Jesus' compassion in their communities in many different ways. Do you have a heart for home? Do you have an idea of how to show Jesus' compassion to those around you in your community? If so, we'd love to hear from you. If you'd like to apply for some funding, simply fill in the online application form on our website. After an application form has been received, a small group of WfM representatives will decide whether it qualifies for a small grant for a specific outreach project. Any questions? Email us at: heartforhome@womenformission.org ●

RESEARCH MASTERS — COULD YOU DO IT?

OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING DEVELOPMENTS AT ETS HAS BEEN WELCOMING PEOPLE FROM ACROSS THE CHURCH TO THE SEMINARY.

That includes people from Free Church congregations as well as people from the wider Church in Scotland, the UK and beyond. We have been delighted to see people join the different courses at ETS, from the Saturday Course, to the Access Course, all the way to the BTh degree. It has been so exciting to see 'ordinary' people benefitting from the courses at our Seminary. But what about a Research Masters? What does that involve? And is it something that an 'ordinary' person can do?

A Research Masters is one of the postgraduate course that ETS offers (the other type is called Taught Masters, which is at the same level academically, but is structured in a different way). Postgraduate means this is a course that comes after graduating with another degree, so it is not an entry-level course. Normally applicants for the Research Masters have completed a degree in theology or history. But it is also possible even if you don't have those exact qualifications.

What does it involve? Well, a Research Masters is basically just one very long essay! 40,000 words to be exact. That sounds a lot, and in many ways it is, but it is almost always the case that students end up having to cut words out rather than struggling to reach the total.

So, it is a big, long essay. That's the bad news; the good news is that you get to choose what the essay is about! That's one of the wonderful things about a research Masters: you pick a topic that fascinates you and then dig into that subject in order to try and find an answer to a question you feel is important.

Students work under the guidance of a supervisor, who will be either one of the full-time ETS lecturers or one of the part-time postgraduate supervisors who support the Research Masters programme. Your supervisor will have expertise in your chosen area of study. They will also guide you on potential avenues to explore and will help refine each section of your big essay as you write. This means you are supported by someone who has walked this path before you, and who has a wealth of knowledge and experience to share.

You can do a Research Masters in any of the subject areas at ETS: Old or New Testament, Systematic Theology, Church History, Mission or Practical Theology. The options are endless, really. People have done Research Masters that stretch all the way from

looking at food and drink in Genesis right through to how the First World War affected congregations in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

As you study, you are your own boss. Even though you are under supervision, you are the primary researcher. You're the one making connections, developing arguments and presenting your findings. That has to be done very thoroughly. You have to be able to prove everything you say, and it can take a long time to do it. But the end result is very rewarding.

Could you do it? Well, it is easy to think, 'No, I could never manage that.' But I wouldn't be so sure. A Research Masters is not just for the intellectual elite. It is for someone who wants to learn more and to grow in their understanding of a particular topic. Lots of the skills required can be learned along the way, and doing a Research Masters will almost certainly make you a better reader, a better writer and a better thinker. In fact (and this may sound crazy!), a Research Masters can actually feel like a hobby. It is not like an undergraduate degree, where at certain times you have no choice but to study things you find boring. Instead, the whole thing is focussed on a topic that you have chosen, that fascinates you and that is a joy to explore.

If your Masters is in Biblical Studies, it is amazing to look more deeply at the riches contained in Scripture. If you are in Systematic Theology, you get to understand more about who God is and all he has done. If you choose History, you get to go back in time and live and breathe in a different era. If you choose Mission, you can get a better understanding of how the Good News of Jesus is spreading across the globe. And if you choose an area in Practical Theology, then you can explore a topic that addresses the most urgent needs and questions of society today.

Often in our Christian lives we can feel that we just don't know enough. But a research Masters is a chance to become expert in your topic. And while it is always the case that what we know is far smaller than what we need to learn, a Research Masters can be a big confidence boost in terms of being able to think and speak about theology.

So, can you do it? Well, the good thing about postgraduate studies is that because you already have a degree, you know that you have already graduated once. If you can do it once, then you can definitely do it again! ●

DONALD MATHESON, MBE (1933-2020)

BY **REV. DAVID RANDALL**

DONALD WAS BORN ON A CROFT IN BRUE, NEAR BARVAS, ON 10TH JUNE 1933. He was born in a blackhouse but the family built a 'white' house in the late 1940s/early 1950s. Donald didn't speak English until he went to school, aged five. After attending Barvas Primary School, Donald went on to the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, being first in his family to go to secondary school and then university. In 1952 he went to Aberdeen University, graduating in 1956. He met Alice in 1953 when both were studying in Aberdeen. They married in King's College Chapel on 19 January 1957.

He did basic army training with the Royal Berkshire Regiment for 10 weeks, then to Beaconsfield, Headquarters of Royal Army Educational Corps. His first posting was to Harrogate, Yorkshire, as an instructor at the Army Apprentices College. He was recommended to go for a Commission in 1960, and decided to make the Army his career.

Donald had many interesting postings, including several in England. He had three postings in the Far East with the Gurkhas — twice to Hong Kong and once to Northern Malaysia. While serving in Hong Kong he had two tours in Borneo during the Indonesian Confrontation. He made several trips to Nepal, where he was involved with recruiting young Gurkha soldiers, learning to speak Gurkhali so that he could talk to them in their own language. His last two postings were in Germany, first in Soest, then at British Army of the Rhine Headquarters near Monchengladbach. He reached the rank of Lt. Colonel. In 1973 Donald was presented with the MBE by the Queen for his services to education.

After retiring from the Army in 1981, Donald and Alice lived in Aberdeen, where Donald built up his own recruitment business, Donald Matheson Management Services. They attended Bon Accord Free Church. Donald became an elder, and was for nine years Sunday School Superintendent. He took over from Rev. John MacPherson as Chairman of Eastern Europe for Christ.

In 2000, Donald and Alice moved to Kinross, and attended Falkirk Free Church, where Donald served as Session Clerk. Robert Macleod was minister, and he recalls: 'Barnabas was a "good man, full of the Holy Spirit". The "Colonel" (as Donald was affectionately known) was all of that — an inspiration and encourager to many. As ex-military, he never allowed us to commence services late! His sharp mind, compassionate heart and desire for God's glory shone. He, along with Alice, wholly committed themselves to our fledgling congregation. I will remember him as a passionate Christian gentleman who served the cause of Christ with dignity and winsomeness.'

Donald was also a keen supporter of the Govan church plant established by Robert Macleod's successor, Norman Mackay. Like Robert, Norman benefited from the presence of the Mathesons in Falkirk: 'Everyone meeting "the Colonel" soon discovered all the virtues of a Christian gentleman. Donald was rightly regarded as a "senior figure" within the denomination, and I found great reassurance in having him as our Session Clerk. Indeed, such was Donald's bearing that our children liked to imagine that "the Colonel" had been a kind of James Bond figure serving as an MI6 agent! Upon our being called to start a church in Govan, Donald played a major role in supporting us.'

Donald's term as Session Clerk at Falkirk continued into the ministry of David Randall, who found Donald's advice and support invaluable as he came into the Free Church: 'Donald was a remarkable man, combining humility as a Christian, conviction as a leader, grace and compassion as a brother-in-Christ, musical skill as a precentor and a delightful sense of fun. He was the same with everyone, and you always found him the same. I remember my induction in 2014 having to be delayed

by two weeks so that Donald could go on a skiing holiday to mark his 80th birthday! Many in Falkirk today still testify that it was the warmth of Donald's welcome that drew them into the fellowship.'

In 2018, Donald and Alice moved to a retirement village in Maidstone, Kent to be near family, as Donald's health began to decline, and he was very happy and content there.

Donald and Alice have been blessed with six children: three girls — Catherine, Jennifer and Mary — and three boys: Leslie, Calum and Donald John. Calum, his second son, predeceased him in 2002. He had nine grandsons (Calum, Finlay, Matthew, James, Fergus, Andrew, Foster, Louis, Charlie) and two granddaughters (Stella and Rose).

In 2 Samuel 3, David stated that *'a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel'* — that is the feeling many have had on receiving the news of Donald's death. But we do not mourn as those who have no hope. No: we commend our brother to the infinite mercy of God; we commit his dear wife, Alice, and her family, to the Lord in prayer; and we give thanks for the life and legacy of a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. ●



Time is not much of a healer
when it comes to grief.



Under the Rainbow

BY **JUDITH AND JONATHAN KEEFE**

MISCARRIAGE, INFANT LOSS AND INFERTILITY SADLY WILL BE ISSUES THAT MANY OF US HAVE JOURNEYED THROUGH, either personally or alongside loved ones. The statistics are high for miscarriage in early term, and repeat miscarriages are the experience of many couples. Yet, for how many young couples (Christian or not) does the thought enter their heads that they might lose an infant in the womb? Would they have heard it spoken about it in church? Would they be aware that older couples in the fellowship — perhaps now with children — went through it maybe several times, or even that they had siblings who were short-lived on this earth? Marriage preparation classes seldom mention loss like this, yet why not, given its prevalence?

Often it takes celebrities to raise the profile of an issue like infant loss. This is perhaps to be expected in society at large, but not in the church. Not in the local fellowship where pains and griefs and losses are shared and carried, where the older are to teach and instruct the younger, and where adversity and hardship are tools of glory and grace.

Avoiding grief is a very common phenomenon in our society. We employ undertakers to keep it at arm's length. We speak of the dead in terms that avoid the impact — they aren't gone, they are just 'unseen'. We keep children away from the whole process — often the funeral service too. The church should know better but often acquiesces, perhaps thinking that grieving discredits God, or is a result of a lack of faith, or disbelief in heaven.

Yet grief is not just a healthy, natural human process but one endorsed in scripture. We well remember those words of Jesus, often repeated at committals, *'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live'* (John 11:25). But, just as often, we forget the grief of the speaker and his tears of grief — even though he must have known he was about to reverse the death process in Lazarus.

Our own experience of miscarriage will be familiar to some. We were told at a routine appointment that our baby seemed to have no heartbeat. A hospital scan an hour later would confirm this, and 48 hours later, our first baby was delivered at 21 weeks — a tiny baby girl we named Charis. This utterly devastating loss, experienced by so many, would mark the beginning of a new journey of grieving and the testing of our faith.

We went on to welcome three healthy children in the following years, but also lived through another three miscarriages. During this time it became apparent that there was a lack of Christian resources on miscarriage, infant loss and infertility. This was compounded by a lack of understanding of these issues within the church. Often people did not know how to respond with compassion and love, which seemed to make the grieving process so much more difficult.

In the midst of this process, a need became apparent for a reliable and biblical resource to support those directly affected, and also to equip family and friends and those pastoring others.

MAKING SUPPORT AVAILABLE ONLINE

In 2011, Under the Rainbow (UTR) was launched as an online resource. It became a ministry of Rutherford House in 2015. Rutherford House, now Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology (RCRT), exists to promote orthodox Christianity and to help people to think biblically and theologically. To accomplish this, their vision is to encourage scholarship and writing, to educate and train church leaders and to promote evangelical church life across Scotland.

UTR has grown over the years and now includes lived experiences of men and women alongside Bible studies, medical information and practical advice for families and carers. It is found entirely online and so is readily accessible. Central to the ethos of this resource is that it is underpinned by biblical truths surrounding loss. One of the most recent additions to the site is a video focusing on men and grieving, and features the story of Andy, whose son Jacob died soon after birth.

The platform has received much support from various contributors representing a breadth of denominations. Ministers, retired ministers, full-time Christian workers, policemen, medics, allied health professionals, stay-at-home parents and foster carers have all contributed. It is a testimony to how widespread the issue of miscarriage is within our churches.

Time is not much of a healer when it comes to grief. UTR is preparing a resource for men in prison, whose lifestyles often discourage grieving — that is until time comes in abundance in prison and grief descends. A prisoner serving a life sentence told us about his grief at losing twins over 20 years previously.

