

# NEWCASTLE READER

ISSUE 20 Autumn/Winter 2022



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# READERS ANNUAL LICENSING AT THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS ON SATURDAY 8TH OCTOBER 2022



Annie and Jane with Dr Melody Briggs, Director of Studies at Lindisfarne College of Theology.



The Right Reverend Stephen Platten with newly-licensed Readers Jane Algar (left) and Annie Newlands (right). Jane will serve in the Benefice of Bywell and Mickley, Annie in the Parish of Morpeth.

# EDITORIAL

## Greetings from the members of the Communications Group:



**Olwyn Black,**  
Reader with PTO at Gosforth St Nicholas, the group's minutes secretary.



**Gwyn McKenzie,**  
Reader at Riding Mill St James, writer and gatherer of information for Comings and Goings.



**Chris Hudson,**  
Reader in the Scremerston, Spittal and Tweedmouth Benefice, writer and roving reporter.



**Louisa Fox,**  
Reader at Longbenton St Mary Magdalene, responsibility for website matters and liaison with Bethany Browning at Church House.



**Jan Porter,**  
Reader at Monkseaton St Peter, ex officio member as Secretary to the Executive Committee of the Readers' Board.



**Gloria Bryant,**  
Editor and writer and chair of the Communications Group.

**Greetings from the Communications Group which continues to be served by Jan Porter, Olwyn Black, Chris Hudson, Gwyn McKenzie, Louisa Fox and Gloria Bryant.**

We hope that you continue to enjoy Newcastle Reader – amazingly, this is the twentieth edition of the new style magazine. We have not normally focused on a theme when we consider what to print; however, one seems to have emerged in this edition where there is clearly an emphasis on preaching and teaching and learning. We hope that those who were not able to attend the Annual General Meeting and Licensing will draw inspiration from reading the sermon of the Right Reverend Gordon Mursell, who was our preacher on 8th October 2022. Those of us who were at St Nicholas' Cathedral greatly appreciated Bishop Gordon's humour, wisdom and encouragement and will benefit, we are sure, from being able to reflect on his sermon in print. Many thanks to Bishop Gordon for allowing us to print his sermon! Thanks also to our Warden, Bishop Stephen, who has allowed us to print the sermon he preached at this year's Inaugural Eucharist for students beginning ordination and reader ministry training with Lindisfarne College of Theology; Bishop Stephen offers us the hope of a world transformed by the light of Christ.

As always, I encourage all who read Newcastle Reader, lay or ordained, to consider submitting an article. The Communications Group has not yet run out of ideas,

but we are encouraged and inspired by those who offer us suggestions and, even better, actually produce something to print. As you can see from this edition, that includes poetry as well as prose. It could also include art work and photography, and we are confident that a number of our readers will have gifts in those media. So, please consider offering us something which tells of your gifts and supports your ministry, whatever form your ministry takes.

The magazine is a useful recruitment tool, and so with this in mind, if you are a Reader who receives two copies, please place one in your parish church, with the permission of your incumbent, of course. If you would like additional copies, please contact the editor. We are currently exploring ways of increasing the circulation of the magazine, so if you have any ideas, please let one of us know.

Finally, our thanks to Bishop Mark for the continued support of the diocese, to the staff at Church House who assist with distribution, to our printer Shiremoor Press and to our designer Jon Kirkwood, who makes the magazine such a delight to look at, and last but not least to our Warden Bishop Stephen for his unfailing support and encouragement.

## COMINGS AND GOINGS

**NEW READERS:** In addition to Jane Algar and Annie Newlands, we welcome Andy Morsman and Richard Pattison who were licensed by Bishop Stephen at Alston in August 2022

### IN MEMORIAM:

Edward Newton | Bill Knox | Mary Lillie

May they rest in peace and rise in glory

# JUST A SEC

JAN PORTER IS SECRETARY TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE READERS' BOARD AND A READER AT MONKSEATON ST PETER.



**There is a town in Ireland that we visit often. It has a long name, Graiguenamanagh, which means "the grange of the monks." It is so named because Cistercian monks founded an Abbey there in 1204 beside the River Barrow.**

Each year a rowing regatta is held there. People who live in the town and its environs join with people who have come home to visit as they celebrate the festival. There is a wonderful, friendly atmosphere and the races are exciting. The warmth with which visitors are welcomed is in fact tangible all the time, not only on regatta days. I have always felt that what makes this such a special town is that Duiske Abbey lies at its heart. This place of worship is open and welcoming. Mass is said regularly in the church, a beautiful building filled with light and where one may feel the prayers of generations. The local people go in and out all day to pray as they undertake their various tasks. One of the chapels is a peaceful Chapel of Reconciliation. The people look out for their neighbours in Graigue, as it is known for short and greet each other cheerfully.

A few years ago, my husband fell in Graigue, on an uneven pavement, and people came from all around to make sure he wasn't injured. Cars on the main street came to a standstill until they had ascertained that he was alright. It is a place where people have an awareness of what is happening in their town and in the wider world and where they talk naturally about praying for situations near and far. People take care of the vulnerable in the community. This year a lady I met at the post box was praying for Ukraine. Things have and still do go wrong here, for instance the river has flooded and caused damage several times in recent winters, but the Abbey bells go on marking out the day reminding all who hear that "God is with us." We may all pray that our hometowns and churches will be like Graiguenamanagh and Duiske Abbey and that Readers will play their part in making them so, as they share the Good News.

There are different ways to share the Good News. This year in Howth, an Irish fishing port, I went to lunch with someone who does not yet believe in God, or at least says they don't. The person was

wearing a button, bought at John Lennon's early home in Liverpool, which said 'Imagine Peace.' I need to explain that in the past people have seized my friend by the arm in town squares demanding to know whether they "Have met God." I am sure this was undertaken with good intentions; however, it frightened and antagonised my friend. The gentleman who showed us to our seats and brought the menu remarked upon the badge and said that it reminded him of something he had seen on the previous weekend. He and my friend agreed it was an admirable sentiment. When he later brought our food, he produced his mobile phone and showed us a banner which he had seen at Mass. It was embroidered with the verse from 1 Peter 3.11 :

**"Let them seek peace and pursue it."**

My friend was impressed by this Christian man who had a kind and helpful manner with his customers and found a way to engage someone with a discussion about Christianity. He illustrated Jesus' teaching without being over assertive. Later in the day my friend was more willing to discuss my beliefs with me. This was not an over lunch conversion, but was a positive step and Bishop Martin Wharton always used to say "small steps "mattered.

As I write this, we have been in Generosity Week, considering how we may serve our neighbour. This summer in Dublin we were on our way to an exhibition. A man hurrying somewhere pushed my husband over. People walked by but a man who was begging with a paper cup rose from the ground and rushed to help. He showed us a bench so we might sit for a while. He disappeared into the crowd before we could thank him. He showed himself to be our brother and good neighbour and asked for nothing in return. **"You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"**

**James 2.8**

# LIFE AS GIFT

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE RIGHT REVEREND STEPHEN PLATTEN AT ST JOHN, PERCY MAIN, ON SATURDAY 3RD SEPTEMBER 2022 AT THE INAUGURAL EUCHARIST FOR THOSE BEGINNING THEIR STUDIES WITH LINDISFARNE COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY.

[Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 1-12; John 2: 1-11]

Late in the 1960s, well after the Beatles' revolution in popular music, when theology was excited by the same sense of purpose and vitality as were most other facets of life, a young curate arrived at one of the parishes in Oxford.

A few months into his time there, in one of his early excursions into the pulpit, he was faced with the gospel we have just heard. So, David, as I'll call him, set to work. He had enjoyed his training and had been energised by all he had learnt, including his introduction to the critical study of the Scriptures.