So time can't be relied on; what can? As Christians, where can we look to grieve? As the church, where can we point others to? The church should be a safe place for all of us when we are struggling, grieving or going through hardship. So often, sadly, that is not the case, and increasingly people find themselves looking outwith their church community for care and support.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Isolation is an issue for many in lockdown, and the same is true of many in grieving the loss of an unborn child. We have a God who is himself a parent, a God who is with us, a God who knows us.

He knows when we can't sit in a gathering of God's people anymore because the focus on family life in the service is unbearable. He knows the effect of infant baptisms on the grieving. He knows the wounds inflicted when others attempt to comfort with false comforts — *'At least the little one didn't actually breathe'; 'It's a blessing in disguise — your little one would probably have been handicapped'; 'You'll be pregnant again in no time'; 'They were really too young for a funeral service...'*

He knows the dark nights of all our souls and we need reminded that, like the Psalmist, we can cry out to him. We can tell him our soul is full of

troubles because his will for us has been so hard to bear (Psalm 88). We can tell him that we feel like escaping, that we feel cast away by him and that it's like we are drowning in darkness. We can ask God how we are to make it through this, and if he is really there (Psalm 121). There are layers to our grief and different people see different layers – very few seeing the deeper ones – but God knows them all. And he knows the comfort that is needed at each layer. He doesn't just know it but he provides it, above all other comforts (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

It doesn't go without saying – pray for those who have lost loved ones. Don't just tell them you will pray, pray. Don't just think about them, pray. Pray that they will have their daily bread – that their greatest needs each day will be met by their heavenly Father who knows what they need.

Amongst other things grief can cause great feelings of loneliness, causing people to feel unconnected with friends, family and often God. Pray against these feelings and for a very real presence of God's comforting Holy Spirit.

THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

The church is the place for the primary care of our souls. It is not the place simply of friendly, happy people and platitudes. It is the place where people know us best. The place where people listen before they speak. A place where people know the power of words – the honey they can be and the anguish they can bring to a heart already aching. The church is the place where others know we are struggling and lovingly re-orientate us back towards God, and not towards the world.

To speak or not to speak – many within the church have confessed struggling with this, and at times both silence and words are helpful, but people's presence seems to be more important than words. Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness are understandable, and finding words is difficult, but presence matters more.

We have a minister friend who visited our home in the immediate aftermath of our loss, and from the time he entered the house till he left half an hour later he didn't say more than ten words. He simply sat with us and wept. It wasn't awkward and it was truly comforting – he was weeping with those who weep. Job's comforters came and sat with him in silence for seven days after his loss (Job 2:13) – things went wrong when they eventually did speak! Mentioning the child might be difficult but it acknowledges the life God was forming in the womb – the significance of that creation and the sadness of its loss.

'Silent comfort is a balm. When there are no words to say the silent presence of a friend "speaks volumes". To the comforter there may be awkwardness as time passes in silence. To the bereaved there is not; time stands still' (Nigel Barge).

No one size fits all. Everyone grieves differently; some want to be busy like Martha, and others reflect and seek God quietly like Mary. Some of us like to talk about what we are feeling a lot; others are emotionally illiterate. We are all unique and the circumstances around grief are too. We don't know exactly how someone feels (even if we also have experienced the loss of a baby). But all God's people at some point need reminded that God *doesn't* promise to keep us from severe hardships, but he *does* promise to keep us through them (Isaiah 43:1-3). All God's people need their church family to care for their souls, and to speak truth to them.

The loss of a baby is not something that people 'get over'. Time may allow for the process of God's healing and work in people's hearts and lives, but the separation death causes between a parent and baby can only be fully reconciled in eternity.

And we mustn't forget – much comfort flows from the kitchen. Preparing a meal, getting the shopping, walking the dog can all seem quite insurmountable tasks in grief, and for others to help with these tasks are ways of demonstrating love.

For most the pain of child loss and the ache of disappointment doesn't get any easier with subsequent losses. But having people to speak truth, to speak to about their bereavement, and meeting others who have experienced similar difficulties can be so helpful, especially in those earlier years when the pain is raw. And it's a big part of what the church family is there for. ●

More resources on these issues are available at undertherainbow.org.uk

If you would like to know more or perhaps contribute to Under the Rainbow, you can email Jonathan or Judith at admin@undertherainbow.org.uk

Please also note Hope Deferred (hopedeferred.co.uk) and the conferences they run. Hope Deferred is a non-denominational organisation founded by Alister and Valerie MacInnes. They run conferences, assisted by a team of Christians who have personal and professional experience of infant loss, miscarriage, infertility, fertility treatment and adoption.

In addition to founding *Under the Rainbow*, Judith Keefe works in Mental Health Services as an Occupational Therapist. She supports various ministries within Robroyston Church of Scotland.

Rev. Jonathan Keefe is married to Judith. He worked in mental health, homelessness and addiction before studying for the ministry at Glasgow University and Reformed Theological Seminary in the USA. Jonathan is minister in Robroyston Church of Scotland and is a prison chaplain in Barlinnie prison.

Judith and Jonathan are both on the Board of the Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology.

MAR/APR 2021 **PRAYER DIARY**

Please send requests to Dayspring MacLeod (dayspring.macleod@icloud.com). This month we will be praying mostly about things which are discussed in this month's *Record!*

Mon 8th—Wed 10th

Pray for the Church in the wake of the Ravi Zacharias scandal, and particularly for the women who have been sexually and spiritually abused. Ask the Lord to show them that He is still the good and faithful One. Pray that hidden sin in our church leaders should be revealed, with repentance.

Thurs 11th—Sat 13th

Remember the nation of Myanmar, in such turmoil during the coup. Give thanks for the courage of the local Christians, and pray that their focus stay on demonstrating Christ's truth, grace and self-sacrifice rather than primarily political aims. Ask God to keep them safe and give them opportunity to share his good news, shining in all the chaos.

Sun 14th—Tues 16th

Give thanks for Andy Pearson's years at London City, and pray for the congregation there to be comforted and have a sense of God's nearness as he moves on. Rejoice with St Peter's too, and seek a blessing on Andy and his family's work there, that the gospel may flourish in Dundee.

Weds 17th—Fri 19th

Remember the family of Col. Donald Matheson. Although his passing was some time ago, the hearts of those who love him still ache with the loss. Pray also that God will form our own character in such wisdom, grace, and love of the Lord as this dear brother showed.

Sat 20th—Sun 21st

Pray for MC Rios, our poet this month, and her two little daughters as they continue to grieve Erick. Ask the Lord to keep his arms tight around them and give a closeness to his side which will be very precious. May he fill their every need and give balm to every sadness.

Mon 22nd—Wed 24th

Pray for the small evangelical community in France, where new legislation is tightening on the right of citizens to put faith ahead of country. May God strengthen his people to overcome, and to cling closer to him and live with a zeal that will grow the Church despite increasing pressure from the state.

Thurs 25th—Sat 27th

Pray for all those experiencing infertility, miscarriage and child loss. This is a searing ordeal for those who so long for the blessing of children and experience so many great highs and lows along the way. Ask the Lord to give them trust in his promises and processes and to let him do his good work through their 'fiery trial'. May they know the peace that passes all understanding.

Sun 28th—Tues 30th

As spring arrives, pray for all the refugees and asylum seekers who risk their lives to come to a place of freedom and peace. Pray for their safety, and that God would also use us to give help and hope to these desperate, weary 'aliens' who are so precious in his sight.

Wed 31st—Fri 2nd

Pray for Dr Adam, working in dangerous and challenging circumstances. The Lord has so often given him an impossible task, in order to show that nothing is impossible with Him! Glory to God! Pray for Adam to be upheld in his work, and that the Lord would grow his Church in this hard ground. Intercede for those who have come to faith through Adam's word, that they may persevere in the faith and lead others to Christ, even through persecution.

Sat 3rd—Tues 6th

'Because he lives, we can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives!' Take a rest from 'requesting', if you can, and instead rejoice in the Lord, rest in his hope, praise him who overcame death for those he loves. Happy Easter!

CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW PART 03 OF 04

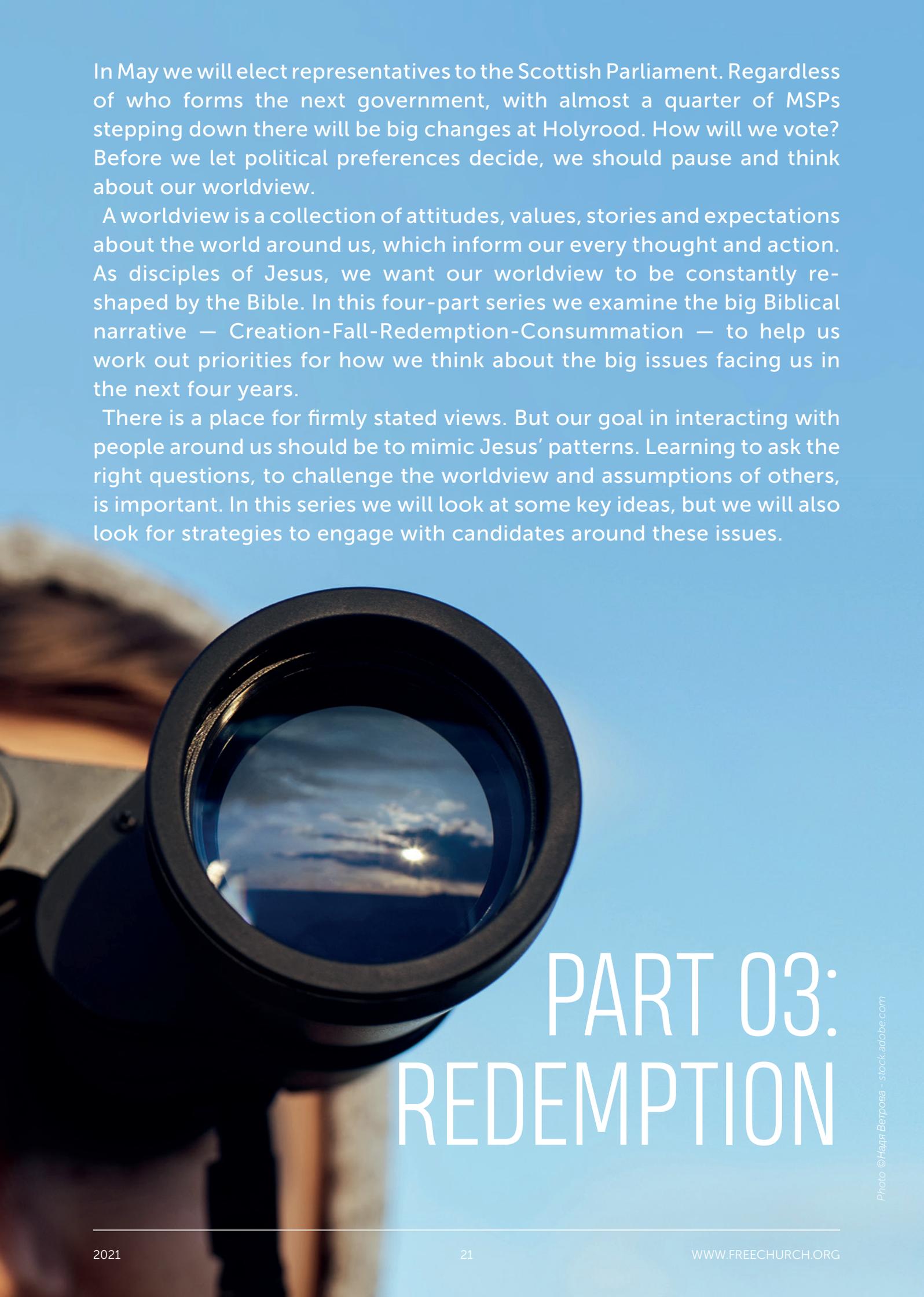
BY REV GORDON MATHESON



In May we will elect representatives to the Scottish Parliament. Regardless of who forms the next government, with almost a quarter of MSPs stepping down there will be big changes at Holyrood. How will we vote? Before we let political preferences decide, we should pause and think about our worldview.