The result was nothing if not controversial. His tack was to say that, of course, the water didn't turn into wine. It was simply that the guests were so plastered by the time Jesus placed his hands on those water jars that the wedding guests couldn't tell the difference. There was an explosion and earthquake! Members of the congregation wrote excoriating letters; the parish priest summarily sacked the curate (only to be told by the Bishop of Oxford that he had no right to sack him since he didn't employ him). The bishop sent the Director of Ordinands to explain critical biblical study to the laity, about which previously they knew nothing.

Still, in all the furore, the curate had undoubtedly misjudged it. Rather like those interpreters of the feeding of the 5,000 who said the disciples and all the others had simply brought their lunch boxes with them. In other words, he looked for a mechanical explanation. Instead, the truth of this lovely story, always set for Epiphany, exemplifies a far deeper meaning. The aim of the tale is to illustrate how Jesus, just proclaimed in the previous chapter as 'the word made flesh', had utterly transformed our universe.

In his now rather infrequently read Readings from St John's Gospel, Archbishop William Temple, almost certainly the greatest Archbishop of the twentieth century, captured John the evangelist's aim perfectly:

'...imagine yourself standing alone on some dark headland on a dark night. At the foot of the headland is a lighthouse, a beacon throwing one bar of light through the darkness. It is such an image that St John had in mind. The divine light shines through the darkness of the world, cleaving it, but neither dispelling it nor quenched by it.'

"Worship, of course is the unique thing we have to offer."

'The light shines in the darkness' and as the King James Version puts it, and 'the darkness comprehended it not'. There's a marvellous ambiguity there - the darkness neither understood it nor could it put it out. Therefore, this gospel has a cosmic, universal significance, way beyond that of a modest wedding breakfast in suburban Cana. We live still in a dark world. I hardly need catalogue the woes which surround us - the media, always keen on 'bad news' do that daily. Furthermore, we live in challenging times for the gospel - depressingly it's not atheism, it's not even apathy, it's instead an inability to see the need for religion. But as Readers, deacons, priests, bishops and all you in training, we should not be downcast, for to a great extent it's always been so. Russell Barry, another theologian - later Bishop of Southwell, and like Temple, whose volumes now adorn the shelves of secondhand bookshops, wrote as long ago as 1931, about the then mission to the University of Oxford, led by William Temple:

'...religious and moral life was at a low ebb. College chapels were virtually empty. Christianity was a dirty word. Christian belief was commonly regarded as the refuge for the mentally second-rate.' The task of the University Church, which he led, and its subsequent mission was to get Christianity back on the map, relevant to daily

life and intellectually respectable. This Temple did with a vengeance. For a decade or more after, students would remember how he spoke of the possibility of a world transformed.

Worship, of course is the unique thing we have to offer. Of this theme, Temple reflected:

'...to worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the Will to the purpose of God. All this is gathered up in that most selfless of emotions - adoration.'

There lies the heart of the ministry of Christ, which we all share, and for which you are being trained. It is an awesome challenge to us all. That challenge is powerfully summarised in the bishop's charge to those to be ordained priest within the 1662 Book of Common Prayer ordination rite. But it's not just true of priests, it applies to all who minister in God's Church:

'Have therefore always printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge.....Howbeit ye cannot have a mind and will thereto of yourselves; for that ability is given of God alone. Therefore, ye ought, and have need, to pray earnestly for his Holy Spirit.'

In these coming months and years, then, you will learn of Scripture, of doctrine, history, moral theology, prayer, spirituality and of pastoral gifts. But what will lie at the heart, what will be the essence of the life you will be called to live and indeed all, Christian people are called to live?

Well, since we worship a Christlike God, the essence must lie in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ himself, in his teaching and the life and death he exemplified. Many years ago, I remember reading the Scottish theologian, James Mackey's great book, *Jesus - the Man and the Myth*. Mackey talks of the experience of the 'reign of God', another synonym, I suppose for the Kingdom of God, but avoiding some of the easy misunderstanding of that ancient concept. So, he writes:

'...if the experience itself could find words to summarise its impact in a short space, it would say something like this: "That life is grace to us, our own lives and the lives of all we encounter, that all things great and small are gift, the treasure that we can at any moment discover, the banquet to which all are equally invited. That delay must not mar this discovery, nor decline the invitation, for such ingratitude instantly ungraces us; it is then that life is more than bread, more than accumulated possessions; that to realise the

true value of someone or something and to discover treasure are one and the same imperative act.'

Let me conclude with just two more of Mackey's lines. He continues: '...the true value of all that exists is discovered in the unique way in which one values a gift; that we shall not therefore crush by grasping, or tear by trying to pull away. The gift has its roots in the giver; like a flower with roots hidden that breaks the ground to brighten a common day.'

In a nutshell, then, that is the life our God calls us to and is seen perfectly in his incarnate Son. What an extraordinary transformation that promises to our present world - that is indeed water remarkably transformed into wine. That is the gospel with which we have been entrusted as ministers. It is a treasure beyond all measure - it speaks of a world redeemed.

**The Right Reverend Stephen Platten is the Former Bishop of Wakefield and Associate Bishop and Warden of Readers in the Diocese of Newcastle.**

There lies the heart of the ministry of Christ, which we all share, and for which you are being trained. It is an awesome challenge to us all. That challenge is powerfully summarised in the bishop's charge to those to be ordained priest within the 1662 Book of Common Prayer ordination rite.

# THE NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE CHURCH OF ENGLAND INSTITUTE TRUST

AN ARTICLE BY CANONS PETER STRANGE (CHAIRMAN)  
AND RICHARD BRYANT (SECRETARY)



## History

Our involvement in the Trust goes back into the 80s in Peter's case and the 90s in Richard's case. As it happens, we were also both tutors of The Reader Training Course, Peter beginning in the mid-70s and Richard in the early 80s. Until 2002 the Institute owned 'Denewood' in Clayton Road, Jesmond, and the building had become the location for a number of diocesan departments, the Newcastle branch of the Religious Learning Resources Centre, various Christian charities and diocesan training events. It also housed a small lending library and hosted several bridge clubs. The trustees were keen for the Institute to help in whatever ways it could as moves began to resite Church House to more suitable accommodation than the buildings in Grainger Park Road and Clayton Road could offer. Once the current site in Percy Main had been selected, the trustees took the decision to sell Denewood, so that some of the proceeds could be used to establish the Religious Learning Resources Centre at the new Church House in Percy Main, and the remaining capital be used to set up the current trust: the capital's annual interest would be available to members of the Church of England in Newcastle diocese by applying to the trustees. The new Church House opened in May 2002, and Institute trustees are proud of their part in the incorporation of the Religious Learning Resources Centre as an integral part of the House.

## Today's Institute in Operation

The President is the Bishop of Newcastle, and the Trustees consist of three co-opted Trustees and eight nominated Trustees appointed from four areas of ministry in the diocese (Education, Training, Finance, the Resources Centre). The Trustees are charged with responsibility for responding to applications, awarding grants and appointing a chair and secretary. The two

of us have occupied the roles respectively of chairman and secretary since the inception of the Institute in its present form in 2004, and the time is coming when others will need to be appointed in our places. The Diocesan Finance personnel have managed the Institute accounts, and Church House staff have assisted with various administrative tasks: we are very grateful to Gillian Green, Ruth O'Hagan and Karen Hunter who fulfil those roles at present.

The Trust awards grants for the education, training and refreshment of members of the Church of England in Newcastle diocese, and we welcome requests from both groups and individuals. The application form is short and straightforward, and we encourage applicants to be specific about the costs of their project or course and to seek at least some of the money they require from local sources (eg PCCs), diocesan funds (where appropriate) and other charities.