A worldview is a collection of attitudes, values, stories and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. As disciples of Jesus, we want our worldview to be constantly reshaped by the Bible. In this four-part series we examine the big Biblical narrative — Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation — to help us work out priorities for how we think about the big issues facing us in the next four years.

There is a place for firmly stated views. But our goal in interacting with people around us should be to mimic Jesus' patterns. Learning to ask the right questions, to challenge the worldview and assumptions of others, is important. In this series we will look at some key ideas, but we will also look for strategies to engage with candidates around these issues.



PART 03: REDEMPTION

Photo ©Надя Ветрова - stock.adobe.com

These are distinct spheres, and Jesus is Lord over both. In a sense, Church and State are partners in enabling us to live out godly lives.

THE CRUX OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE IS THE INCARNATION, DEATH, RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF JESUS. These are, firstly, remarkable historical facts — the transcendent second Person of the Trinity entered the human world, participating in human experience. We might say God has ‘walked in our shoes’. But that expression is noteworthy for many of Scotland’s citizens — his life was one of considerable poverty: the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head! First-world problems were not the problems Jesus experienced in his life. That simple observation offers ample reason to stop and humbly question our priorities going into an election.

Secondly, these are also remarkable soteriological truths — he did this to save us. The driving force in this redemptive work is the love of God. Having saved us out of his love, Jesus now continues to rule, still expressing the Love of God for his creation. Jesus is worthy of our faith — trust that he knows what is best for us, and will deliver us through all our experience in life. He is worthy of our love. He is worthy of our worship.

Thirdly, the person and work of Jesus are not only historical facts and the basis for our salvation, but they are remarkable in defining both why Christians are in the world, and also how we engage with the world. Christians are in the world to be partners in mission. We need to be clear about that mission — in terms of both our goals and our method.

The ‘mission’ of the Church (not as an organisation, a local church, or even a denomination, but as the sum total of all God’s people!) is a hotly debated topic. On one side of the debate there is an emphasis on pursuing individual salvation; on the other an emphasis on pursuing social action. Both extremes are deeply flawed, and the truth is a blend of the two: we are here to make disciples, people who live out the teaching of their master. Making disciples is a task that involves not just telling, but also showing, the love of God towards us. It involves bringing the Gospel to people, both to lead them to conversion, and to teach them how to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

If we go back to the language of imaging-bearing (see Part 1 of this series), disciples bear the image of Jesus, who is himself the perfect image of God. Thus, being a disciple means living out the character of Jesus. The character of Jesus is revealed in the Gospel — and it is through constant exposure to the Gospel that we grow into that character.

So, in terms of how a Christian worldview helps us approach the Scottish Parliament elections, we need to tease out Gospel priorities and apply them to our setting. The story of redemption has far-reaching consequences.

JESUS IS LORD

This is no mere slogan. The Lordship of Jesus is the reality of right now. He sits with the Father, enthroned over Heaven and Earth, and will one day return as judge. Whenever we talk about Jesus’ Lordship in terms of earthly politics, we have to acknowledge there are risks. It is not the job of the church to wield temporal power, or even to expect the State to mirror exactly the civil laws of the Old Testament. Nor is it right that the State wield spiritual power belonging to the Church: for example, by telling us what to preach.

These are distinct spheres, and Jesus is Lord over both. In a sense, Church and State are partners in enabling us to live out godly lives. So, we should desire our lawmakers to enact laws in keeping with God’s revealed will in the Bible (which we’ll come back to). We should also expect the State to provide a safe environment in which all people, including those in the Church, may flourish. Where we give collective assent to the state — in areas like education, healthcare, or managing infrastructure — we should expect them to do so with integrity, not only as our servants, but as servants of God.

That leads us to two immediate conclusions: firstly, a Christian worldview compels us to be involved in the political process, because Jesus is Lord. Secondly, we dare not dislocate Christ’s standards from what is politically expedient. For example, we might share a particular party’s long-term political goal, but if the route to that is entirely unworthy of Christ’s disciples, we should be wary of investing our energy in it.

The Lordship of Jesus has, however, a more fundamental influence in our society. The experience of human flourishing was transformed through the revolutionary claims of the early church, completely reorientating the morality and ideas framing the Greco-Roman world. The Greek and Roman worldview was essentially Darwinian: the strong not only survive, but thrive. As the Gospel spread through the Roman Empire, it upturned that status quo. Their culture had no problem with a God who was lord of heaven — a faraway realm beyond earth and sky. But the Lordship of Jesus extends

We might share a particular party's long-term political goal, but if the route to that is entirely unworthy of Christ's disciples, we should be wary of investing our energy in it.

to this world. Human authority and morality were challenged by the claim of Jesus' Lordship. His disciples cared for the vulnerable and the sick, even in times of pandemic. Humanitarian ideas, which we take for granted today, were not hallmarks of the Gentile societies into which the Gospel spread. These things are the fruits of Gospel transformation. Our liberties are built on the outworking of the claim of Jesus' Lordship. Our society is taking enormous risks as it rejects these claims today

Early Christianity also produced a desecularisation of politics. In the Roman Empire, politics and religion were interwoven. Emperors could, and did, assume divine titles, and expected to be worshipped. Politics, and the power it offered, was sacred. Roman society viewed those who didn't worship Caesar and the Imperial Cult as a destabilising threat. But, under a Christian worldview, political leaders are merely human, answerable to the same ultimate judge as the rest of us. Our culture hasn't totally abandoned this, yet! But we should be alert. Politics — particularly tribal politics — can take on a religious role in our lives. We can view our political leaders as infallible, beyond question — or accountability. Our political structures may be heading the same way as the Roman Cult, ostracising those who don't follow and cheer the political orthodoxy of the day. The remedy we offer is that Jesus is Lord, and no human can, or should, command conscience. Sadly, finding such free-thinking politicians can be a challenge.

GRACE AND TRUTH

Every election has themes. This May, the election will focus on COVID recovery; or on the route towards a new Independence referendum; the reality of ever-increasing climate change implies that should be a key theme too. On every issue there are competing truth claims — and spin. We should note that the Bible is not spin; it is not God's take on events. Holding objective truth as our guide, we cannot hide objective truth as it suits us — or suits our political heroes!

That aside, the reality we face as Christians is that our central source of truth is increasingly rejected as truth at all. God's self-revelation in the Bible is part of his redemptive purpose. It is in the Bible that we find the truth about Jesus and the Gospel. It is also how God has revealed his will to us. It is where we find the message of the teacher, whose disciples we are. The Bible's truth

is relevant to every sphere of human experience — what we believe about God, but also how we live with one another: in the arts and sciences, in families and other societal structures, and in public politics. This is a challenging claim to make in a pluralistic society, especially one where the (false) assumption is that secularism is 'neutral' and safe.

Many Christians feel lost in our society. The 'values' we are familiar with seem to have been lost in our contemporary culture. We assumed everyone would keep on believing in self-evident objective truth, sharing the generally Christian worldview that accepted biblical morality, and so on. This makes it very difficult to choose how to cast a vote — every option seems like a poor choice from a biblical standpoint.

Scotland in 2021 has already undergone a radical change. Western nations have been shaped by two types of revolution. On the one hand there were essentially God-acknowledging revolutions: the Netherlands from Spanish rule in 1581, the overthrow of James II/VII in the 'Glorious Revolution' in 1688, and the American Revolution in 1776. A shared theme in all was a philosophically Calvinistic recognition of a sovereign God who enables human flourishing. On the other hand, the French Revolution in 1789 and the Russian Revolution in 1917 were characterised by atheistic populism, and the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Scotland is now firmly in the latter camp. A vote cast at the ballot box is not going to change this.

So how should we approach this election? I would suggest we should do so as evangelists. By being about the good news of God's grace. Revolutionary France and Russia were horrific places to live. Grace was often absent. Justice was certainly pursued, with a vengeance. Mercy was occasionally exercised. But human flourishing has never thrived on the basis of mere justice (getting what you deserve) or even mercy (not getting what you deserve). Important though justice and mercy are, human flourishing also needs grace (getting what you don't deserve). This is foremost displayed in the Gospel — and is the essence of God's character.

So, let us engage in this election to speak of grace, but also to bring, where we may, God's grace into the life of our nation.. ●

The Rev. Gordon Matheson is the minister of Sleat & Strath Free Church on the Isle of Skye.



DAYSPRING MACLEOD mixes her metaphors

The Driver, the Lion and the Child

THERE'S A PHRASE WHICH YOU'LL OFTEN FIND EMBLAZONED ON T-SHIRTS AND TRAVEL MUGS AT AMERICAN STORES: **JESUS IS MY COPILOT**. Like many colloquial sayings, it is well-meaning.

The idea is to identify the wearer as someone who is conscious of Jesus' presence with them, open to his input and guidance at all times. From a less pithy but more biblical point of view, we can declare that Jesus is also the driver, steering wheel, seat belt, road, and destination. If that still sounds too neat, there's a verse to back it up — Psalm 18:2. 'The Lord is my rock, *and* my fortress, *and* my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield, *and* the horn of my salvation, *and* my high tower' (KJV, emphasis mine).

Surely, for metaphor's sake, it would have been enough to say 'the Lord is my deliverer,' or 'the Lord is my shield'. But David, who at the time he wrote this had just been delivered from Saul, saw God's hand in absolutely everything. He was effusive in his praise because God had been effusive in his care. David rightly knew that he had accomplished nothing by himself, and he had to show off every element of God's protection of him.

The problem with 'Jesus is my copilot' is, of course, that the copilot is not in control. The *pilot* is — and the pilot, implicit in the saying, is still 'me'. The person wearing that T-shirt is witnessing their belief in Jesus, but also unwittingly testifying to their own sufficiency to sit in the driver's seat.

This is not an American problem, only an American phrase. The problem — *I might believe in Jesus, but I have faith in myself* — is a human one. Even as believers we must fight our sin nature, our self-idolatry, to the death every day, in order to be surrendered to Christ living in us. Numerous writers and thinkers have observed, 'Every man is the hero of his own story.' Christians are in the unusual position — paradoxically both liberating and sacrificial — of recognising Another as the hero of their story, and themselves as a servant, a follower of that hero.

***We all want a home where we can walk in, lay
our burdens down, and breathe a sigh of relief.
What is heaven if not that?***

We are promised not only self-sacrifice, but active suffering. Very often that suffering comprises not only the actual outward trial — illness, broken relationships, poverty, stress — but also the discovery that we must die to ourselves in the midst of it. Die to our own strength, die to our own desired outcome, die to our attitudes of anger or despair, die to our own wisdom. A dear friend of mine has always lived a blessed and fruitful life — but in the last two years has encountered terrible trials and has found herself overwhelmed in ever increasing degrees. As I was praying for her, the passage that came to my mind was the honeycomb in Samson's dead lion. Even as my friend saw her own strength and ability fail her, I could sense already the germs of a new sweetness, the absolute sustenance of God's faithfulness. For Christians, death and life always go hand in hand; one always leads to the other. Our suffering is real, but it always encapsulates hope. Our trials pass with time and the memory fades, but what we have discovered of God's goodness, faithfulness and beauty remain like hidden treasures.

Coronavirus has been, for me, more an endurance test than a time of outright suffering, though I have also had my moments of sadness and anxiety in its midst. In the last few months of 2020, though, I came to feel almost as if I were a new Christian all over again — a painful time of seeing my own heart, repenting, and then a joyful longing for Christ's company and renewal. I felt at the start of 2020 that God wanted to show me in that year that he could accomplish what I could not. Naturally I took that to mean that he would change circumstances! What I never expected was him changing my own heart. I am grateful for that 'honey' from the dead lion of my inabilities.