The Trust's current capital of some £850,000.00 raises about £20,000.00 in interest a year, depending on market and investment fluctuations, and trustees have offered between six and sixteen grants a year since 2004. Trustees welcome applications from clergy, Readers, other laity, those in training for public ministry, PCCs and schools in the diocese. They meet twice a year, and the next two meetings will take place on 16 November 2022 and 7 June 2023. We do expect, and look forward to receiving, a brief acknowledgement and report from successful applicants within a reasonable amount of time after the conclusion of their project or course.

For applications and further information please contact Richard Bryant on **07765 835 075** or **rkbryant28@gmail.com**.

# USING THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS IN PREACHING

**CHRIS HUDSON IS A READER IN THE BENEFICE OF SCREMERSTON, SPITAL AND TWEEDMOUTH.**

Would you like some fresh verbal and visual illustrations for your sermons? Then consider the current exhibition of the Lindisfarne Gospels in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Usually housed in the British Library, this 'pinnacle of Anglo-Saxon art' was created by Eadfrith, a monk working on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne around 700 AD. For all their cultural value, we can also use the Gospels to 'speak' God's truth. Here are a few possible sermon themes- can you think of others?

## **Serving God with perseverance**

Each separate page of the Gospels represents the concentrated labour of many weeks. Beavering away in his scriptorium, Eadfrith served God with care and determination to the best of his ability. Wherever and however, we are called to serve God's kingdom, let's be encouraged by that sense of dedication. We might never see their full effect of our work- but that doesn't mean God won't use it.

## **Enjoying our place in God's Creation**

It's easy to feel despair when we consider environmental issues, but Eadfrith enjoyed Creation as an artist, delighting in the vibrant colours and complex patterns of God's Creation, fancifully elaborating the necks of seabirds in long complicated loops, twisting his snakes into letters packed with complex fractals. But for all this creativity, each page features a deliberate 'mistake', an unfinished detail or a hint of broken symmetry- because the results are intended not to glorify the artist, but only the Creator.

## **Sharing God's message in different ways**

Few of those viewing Eadfrith's work could read, so he included symbols and images to explain the



<https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/lindisfarne/accessible/pages9and10.html>

Gospel message in other ways. For example, the St Matthew carpet page features a large cross as its centrepiece, comprising the outlines of several chalices and consecrated bread. Do you see the connection? 'This is my body, this is my blood...' Eadfrith suggests that when we share the bread and wine of Holy Communion, we not only re-enact the Last Supper that Christ shared with his disciples that led on to his crucifixion, but also his resurrection (symbolised by the empty cross), promised to all who believe and trust in him.

## **Diversity in God's kingdom**

The Lindisfarne Gospels embody Britain's long history of settlement from overseas. Many of the 'Celtic' designs have Irish Gaelic origins (similar to the Book of Kells), but also Anglo-Saxon elements (found at Sutton Hoo and the Staffordshire Hoard). Eadfrith's text is written in Roman Latin, but the lettering is 'gothic' (Saxon-German), and the 'carpet' pages resemble early medieval designs found across the Mediterranean and North Africa- and of course, the stories themselves come from Roman-occupied Judaea. Eadfrith was happy to draw on all these diverse sources to create one magnificent testament to God's outpouring of love into our world.