Like many of you, this past year has left me feeling, as much as anything else, simply stuck. Stuck not only in circumstances but in geography! So much human emotional support has been stripped away: little opportunity to talk with friends, no play groups to share the common parental exhaustion of a Monday morning, less childcare available to create thinking space, and most of all, no visits home. Even now, at the start of middle age, I often feel like Solomon as he ascended the throne: *'And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in'* (1 Kings 3:7). He's not abnegating his duties, as Moses and Jeremiah were tempted to (Ex. 4:10, Jer. 1:7) on account of their youth or inexperience; rather he is presenting to the Lord his feeling of unworthiness and insufficiency *in order to*

ask for the wisdom and strength he needs to carry out the work to which he has been called.

His father, King David, had felt just the same! *'When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up'* (Psalm 27:10). David wrote that as a grown-up, but even he felt that longing for someone to 'take him up'. We all have insecurities. We all want someone to just pick us up and tell us it will be all right from time to time. We all want a home where we can walk in, lay our burdens down, and breathe a sigh of relief. What is heaven if not that?

The verse I kept seeing at the start of 2021, and which has been my comfort, is the answer to those longings — Isaiah 46:4b. *'Even to your old age I am he, and to grey hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save'* (ESV). This is such a welcome assurance that all of us remain like little children — often painfully aware of our own lack of wisdom or ability — but, no matter how old we get, we never have to feel alone. We never have to carry the world on our shoulders. We can always run to the Father and be scooped up in his arms, and taught at his knee, and rescued when we are out of our depth.

I've come belatedly to the point that I must stop longing for 'home'. America is no longer the place to lay down my burdens, no longer the goal to reach in order to feel refreshed. Psalm 45 is like an arrow targeted just for me: *'Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house...In place of your fathers shall be your sons; you will make them princes in all the earth'* (vv10, 16 ESV). Now, even if I still feel too unsuited and too overwhelmed and even too tired for the role God has called me to, as a mother to small children, I know that I can go to the Father for renewal and to lay down my burdens, wherever I am. I don't have to wait, for America to do that.

If you are still in the driver's seat of your life, and your vehicle is careening out of control; if you are a lion in the throes of suffering, without even a sniff of honey on the air; if you are a child that doesn't know how to come in or out, and feels anxious even about trying to keep going — there is an answer. Climb up on the Father's lap and hear his reassuring voice. You will always be welcomed there, never turned away, never find it out of reach, and his strength and love will never fail. ●

Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.
Psalm 131:2 NKJV

STUDYING THE RESURRECTION RAISES UNEXPECTED PROBLEMS. Between our spiritual resurrection, when we become believers, and our physical resurrection there is our death, unless the Lord returns first.

How can I be sure, as I approach death as a believer, that my soul will go to heaven? Is it possible that I might 'slip through the net', as it were, and end up in hell? The problem is worrying but the solution is found in the Word.

In John 3:18 Jesus says this: *'... whoever does not believe [in the Son] stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son'*. That defines my problem. The whole human race is condemned, and when each person dies immediate judgement is unnecessary: they are already condemned and their soul must inevitably go to hell, the place of waiting till the General Resurrection and Judgement. (If you are not a believer, or have unbelieving family or friends, this line of thought is upsetting. But it is the teaching of Scripture. Just be careful in your judgment of the spiritual condition of others.)

In John 5:24 Jesus says: *'... whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.'* Just as the natural destination of the soul of the unbeliever is hell, the natural destination of the soul of the believer is heaven. When you become a Christian, when you start to follow Jesus, you change not only the whole direction of your life but also the direction of your death. As Paul says, *'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'* (Rom. 8:1,2).

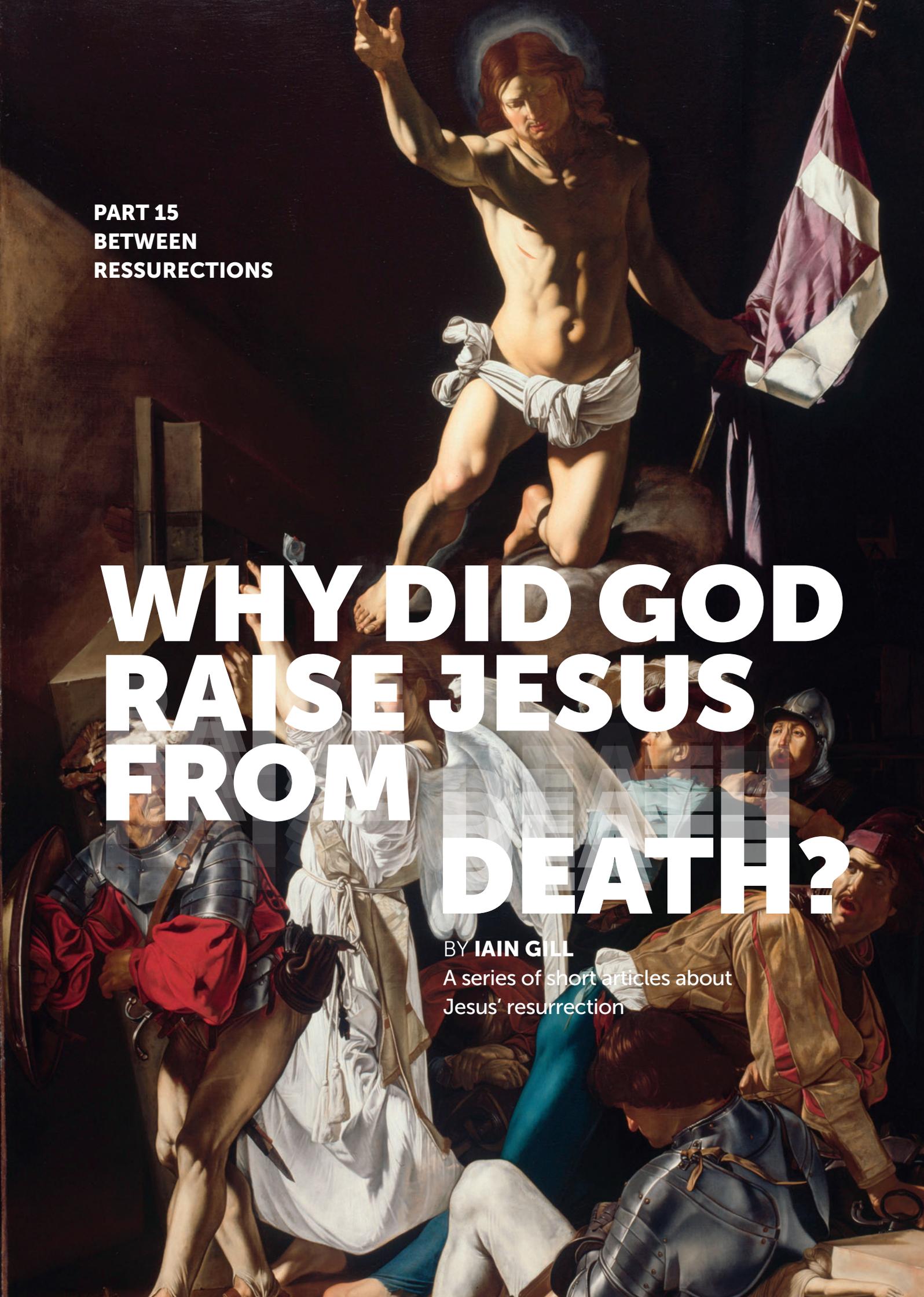
So much for the theory. But what about the practice? What comfort do the Scriptures offer as to the actual journey through the valley of the shadow of death?

The burial of Jesus confirms the reality of his death and the depth of his humiliation. The burial also tells us that every path we may have to walk has previously been trod by Jesus, not only in life but also in death.

In the abyss of the unknown, between life flickering in its last moment, and death, when we believe we as believers will end up in heaven — at that precise point when our souls could go to heaven or to hell — Jesus has been through that experience. In burial he entered into that awful place, the dark valley of the shadow of death. He went there before us; he experienced the full impact of death; and in doing this he prepared the way. In his death, burial and resurrection Jesus removed the sting of death and the victory of the grave.

As well as preparation there is also presence. The 23rd Psalm teaches us that our Shepherd will walk with us, guiding and protecting. ●

Though I walk in death's valley, where darkness is near,
Because you are with me, no evil I'll fear;
Your rod and your staff bring me comfort and cheer.



**PART 15
BETWEEN
RESSURECTIONS**

WHY DID GOD RAISE JESUS FROM DEATH?

BY **IAIN GILL**

A series of short articles about
Jesus' resurrection

In the line of duty

In the **This is my story** devotional series, **REV. DAVID J RANDALL** imagines how some of the Bible's characters might tell us their story. Some are not headline characters, but they all had a part to play in the great drama of God's plan, given to us in Scripture. Hebrews 11:4 says of one character, 'though he died, he still speaks'. May the stories of these Bible characters from yesterday help us today to trust, follow, love and serve *the* Character of the Bible.

YOU'LL ONLY FIND MY NAME IN ONE VERSE IN THE WHOLE BIBLE. The incident in which I feature is mentioned in all four gospels, but it's only John who records my name.

I am Malchus, a servant of the Jewish High Priest, and on one particular night we had our orders to go and arrest a teacher called Jesus. It sounded like a fairly simple assignment and we didn't expect any trouble.

We did take some weapons with us, but everybody knew that the man preached love and non-violence, so I was staggered when one of his followers drew a sword and slashed at me. I guess he meant to take off my head, not just my ear, and if their leader hadn't intervened I suppose Peter would have struck again.

I was shaken. Our intelligence hadn't led us to think that they would be armed in any way, but Peter must have suspected something and decided that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

What a shock it was! I suppose adrenalin helped with the immediate pain, but as I grabbed the side of my head I realised that he had completely severed my ear.

I don't know why someone didn't then give the order to attack the lot of them. It was a strange atmosphere, and the odd thing is that the main Man seemed to take control of the situation. Weird it was — we had been sent to arrest *him*, and yet he seemed to be calling the shots. And I could hardly believe it when he calmly picked up the detached ear, put his hands on me and restored it.

Since then I've heard stories about other miracles he's said to have done — giving sight to the blind, walking on water, feeding a multitude with five loaves and two fish. Before then, I would have dismissed it all as the crazy delusions of an extreme cult, but of course the events of that night changed my mind.

But the next day they crucified him, and I supposed that that was the end of any miracles.

Certainly, he had a presence. A power that had nothing to do with swords and weapons. As far as I'm aware, he didn't have any military or political power, and yet I have a feeling that his actions and words are going to live on long after him.

A few days before, I had witnessed a ruckus in the



temple courts — I'm a servant of the High Priest, after all. Things were going on pretty much as usual, with crowds of people around because of the Passover festival. People had to offer sacrifices and pay the temple tax and so there had to be places where they could buy something to offer and exchange their currency for the Tyrian coinage in which the temple tax had to be paid. Many of us felt that some of the priests were pretty good at lining their own pockets; I mean, the prices they charged were ridiculous.

And Jesus took them on! It was amazing to see. He went striding through the temple courts and started overturning tables and shouting that this was meant to be God's house, not a market.

Later we were all questioned about why we hadn't stopped him, and I still wonder about that. It was the same as later in the garden — there was just *something* about him — I don't know, a sense of authority, as if he had every right to do what he was doing.

But, of course, our bosses were livid. To think that a country bumpkin from Galilee should question and defy them! *They* were the religious leaders and they were used to controlling what went on in the temple courts. Yet here was this upstart from rural Galilee acting as if the temple belonged to him and he had the right to say what should or shouldn't happen there.

I think it was really that incident that sealed his fate. The priests were enraged and they started plotting. They had already wanted to get rid of him, but this was a challenge to their authority. Either they had to go — or he had to be removed. That's why they'd sent us to Gethsemane to bring him in.