# SERMON ON THE MINISTRY OF READERS BY BISHOP GORDON MURSELL



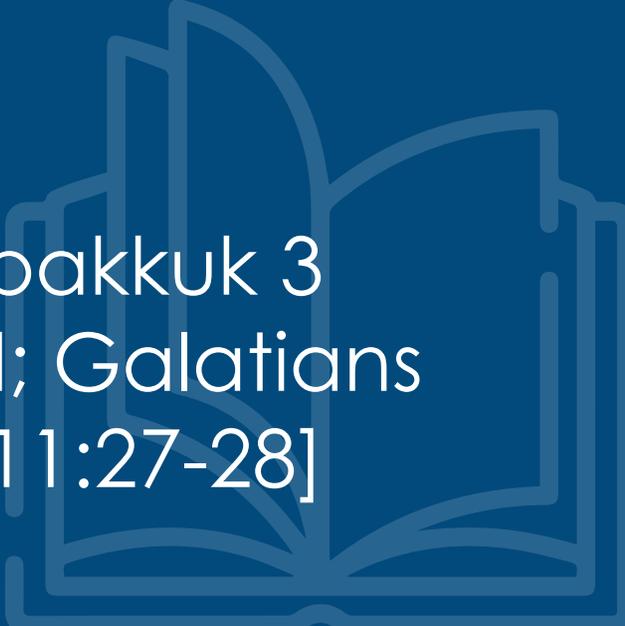
THE RIGHT REVEREND GORDON MURSELL IS HONORARY ASSISTANT BISHOP IN THE DIOCESE OF GLASGOW AND GALLOWAY.

**The great actress Dame Judi Dench tells the story of how her acting career really took off when she landed the part of Juliet in Shakespeare's play, at the Old Vic in London.** She was naturally thrilled to get the part; so, she arranged for her parents to come down from her native Yorkshire and bought them tickets for the first night. There's a moment during the play (in Act 3 Scene 2) when Juliet has to speak the line "Where are my father and my mother?" And when she said this, a voice came booming from the audience, "We're over here, darling, in the rear stalls. We're so proud!"

That story came to mind when I first looked at the Gospel reading which we've just heard, in which a woman calls out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" (Lk 11:27). In effect she was saying, "your mum must be so proud of you", as Judi Dench's parents so obviously were of her. There will be people here today who are equally proud of those of you who feel called to reader ministry in the Church. Yet Jesus' answer seems curiously negative: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Lk 11:28). He seems to be disparaging both his mother and, by implication, anyone else who feels a wholly legitimate pride in those who follow him. Let me suggest that in fact the opposite is the case: Jesus is praising his mother, but not because she gave birth to him – rather because she is a model of what it means to "hear the word of God and obey it" – and if she is a model of what Jesus is talking about here, she is also a model for all ministry conducted in his name.

But before we explore what that means, let's have a brief look at today's second reading, from St Paul's Letter to the Galatians, because it tells us something vital about the nature of the church in which all of us, readers and others, are invited to play our part. Any vision or strategy for ministry will be useless unless it is set within a wider vision for the church, and for the kingdom Jesus wants the church to build. This reading from Galatians is usually seen as offering a contrast between Judaism and Christianity. But it may be more helpful to see it as offering a vision of what the Christian church should be like – not a legalistic institution, but a living and life-changing movement. St Paul's thrilling words are there on page 8 of your orders of service: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This is no empty rhetoric. From the start, in theory at least if not always in practice, the Christian community – the Church – was one in which national and ethnic identity (Greek or Jew), social status (slave or free), and gender (male or female) were all transcended. It was a radical vision in St Paul's day (in a very hierarchical society), and it still is today. In the ancient Roman world, the division between Jew and Greek (or Jew and Gentile) was sharply defined, as was the division between men and women – and most of all the division between slaves and free people. But for those who, as



# [READINGS: Habakkuk 3 vv2 and 17-end; Galatians 3:22-end; Luke 11:27-28]

Paul puts it, have clothed themselves with Christ, those divisions were done away with. Look at our world today: colossal sums are spent on policing borders, keeping out foreigners, rather than on addressing the root causes of migration and poverty. The gap between rich and poor is arguably greater than it has ever been. And millions live like slaves even if the word itself is not used. Now we must be careful here: it's easy to pontificate from the pulpit; and, anyway, all too often religion has been part of the problem rather than the solution – look at the treatment of women in Iran by Islamic fundamentalists, or the way the Russian Orthodox Church's leaders grovel in justifying Putin's war on Ukraine. And even well-mannered Anglicanism hasn't always come across as welcoming those who are different from us. When I was a young vicar, my bishop was Mervyn Stockwood, who used to tell the story of how in the 1960s he once went for a walk in the Fen country with an atheist friend, and they came to a remote parish church with just one notice on the door: "Members of the Church of South India are not welcome to receive Communion in this church." What St Paul is offering is a transcendental vision of a Christian community where these barriers and divisions are broken down. And there's an even more important point still.