The fact that Jesus was popular among many of the ordinary people made it difficult for them, plus the fact that they didn't have the legal right to condemn anyone to death. For that they had to get the approval of the Roman governor and that wasn't going to be easy. Mostly, governors took little interest in Jewish religious matters. It was only when things took on a political slant that their ears would prick up and they would take action — decisive, brutal action usually.

So, rather than bringing religious charges against Jesus, they decided to accuse him of treason. That was sure to get Pilate's attention! They say Pilate had skeletons in his cupboard and he certainly wouldn't want bad reports going in to Rome about

his administration.

So when they accused Jesus of defying the authority of Caesar, Pilate couldn't afford to be seen as weak. After trying in various ways to wash his hands of the whole business (literally), in the end he signed the warrant.

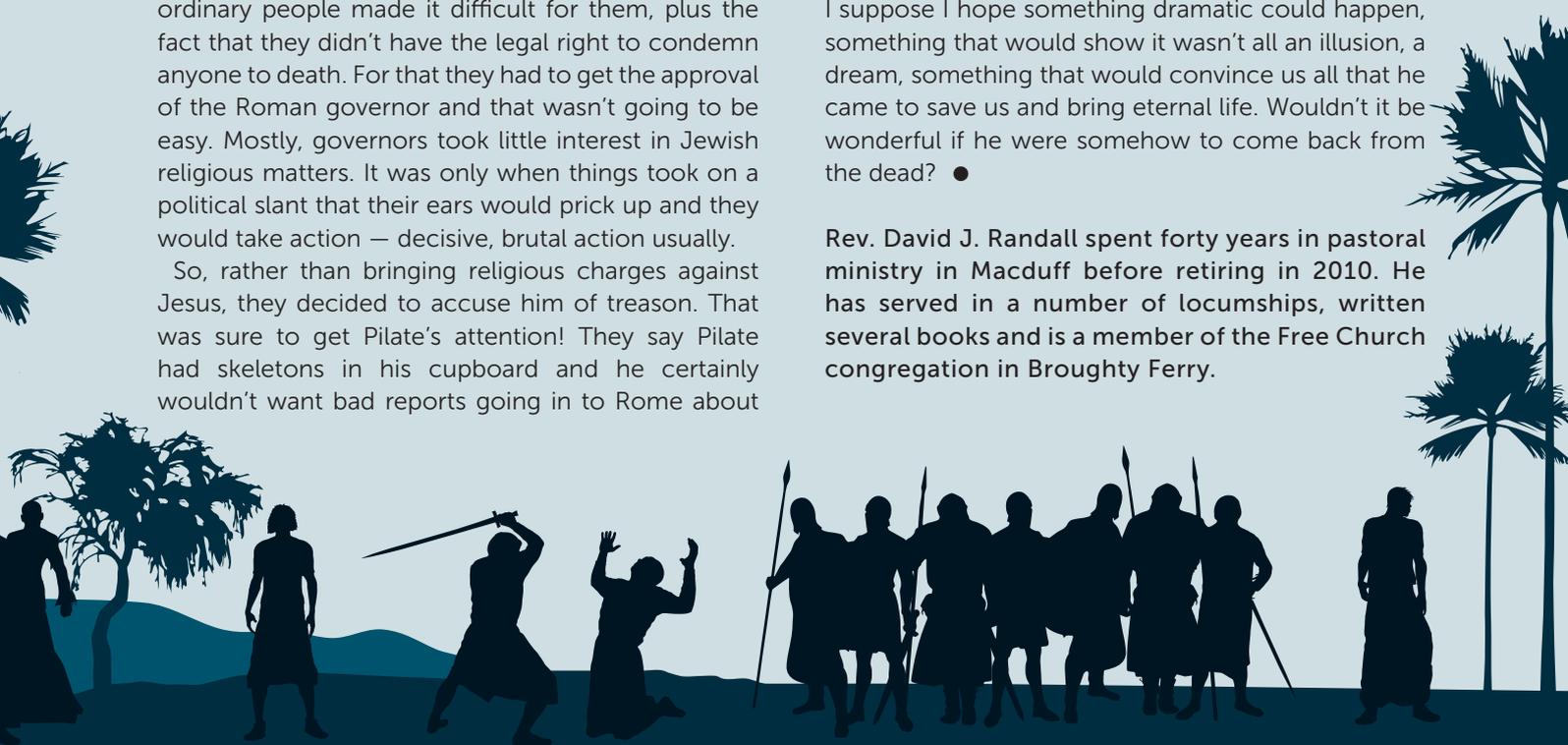
Well, I've seen many crucifixions in my time — it's a terrible way of killing people. Usually guys screamed and roared in their agonies for ages before they finally sank down in exhaustion and death. But Jesus was different. Instead of the usual screams and curses, he said some amazing things. He was concerned that his mother should be looked after. He spoke to one of the other victims about seeing him in paradise. He even prayed that God would forgive his enemies. Not the usual kind of victim at all.

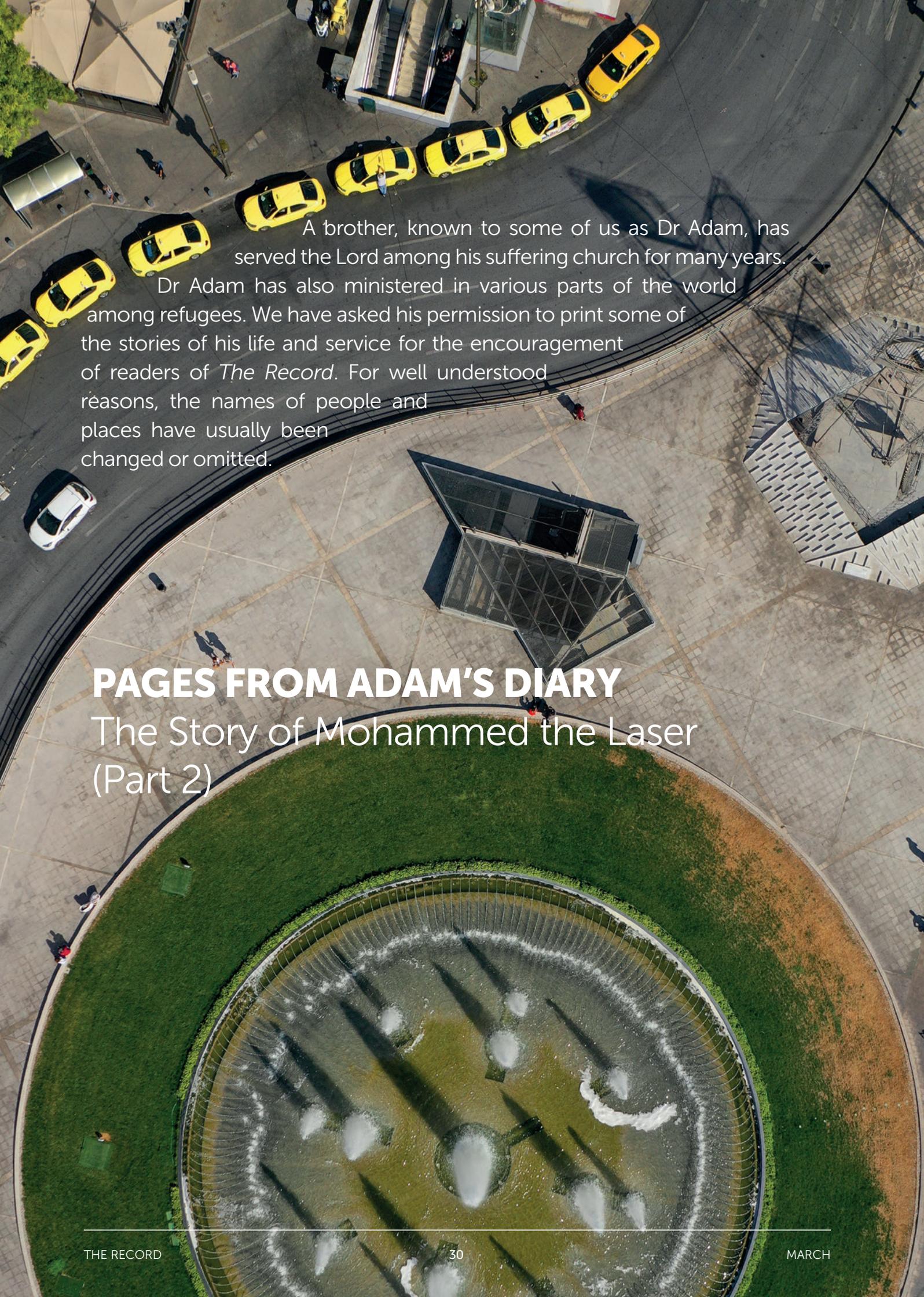
In fact, I've come to wonder if he was a victim. It looked more as if he was the One in control, and when he eventually cried out, 'It is finished', it didn't sound like a weary cry of defeat — more like a shout of victory.

It confirmed what I felt in the garden. I nearly lost my life that night; Peter wasn't kidding when he slashed at me. But it was Jesus' action that arrested *me*. I thought: if he can perform a miracle like that, maybe there really is something special about him.

It's hard to dismiss him as just another in the succession of would-be messiahs. Something in me wants to believe in him. I mean, there's much about all our temple ritual that's rotten and corrupt, but in the sacred scrolls there are prophecies of a coming Saviour. I've heard readings about a suffering servant who would come and take upon himself the sins of the world — all sorts of things that were often forgotten. I suppose I hope something dramatic could happen, something that would show it wasn't all an illusion, a dream, something that would convince us all that he came to save us and bring eternal life. Wouldn't it be wonderful if he were somehow to come back from the dead? ●

Rev. David J. Randall spent forty years in pastoral ministry in Macduff before retiring in 2010. He has served in a number of locumships, written several books and is a member of the Free Church congregation in Broughty Ferry.



An aerial, top-down view of a circular plaza. In the center is a large, circular fountain with multiple jets of water spraying upwards. The fountain is surrounded by a green lawn. Beyond the lawn is a paved walkway with a grid pattern. A curved road with a black railing runs along the edge of the plaza. Several yellow taxis are parked or moving along the road. In the background, there are modern buildings, including one with a prominent glass and metal structure. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

A brother, known to some of us as Dr Adam, has served the Lord among his suffering church for many years.

Dr Adam has also ministered in various parts of the world among refugees. We have asked his permission to print some of the stories of his life and service for the encouragement of readers of *The Record*. For well understood reasons, the names of people and places have usually been changed or omitted.

PAGES FROM ADAM'S DIARY

The Story of Mohammed the Laser (Part 2)

As the days and weeks passed, the One who is full of grace and truth proved me wrong.

In my previous article, I introduced you to a man whom I had thought was irredeemable. His name was Mohammad, nicknamed 'Laser', and known to his adversaries and bosom buddies as 'Mamad Laser'. He was the embodiment of a thug who belonged to the age of Al Capone. I met Mohammad in Athens, Greece while I was serving our Lord among Afghan refugees. We needed to send a young woman urgently back to her family in Central Asia. She had been beguiled and brought to Greece by an older man. She came to faith in Christ in one of our meetings and asked us to help her to find a way out of her terrible straits so that she could return to her husband and young daughter. However, her passport was in the possession of the man who had brought her to Greece. We needed to urgently get her a replacement passport. To go through the normal process would have taken weeks, if not months, and we needed to return her quickly. At this point, someone told my friend Ali and me about Mohammad Laser. We were told he might be able to help us because of his diplomatic connections in that particular embassy.

In the centre of Athens there is a square called Omonoia. We were told that was Mohammad Laser's hangout. Ali and I took a taxi and went to Omonoia Square and found our man standing next to a telephone kiosk scouting the landscape and cracking sunflower seeds, the debris of which had formed a circular mound around his feet. We went near and asked him, 'Are you Mr. Mohammad?'

His eyes narrowed like a fox. After he looked us over he concluded we were not there for a brawl.

'What do you want?' he retorted.

We explained to him who we were and our predicament.

'Oh, yes. I have heard about you guys. Christians, ha? Is it true,' he asked, 'that some Christians are given a spirit who gives them supernatural power?'

I answered that the person to whom he was alluding was the Holy Spirit, who was given to all who believed in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord!

'I would like to have this Spirit,' said Mohammad the Laser, 'So, I will help you with what you need, and you will help me with what I need. What do you say?'

Ali and I looked at each other, unsure as to what to say!

'It is not for us to give,' Ali responded. 'God is the only person who can give the Holy Spirit. And he gives the Spirit only to those who turn from their sins, believe in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and take up their cross and follow him.'

'Take up what?'

'When we say "take up the cross",' I explained,

'what we mean is that we follow the Lord in love and devotion even if it will require our very lives. "The cross" for followers of Christ not only speaks of the propitious, vicarious, substitutionary atonement of our Saviour, but a life of selflessness, self-giving and sacrifice.'

He was staring at me as though he had just heard gibberish which needed to be deciphered for him (I explained the doctrine for him in a later meeting).

For now, he changed the subject and asked us for the details of the young woman we were trying to send back and for a passport picture. That evening we met him again and gave him the items he had asked for.

A few days later, he contacted us and asked us to meet him. We did. He pulled out of his coat pocket a passport and handed it to us. It looked authentic. However, neither Ali nor I could bring ourselves to ask him if it was a genuine passport or one of his own productions.

To make a long story short, we sent that young lady back to her family and, as I told you in the previous article, the Lord brought an incredible transformation in, and fruit from, the life and destiny of that simple, guileless young woman! And not only in her life, but also in the life of her husband. God has brought forth extraordinary fruits of salvation and righteousness through the courage, sacrifice and pure witness to our Saviour of this couple (Daniel 12:3).

Back to our friend, the Laser.

The day after he had given us the passport, he contacted us again. He insisted that he wanted to know how he might receive the Holy Spirit so that he would have supernatural power.

I took him to a coffee shop and sat there for several hours explaining to him the gospel. I told him that the principal work of the Holy Spirit was not to give us supernatural power for mischief but to turn us from evil and wickedness to righteousness. I told him that the Spirit enables us to do the will of God and to be his light in this present darkness.

'The power of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a transforming power whereby sinners are changed into saints. The Spirit of God gives those who believe in Christ's redeeming work of salvation the grace and courage to do the work of God and to be the light of Christ in this present world which is submerged in moral and spiritual darkness,' I explained.

I was not certain whether my words registered in his mind.

But as I was speaking to him, several times I noticed his eyes filled with tears, and he wiped his nose and continued to listen.

'The power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in our ►►

The Holy Spirit did give me power — power to survive catastrophic loss.

weakness and he changes us to be like Christ. The Holy Spirit forms in us the virtues of our Lord. The Holy Spirit fashions, as it were, on the tablets of our souls the image of Christ. We become more and more like him,' I told Mohammad (Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19).

When I finally finished, he said, 'I want to become a Christian and receive the Holy Spirit. How do I do it?'

I explained the gospel to him again.

'Ma-a-an, I am ready! What do I do now to receive the Holy Spirit?' he asked.

Although I was still somewhat skeptical that a hardened scoundrel like him would have truly come to the saving knowledge of our Saviour, nevertheless, I asked him to bow his head and pray with me — which he did.

Afterward, he said, 'Doctor, I did not feel anything. Are you not supposed to feel something?'

Somewhat exasperated, I explained to him that it was not a matter of feeling. It was a matter of faith and fruit.

'The fruit of the changes in your life and behaviour will show whether, in fact, the Holy Spirit is in your heart.'

'Fruit? What fruit?' he asked.

I read to him Galatians 5:19-24.

'OK. OK. I am now illuminated.'

Next, he wanted to be baptised, not in a church but in the sea. So he was taken to the shores of the Aegean Sea in Athens and baptised.

I had to leave Greece and return home. But my friend Ali kept me posted on Laser's progress. As the days and weeks passed, the One who is full of grace and truth proved me wrong. I had judged that Mohammad seemed beyond redemption. The Lord showed me the disparity between how he sees and how man sees, how God renders judgment and how man makes judgment. He knows the very intent and the inner reality of our hearts and we only see the exterior. Our Saviour also reminded me that the one who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:36-50). In fact, in spite of his convoluted motives, the simple, childlike faith of Mohammed the Laser was sincere and genuine. The Spirit of God had pierced his heart, breathed life into him, opened his eyes so he could now believe and transformed that sinner into a saint.

As time passed, Mohammad completely turned away from his criminal past. About five months later, I was back in Greece again. As soon as I arrived at the airport, I was told that Laser was expecting me. When I saw him, his demeanour had changed. The hardness, the darkness in his face was gone and was replaced with light. He told me, 'Brother, with my history, I can't stay in Greece anymore. I am thinking

that I will go to Germany. Do you know a Christian there to help me?'

I contacted a devoted friend of mine in Germany and sent Mohammad to his care.

That brother disciplined Mohammad.

In Hamburg, Mohammad met a lovely German Christian lady whom he married. But not long after their marriage, she was tragically killed in a car accident.

When I went to Germany to console him, sobbing through tears, he reminded me of his desire to receive the Holy Spirit so he would be given supernatural power — 'Do you remember?' I replied that indeed I remembered! He said, 'The Holy Spirit did give me power — power to survive the catastrophic loss of someone I have loved more than my life!'

There are times that words fail us. I could not find words to comfort him. The journey through the purifying furnace of fire for my friend the Laser had begun. I have learned in these years of walking with our Saviour through the fields of this world that all those whom our heavenly Father chooses to change this present darkness are first sent to pass through the furnace of trials.

But I have also learned, *'When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, my grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply. The flames shall not hurt you; I only design, your dross to consume and the gold to refine!'*

The Spirit of God transformed that man into a fisher of men. Brother Mo, as he is now called, works in a depot loading and unloading lorries and spends his earnings to serve our Lord as an itinerate evangelist. Who would have ever imagined that?! Among the people he has led to the Lord is a distinguished professor in the University of Hamburg. It is one of the many unbelievable, beautiful paradoxes in the kingdom of God.

In the next and the last part of this story, I will tell you of an evangelistic gathering which our brother Mohammad and his lecturer friend organised, in which a mocker of the Lord was mocked when his pants were set on fire. To be continued! ●

Several readers have asked how they can support Adam's ministry. For information about the Adam Support Group, please contact either:

Evan Macdonald (Chairman)

evan.m@ntlworld.com

07981 756786

or

John MacPherson (Secretary)

johnmmacpherson@btinternet.com

07484 397670

POETRY PAGE

A TRAIN CALLED TIME

BY MAIRI-CATHERINE RIOS

Time drew close to the platform and slowed,
He stepped off for just a second,
Right behind us,
any minute now.
"He'll be here any minute now"

Yet time
shuddered and creaked,
and pulled slowly
away from the platform,
Pulled us slowly apart
His beautiful face, as I looked on,
was now still — eyes closed,
For just a moment —
time stopped and stayed. Just for that moment.
I reached out across the platform and stroked his cheek,
Tracing the lines I knew so well,
Ran fingers through his hair.

Time hauled
and pulled us on
as they took him away
Hands and arms stretched out of the windows, longing.
Further and further, and further we go on —
time rushing faster, yet at the same time,
creeping slow.
With every move forward, we leave him behind —
Hearts in pieces,
so many pieces,
Darkness in mind

We run back through the carriages — calling his name — desperate.
Photos and videos line the walls —
Beautiful memories of smiles and animation
That now mock with their vibrancy and joy,

Now so still and quiet
So quiet.

Such a vacuum of sorrow, dark and haunting
How can we keep moving — how is he not here?
"Please stop time! We left him! This is not meant to be!"
How I long to have stepped off when he did
Screaming within
and crying without
yet nothing can be done
"we can't fix this sweetheart.
I'm sorry — it is done.
I'll cling tight to Jesus,
and you hold tight to mum"

Mairi-Catherine (MC) Rios is a daughter of the Free Church manse, growing up in Iver Martin's charges of Stornoway and Aberdeen as well as in Edinburgh. After volunteering in Peru as a teacher and nurse for several summers, she married Erick Rios in 2010 and moved to Lima permanently. Erick was very suddenly called home to heaven in January 2020, while on holiday in Scotland. *A Train Called Time* is MC's meditation of her last moments with him and of raising their two small girls alone, written to mark the first anniversary of his passing. ●

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BOOK REVIEWS

Our books this month have a distinctly 'mission-hearted' flavour to them, as well as a dash of Puritan wisdom and seasonal words from Sinclair Ferguson. We hope you enjoy them! All are available from Free Church Books (<https://thefree.church/shop>), unless otherwise stated.

BY FAITH

THOMAS MANTON (2000)

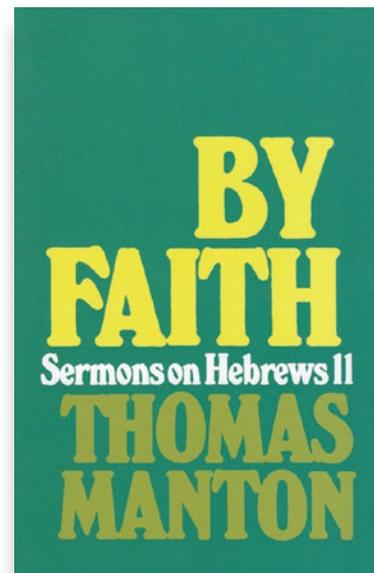
By Faith is 20 years old, but is being reviewed now as a compilation of three volumes of a newly released 22-volume set of Manton's works, also published by Banner of Truth. Read the near-700 pages of this book and you may want to buy the full set!

Sixty-five sermons on Hebrews 11 make for a meaty read, but this is meat that is cooked until it is tender and well worth digesting. Manton, in typical Puritan style, comprehensively tackles every lesson that can be drawn from the text. He highlights not only the historical progression of the characters but also the progression of revelation, e.g. "Abel was a type of Christ's death, and Enoch...a type of his ascension." There is a lot to be learned in each sermon and a comprehensive presentation of the gospel in the collected set.

The language is, not surprisingly, a little dated but not overly so. Manton is easy to read but I noticed that he seemed to get steadily better as I progressed. This may simply have been me becoming more attuned to his style of expression. The three sermons on Moses refusing to be known as Pharaoh's son were a highlight. He brings out superbly how Moses had the best of what the world could offer but it was as nothing compared to identifying himself with God's people as God's servant. ●

This book, and the full set of Thomas Manton's 'Works', is available from Banner of Truth.

Duncan MacPherson, North Harris Free Church



A STRANGE UNMAKING

FIONA LYN CHRISTIE (2020)

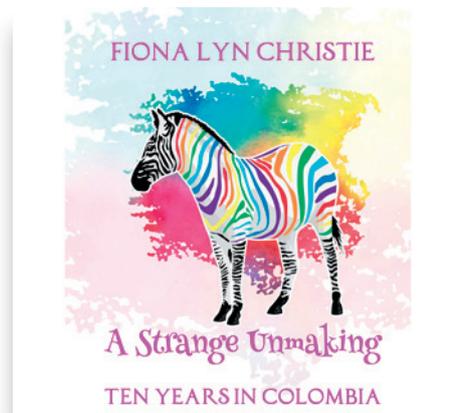
I loved this unusual book. The content comprises excerpts from the author's blog posts, reflections, prayer letters, poems and prose fiction during ten years of missionary work in Colombia from 2008-2018. She defines her time in this country as an ultimately fruitful 'breaking and re-making' by the Lord by means of an 'un-making'. In her own words: 'To be re-made, I had to be un-made' (p.10).

The book is extremely well written, but is not a 'run of the mill' chronological account of daily missionary life. There are very short chapters and lots of lists and numbered facts, but these are very revealing about both the author and the character of Colombia and its people. Her vivid, raw and honest recollections, ranging from the extremely shocking to the extremely humorous, fascinated me and it is obvious that her experiences have changed her profoundly. We glean spiritual lessons from the author's life and work, without their being imposed on us, as with some similar books.

If you want to learn about the work of furthering the Gospel in certain parts of Colombia by an author who does not hide the challenges and struggles in her Christian walk, I highly recommend this book. ●

This book is available to purchase from Amazon.

Judith Lewis, Tabernacle Baptist Church, Llwynhendy



A TASTE OF ASIA

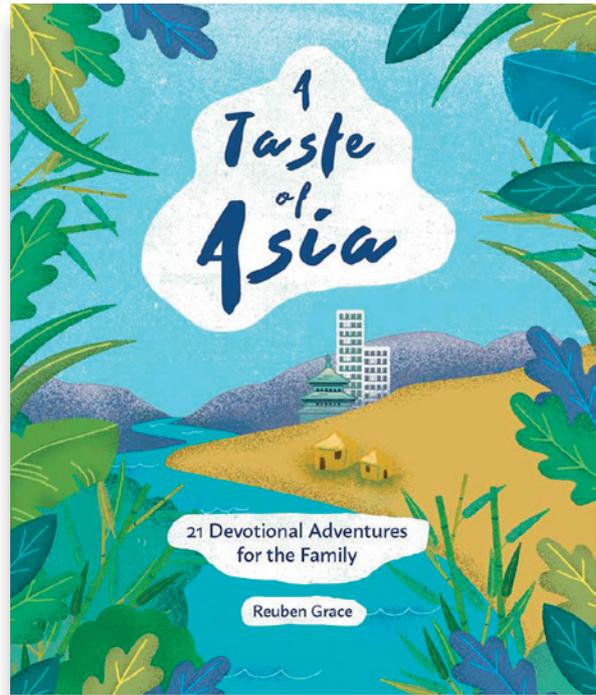
REUBEN GRACE (2020)

As a family we loved this book of 21 devotional adventures around the countries and ministries OMF is involved in across South East Asia. Each page has prayers, a short Bible passage with questions to explore and a story related to a different aspect of OMF mission work, sometimes focusing on a country or a particular type of activity.

This book will be ideal if you have children in the 5-10 age bracket. Our boys loved the illustrations, the various craft or food-based activities (especially noodle-slurping competitions!!) and the 'did you know' section on each page (e.g. why do Taiwanese bin lorries play music? What is holding the great wall of China together?). If you want your children to engage with global mission, to learn to pray for the global church, to understand the types of ministry challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural mission, and to have fun at the same time, this is just the book for you! ●

This book is available from Free Church Books.

James Ross, Buccleuch Free Church, Edinburgh



TO SEEK AND TO SAVE

SINCLAIR FERGUSON (2020)

This is a refreshing book. Designed as a Lent devotional, every day describes a different encounter from Luke's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. As you progress through the book, you realise afresh just how overwhelmingly concerned with people Jesus was, from his disciples to strangers who accosted him along the way, and are reminded how that concern extends to his people here and now, today.

The purpose of this book isn't to provide new or ground-breaking insights into Luke's Gospel, although the biblical scholarship is characteristically strong. No, the unique selling point of this book is the way the author's usual incisive style is combined with winsome self-reflection to offer truly compelling applications of this familiar gospel narrative. Many days I was genuinely moved by truths about Jesus that I already knew, but which I had effectively forgotten. Sometimes the simplest truths really are the ones we need to hear.

Moreover, the book has been thoughtfully presented to make it as easy to use as possible. Each day's exposition ends with a simple bullet point for reflection, and space for a written response, should you wish to use it. As for me, my favourite part had to be the Sundays (coming as I do from a tradition where Lenten Sundays were often a chance to break routine and seek refreshment). Here, Ferguson marks the Sundays with extended quotations from hymns and psalms. They are selected with great care, and always brought joy to my heart. A book to enjoy for Lent most easily, but worth using any time you want to spend a season walking especially closely with Jesus. ● This book is available from Free Church Books.



Miriam Montgomery, Free Church Books

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BOOK REVIEW

HELD: 31 BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON GOD'S COMFORT AND CARE IN THE SORROW OF MISCARRIAGE
BY ABBEY WEDGEWORTH (2020)
THE GOOD BOOK COMPANY

HELD IS A SLIM AND DISCREET BOOK. On the cover, the title is underscored by a picture of a dandelion seed — something small and ordinary, yet full of hope. The whisper of a promise of all the potential it holds, the new life of a new flower. The book has a lovely yellow ribbon to mark your page and elastic to hold it closed, keeping your prayers and confessions safe. It is a book which has been designed on purpose with rounded edges and thick cream pages to let you know from the beginning that inside the covers you will find love, care and comfort as you walk through grief and sorrow. It is laid out as a daily devotional, studying Psalm 139 to discover God's promises and truth about the loss of your baby — because that is what miscarriage is.

Each day's readings are just a few pages, enough to guide you through a verse or two of the psalm. When you are struggling and suffering this is plenty to work through each day! Abbey Wedgeworth's use of Psalm 139 is carefully thought out. The psalm reminds you that you are upheld by the one true God, and that even though we cannot fathom why our babies have died, God is still sovereign and good and cares for us. Wedgeworth affirms the sanctity of each individual life created by God and challenges our responses to miscarriage. We may lash out in grief, but the only way forward is to trust God to *'lead me in the way everlasting'* (Psalm 139:24). After each reading there is space to journal. This is guided by scripture to meditate on and questions which encourage reflection or challenge our feelings and responses. Sometimes poems or hymns are included to further point the reader to God's care and compassion to us, his children.

Held is interspersed with personal accounts of people who have walked through miscarriage in a variety of circumstances, allowing you to connect with others and know you are not alone in your sorrow. There is also a list of further reading included at the end, highlighting other devotionals and books for deeper study to equip readers to develop a theology of grief at their own pace. Whether miscarriage is something you have recently walked through or it was several years ago, I would recommend this book as a starting point to help you process your journey. If you have not experienced pregnancy loss but want to know how to support friends who have, then read this book and understand better the point of view of those



suffering — and then give them the book as a gift!

In a society that minimises the value of life in the womb as 'a cluster of cells' it is confusing to know how to respond to miscarriage. As mothers of babies who died so small, all we are left with is blood and pain, often alone on the bathroom floor. We can be left frustrated, confused and guilty; like we are not allowed to grieve as it doesn't really count as a 'life'.

However, this is not God's truth. Psalm 139 declares that, *'My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there where none of them'* (vv15-16). God promises that every life is precious and beautiful to he who created them. He knows and sees and has plans for them. We are not promised that we will know or understand them, but we can be certain that we held a baby in our womb and that they are loved and valued. Therefore we have a clear right to grieve. Our grief is not measured by the length of our babies' lives.

I felt absolutely broken, empty and so so guilty when I went through my first miscarriage. It was the Christmas holidays and I was overjoyed at the new life growing in me as we celebrated the birth of our Saviour with our beautiful daughter, mistily

contemplating how she would respond to a sibling, how our love would increase with more members of our family. Then I caught a bad chest infection and cramps; pain, then bleeding quickly followed. I blamed myself for getting sick, for not being strong enough to look after my growing baby. We didn't tell anyone – how could we? Would they understand?

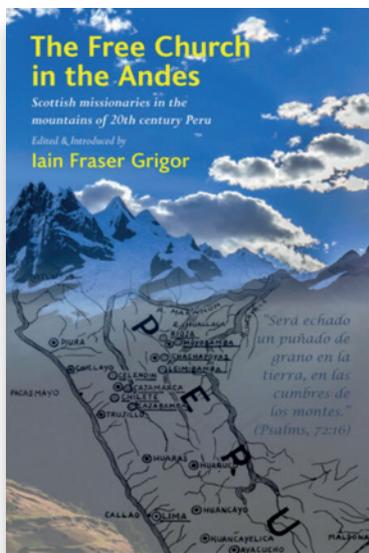
Then I was pregnant again, this time at the same time as two friends, and we happily chatted about the joys of going through it all together. Then I started spotting. Hospital appointments for blood tests and lots of waiting. Finally more pains and bleeding and the small, perfectly formed sac in the palm of my hand. When it happened again, how could we tell anyone, what would they think of me? I spent days in bed crying and unable to know how to move on. My daughter would crawl in beside me and tell me it was okay, that we could have a film day in bed. Her love for me and gentle care saw me through.

We eventually had a baby boy. But then the miscarriages started again. Six in all. Six little lives I think about still. Six little lives that expanded my world with their promise of adventure and love to be left afterwards wrecked and hollow. My body expanding in the early stages of pregnancy and then left flabby and swollen. Guilt stole my joy of my two young children in front of me as I felt a failure.

A failure to cook dinner for my family yet again. A failure as we had to pay for more taxi journeys to hospital we could little afford. A failure as a stay-at-home mother who couldn't bear her babies to term. A failure to not be healthy and fit enough to care for the young children in front of me who were confused by my sadness and irrational anger. I quickly stopped confiding in anyone as I was too often met with statements such as 'it was probably for the best', 'it's nature's way when something is wrong with it', or 'are you sure you were even pregnant?'

I turned inwards and withdrawn. I wanted to turn to God to comfort me. To read words of hope in the Bible. But I struggled to know how to start. The first time I read the testimony of a woman whose baby had died at 20 weeks I felt so loved and known and understood for the first time. Reading other women's experiences, how other women had found God in the midst of these losses, helped me see how much God loved and held me too. This is why *Held* is so important. It is a testament that you are not suffering alone, that you do not have to grieve guiltily in private. Wedgeworth concludes, 'Even in the wake of broken dreams and very real loss, all of God's promises are still "Yes" and "Amen" in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1v20)' (page 214). ●

Kimberley Macdonald, Dunblane Free Church



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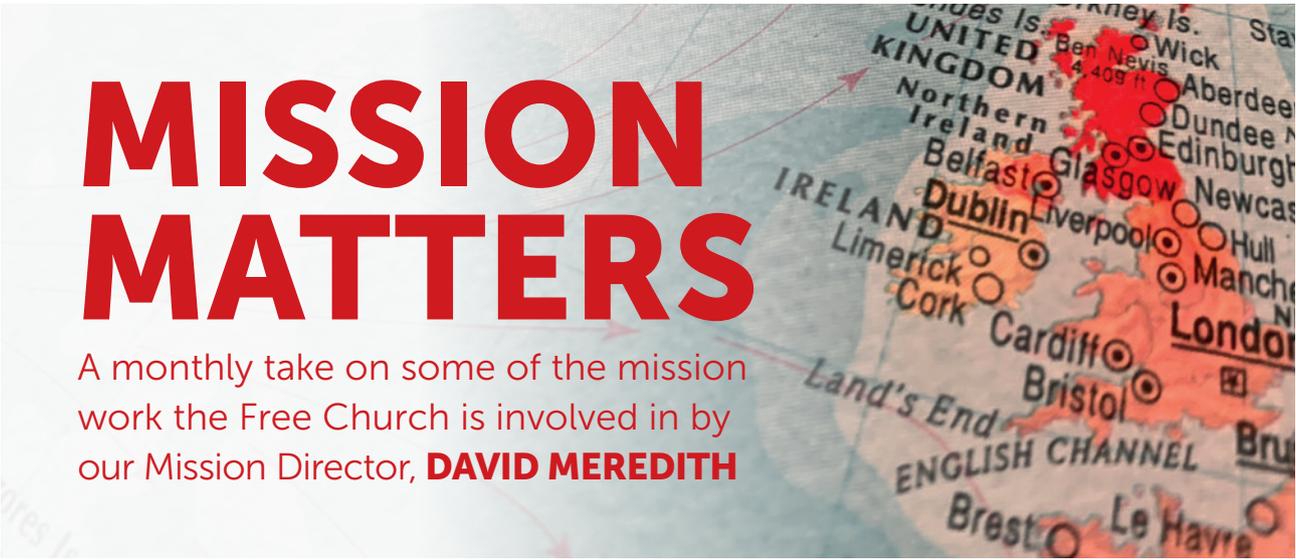
Professor Emeritus Donald Meek

'The Monthly Record was the main source for this compelling book. Its contemporary reports "snatch from the jaws of oblivion" these Highland voices in the Andes. We are the better off for hearing them.'

David Ross, author of *Highland Herald*

'Fhhuair mise mo thogail anns an Eaglais Shaor agus tha cuimhn' agam air mòran dhe na h-ainmean - ainmean dhaoine agus aithean [grave on the first a] – a tha ' nochdadh anns an leabhar. Ach ged nach biodh ceangal agad ris an eaglais sin neo ri eaglais sam bith eile se leabhar a tha seo is fhiach a leughadh.'

Roddy John MacLeod, Lord Minginish



MISSION MATTERS

A monthly take on some of the mission work the Free Church is involved in by our Mission Director, **DAVID MEREDITH**

I T WAS A LONG TIME AGO BUT THE MEMORY IS STILL STRONG.

The presbytery had just heard a helpful and stirring talk on strategy and methodology, and there was a palpable excitement in the room. One of the fathers and brethren was not impressed and quoted the famous E.M. Bounds saying, 'The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men.'

It suddenly struck me that the phrase was a meaningless cliché, so general in scope and ill-thought-out that it is of little use. Of course, to be fair to Edward McKendree Bounds, there is a greater context. He went on to add, 'What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use — men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men — men of prayer.'

Let's give the good man the benefit of the doubt and assume that he is using 'men' in the generic sense to refer to people and not simply to the male gender. It is a given that a movement of God cannot be organised or manipulated in any way by us. Moribund churches will not come to life through soft lighting, a purple paint job and glass doors. Unction in preaching is not inextricably linked to a preacher bedecked in red Converse and skinny jeans. It has always been the case that, '*Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain*' (Psalm 127:1).

Truthfully, the Church requires people who cling to the gospel, not of the better man, but of the best man: Jesus. Basic to any move of God will be a congregation humbled by its sin and shortcomings and on their knees, pleading for a glimpse of his face. A tidy plan and a pristine building could be a whitened sepulchre.

Methodology and spirituality are not enemies. How I wish that we would stop coming between these two friends. The ability to strategise and plan is a key spiritual gift. Paul says that a person with a strategic

mindset is a gift to the Church. Such a person has been given or 'placed' in the local church by God. In the list of gifts given to the Church we have 'guidance' (1 Corinthians 12:22). The word used is *kybernesis* — it refers to a person who has an ability to steer a ship, a helmsman who guides the church.

Of course we require better methodology, to deny that is silly. The way we evangelise constantly changes, and not always for bad reasons. When I began ministry the 'week of evangelistic services' was staple fare in most congregations. I do not know of anywhere within the Free Church where these are still held. In a former day open-air preaching was effective. But it's now largely the domain of the more marginal figures within evangelicalism, with some notable exceptions.

These days Christianity Explored is both used and blessed as people are given space to discuss their burning questions and honest doubts. The Word One to One has been fantastically effective as people engage the Bible for themselves, then talk about it with a trusted friend. These are not backward moves; they reveal that methodology moves with the times.

Clichés have to be questioned. As a denomination we will move forward using better methods without guilt. A good method will be a biblical method. We will not advocate Bible and Bingo but we will encourage congregations to be creative. Creativity will be rooted in the vast resources of biblical material.

When people come into contact with us as individuals or as gathered churches it's essential that there is a bridge between the world of the Bible and the culture of 2021. Most of all our longing is that they will discover a meeting place of heaven and earth. God has chosen to use both people and methods to construct that meeting place. ●

Two resources to look at:
theword121.com
apassionforlife.co.uk

Ionmhasan an dorchadais

(The Treasures of darkness)

LE JANET NICPHÀIL

AG ÈISTEACHD RI SEARMON O CHIONN CÒRR AIR FICHEAD BLIADHNA, bha an teachdaire a' cur nar cuimhne nach robh mòran nithean a' fàs air bàrr na beinne. Eu-coltach ris an seo, bha na glinn glè thric gu math torrach 's iad fasnach.

Bha e a' samhachadh seo ri beatha a' Chrìosdaidh. Ged a bha sinn tric a' miannachadh a bhith air bàrr na beinne, bha an Crìosdaidh a' fòghlam barrachd a' treabhadh nan gleann, nuair a bha cùisean a' dol na aghaidh agus an t-slighe sàraicht'.

B' ann a-mach às an t-searmon sin a dh'èirich an t-òran:

'Ann an dorchadas Ghleann Bàca
èiridh solas agus deàlradh
bidh na naoimh a'fàs an gràs ann
ged is cianail dorch an oidhch'.

Nì iad adhartas 's a' Ghleann-sa
nach dèan bàrr na beinne a-chaoidh dhaibh
chan eil neart ach Dia aig oighreachd
's lionaidh E gach tobar dhaibh.

Chan eil anns a' Ghleann ach sgàile
tha na nithean math' 's na h-Àrdaibh
nuair bhriseas là 's a bhios Gleann Bàca
às ar dèidh nì sinne seinn.

Nach fheumadh sinn aontachadh gur ann nuair a bhios sinn mothachail air feum a bhith oirnn', a bhios sinn a' tagradh ris a' Chruthaidhear airson A chuideachadh. Tha sinn cinnteach gur Esan a chumas neart rinn agus a chuireas rian air ar n-inntinn a dh' fhaodadh a bhith glè iomagaineach.

Tha an Cruthaidhear cho dlùth don dream a ghairmeas Air gu fìor. Tha E cho eu-coltach rinne.

Nach iomadh duine a dh'fhairich fagaisgeachd a' Chruthaidheir nuair a bha cùisean duilich a' tighinn nam freastal. Nach tuirt Iòseph ri bhràithrean, "Cha sibhse a chuir mise an seo ach Dia." Bha e a' leughadh a fhreastail ann an dòigh eadar-dhealaichte. Ged a bha a bhràithrean air a bhith cealgach ris-san, seo Iòseph ag ràdh riu, "Bheir mise dhuibh math tir na h-Eiphit: ithidh sibh reamhrachd na tìre."

Gu cinnteach, cha robh esan a' dioladh olc airson uilc.

Nach e toradh spioradail àlainn a bha seo, ged a bha cùisean air a bhith cho cealgach na aghaidh? Gu fìrinneach, 'cha do shoirbhich inneal a dhealbhadh na aghaidh.' Nach e geallaidhean Dhè a tha fìor? Faodaidh sinn ar n-earbsa a chur annta oir seasaidh Fhacal-san.

Nuair a chuimhnicheas sinn air eachdraidh an Abstoil Eòin, tha sinn gu cinnteach a' faicinn gur ann ann an suidheachadh glè aonranach air eilean mara, 's gun chàirdean faisg, a fhuair e sealladh nèamhaidh. Cha do dh' fhàg an Cruthaidhear e, ach thug E taisbeanadh dha air nithean a bhiodh ann an-dèidh seo. Nach e an Cruthaidhear a chuir an t-urram air, ged a chuir daoine e a-mach às an sealladh? Leis fhèin, ann am prìosan air Eilean Phatmois, nach bu bheannaicht' an t-eilean dha, ged nach b' e sin a bha an rùn nan daoine a chuir ann e?

Gu cinnteach cha robh e aonranach oir bha làthaireachd Dhè aige, agus seallaidhean iongantach air an earbsa ris, a dheidheadh sìos gu ginealach an-dèidh ginealach.

Dh' fheumadh inntinn a bhith glè ullaichte le sàmhchair, agus rinn Dia cinnteach gun do chleachd E Fhèin an t-àite-sa gu A rùn siorraidh a thoirt gu buil. Cò air nach biodh eagal ro Dhia a tha Uil' fhiosrach, agus gach nì air thalamh f'a chomhair, agus gach nì a cheadaicheas E a' tachairt?

Nach cuimhnich sinn a' mhìos-sa air daoine a th' ann an suidheachadh glè aonranach, 's nach bi sinn ag ùrnaigh gum bi Esan ga nochdadh Fhèin dhaibh ann an dòigh iongantach a mhisnicheas iad san t-slighe. Nach e seo a nì gach freastal duilich nas fhasa a ghiùlain? ●





BY CATRIONA MURRAY

POST TENEBRAS LUX

HANGING ABOVE THE DESK IN MY STUDY IS A QUOTE FROM RALPH WALDO EMERSON, which reads, 'Let us be silent that we may hear the whisper of God'. I placed it there because, when I was creating this room, I wanted it to have a quality of peace. The older I get, the more I value silence and the less tolerance I have for extraneous noise – a TV that no one is watching, shouting or loud music from next door, a dripping tap...the list goes on. A study, more than any other room, except perhaps the one you sleep in, needs to be fairly quiet. This one is lined with bookcases, which deaden sound, and sits at the back of the house. My window looks out onto trees planted by my late husband, and beyond that, to the sea.

I can lose myself for hours in this room. It has become my workplace, of course, and so the laptop screen is a second window. It connects me with my colleagues, with students, and with news of the wider world. Through this little screen, I keep in touch with friends, I attend meetings, I join in worship.

At the end of these sessions, though, when I press the 'end meeting' or the 'leave' button, the peace returns. I am sitting at my desk right now, in silence. If I pause from clicking the keyboard, all I can hear is the soft rain on the window and a clock ticking. Every quarter-hour, it stirs a little, before pealing the full Westminster chimes to mark another sixty minutes gone. I find it soothing. It adds a certain quality to the quietness of this room. You see, silence is not mere absence of sound, as far as I'm concerned.

Extroverts are puzzled when I say that I am enjoying this new existence. I catch a tone in their voices, as though they don't quite believe me. It's possible that they think I'm putting on a brave face. They are quite wrong.

I'm with Emerson on this, you see. You CAN hear God's voice more clearly in the stillness. As Elijah discovered, he does not always roar in the storm. More commonly, I have experienced his presence as that same still, small voice. God's law thunders, but his grace is an infinitely more tender thing.

Since the first lockdown, almost a year ago, I have been pondering the church and its partial

exile. I cannot go to the building I was used to calling 'church', but I can join in worship with my brethren. God in his infinite mercy has permitted us to go on hearing the Gospel preached, to come together in prayer, and to fellowship in the spirit. Paul could adapt to all circumstances – even prison – and raise his voice in adoration of the Lord.

He sets a high standard for us, does he not?

But even Paul is not the standard. We do not follow men; we follow Christ. That is, the Son of God, who was homeless all his adult life. Nowhere of his own to lock out the world – because that was never his intention.

He was no respecter of buildings, not when the bricks and mortar displaced the affection that should have been first in the heart of all believers. It was in that context he overturned the tables, and cast the money lenders out of the temple. Even when he addressed the Jews and challenged them regarding his death that was to come, they did not comprehend; they were not thinking of him, but of the precious building that had been forty-six years in the making.

Precious buildings, precious traditions. There is nothing wrong with either, of course, until they displace Christ in our focus. He is the temple that was destroyed and raised up to infinite glory in three days.

If we are his, we are part of that edifice. That one and no other should come first in our hearts. The beauty of belonging to the church means that you are integral to it. No matter how insignificant a member I may be in the eyes of men, to my Saviour, I am equally precious, equally part of the church that is built on the foundation stone he rolled away from the empty tomb.

Here, in the silence of my home, I click a button to bring up the Sunday morning service. The minister preaches from his manse. Hundreds of others join in from all over the world. Every heart united in worship of the risen Christ is a part of him.

We are the church. This silence is a blessing into which, if we incline our ear, God will whisper peace.. ●

Photo by Christine Hume on Unsplash