For this prophetic blueprint for the Christian church is not a vision of a kind of bland, lowest-common-denominator inclusivity in which anything goes and differences don't matter. That would be hopelessly dull. St Paul is envisioning a church in

which people from sharply different backgrounds or ethnicities or status really do learn to listen to and worship with one another. The story of Pentecost tells of the astonishing synergy that is born when Christians really do come together, rather than just keep their own denominational show on the road. Once we learn to accept people from very different traditions or viewpoints as being clothed with Christ just as we seek to be, astonishing things can begin to happen; and the church becomes, not a tired and boring institution, but a living movement inviting all humanity into a new and better future.

Now (you may be thinking) what on earth has all this got to do with the ministry of readers? It's got everything to do with it. For without this Biblical vision of what kind of church God wants us to build, and what kind of kingdom God wants us to bring into being, ministers (clergy, readers and others) become nothing more than religious functionaries. As we will hear in a moment, "Readers are called to a ministry of the word, preaching and teaching, inspiring others to follow the way of Christ, and calling them to share in the good news of the Kingdom" (from the Renewal of Commitment in this service). They are rooted in lay life and experience, called by God through the bishop to welcome and care for the rich diversity of people whom God invites to follow (and to be clothed with) his son Jesus Christ. Readers stand on both sides of the church door. They cross the border between lay and ordained, sacred and secular, church and world. They lead us in worship, and help us to grow in our faith. It's a thrilling vocation, but a terrifying

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one too. Which brings me back finally to the Gospel reading with which we started.

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." Two brief final points about this text are worth making. First, Jesus may have known that, although many of his followers and disciples would receive enthusiastic support from their close families and friends (as Judi Dench did from her parents), there would be others whose sense of vocation would meet with incomprehension, or polite indifference, or even active opposition. It can be a lonely experience to preach and lead worship, and (dare I say it?) church members are not always as affirming and encouraging as they might be of those called to take services and preach the Word on their behalf. You may have come here today with family members, or members of your local church, who are hugely supportive of your ministry, and you will never cease to be grateful for them (although you might not want them to leap up like Judi Dench's parents and express their enthusiasm in the middle of a service). But you may have come today without much sense of support. You may even feel sometimes – as, God knows, we all do – was it worth it? Does anyone really listen to what I have to say? Am I really the right person for this kind of vocation? Have I got it all wrong?

If any of those questions ring true for you, or have done, or will one day, let me end by reminding you of the very first word of Jesus' answer to the woman who cries out in the crowd. It's the word "blessed." It could be translated "happy" or "joyful." Who is the first person to whom that word is spoken, in the Gospel of Luke from which today's reading comes? It's Mary, the mother of Jesus. "Blessed is she," said her cousin Elizabeth, "who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). Mary

was called, not just to give birth to Jesus literally, but to give birth to him spiritually, to "hear the word of God and obey it": to make Jesus' love, his forgiveness, his compassion, and above all his presence come alive in the experience of those around her. Readers, and in a different way all of us, are called to do the same. It may sometimes bring us, as it brought Mary, discouragement and even a sense of failure – think of Mary at the foot of the cross, watching the son of whom she was so proud die in front of her. But that pain and disappointment did not have the last word. She was there on the feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples of their risen Lord, turning a crowd of people from all over the known world into the church of Jesus Christ – the Jesus movement. She was blessed for all eternity. Please God: so are you. Let me leave you with the subversive words of the prophet Habakkuk, from today's first reading:

**Though the fig tree does not blossom**

**And no fruit is on the vines;**

**Though the produce of the olive fails**

**And the fields yield no food;**

**Though the flock is cut off from the fold**

**And there is no herd in the stalls,**

**Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;**

**I will exult in the God of my salvation  
(Hab.3:17-18).**

# THEOLOGY FOR CHILDREN? REALLY?

CHRIS HUDSON IS A READER IN THE BENEFICE OF SCREMERSTON, SPITAL AND TWEEDMOUTH

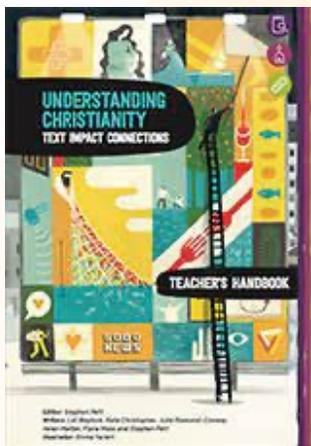


Image found at: [http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CE\\_Intro-Book\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CE_Intro-Book_WEB.pdf)

**Here's a little test. As a Reader, how would you respond if a member of the public asked you one of these questions?**

What do Christians believe God is like?

How do Christians decide how to live?

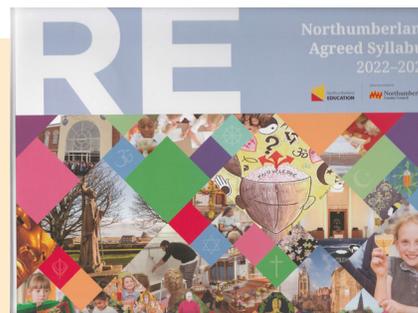
What do Christians believe Jesus did to 'save' people?

All good questions- and each of them challenging, in their own way. If asked, could you provide a straight, theologically sound answer in everyday language? (Pick one, and have a go, in 30 seconds...)

Let's take this further. How would you respond to knowing, that questions like these will be discussed by primary school children in a school near you, this year? That's the level of engagement our local teachers and their pupils face with Understanding Christianity, the Church of England's resource designed to raise the standard of Religious Education in all its church schools, which is also being adopted (with tweaks) by some local education authorities (including Northumberland in its new Agreed Syllabus for RE). Understanding Christianity was published in 2016 with detailed training packages for school staff, introducing pupils to theological vocabulary in ways undreamt of, even a decade ago.

## Why might this matter for us as Readers?

Firstly, the children and young people you work with, might be a lot more clued up to Christian ideas than you might think. For example, 'What is the Trinity and why is it important for Christians?' will be covered in school by 7-9 year olds. Think about that for a moment, considering what happens in your own church. When sharing our faith, do we need to raise our game a little in the way we explain it?



Secondly, we Readers, our church buildings and our congregations could be very useful resources for teachers taking RE seriously, and anyone engaging with schools shouldn't be afraid to discuss theological ideas in age-appropriate ways with children and young people. If you'd like to explore this further, have a look at the National Society's webpage explaining the Understanding Christianity resource:

[http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CE\\_Intro-Book\\_W](http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CE_Intro-Book_W)

(Our excellent Religious Resources Centre has a physical copy of the whole detailed package, and is well worth a visit anyway.)

Does this interest you? After praying about it with others, consider fixing an appointment with a local school to ask the RE subject leader what they're currently doing, and whether there's anything you or your church community could offer in support. Whatever the syllabus in place, pupils might appreciate the chance to interview Christians about their faith, or discuss what a precious picture or artefact means for them. A 'church visit' might be made with a key question in mind, exploring one aspect of our faith. Of course, all church-school contacts need the usual safeguarding procedures in place, but let's not allow that concern to forestall the chance to generate stronger community links where possible. But do remember- we're not using this as an exercise in making new disciples: we are explaining what our faith means to us, and that's different. Although each has their proper place, Education mustn't be confused with Evangelism. Here are some more topics from Understanding Christianity, tweaked for the new Northumberland syllabus:

Year 1 or 2 (Age 5-7) What is the good news that Christians believe Jesus brings? Why does Easter matter to Christians?

Year 3 or 4 (Age 7-9) What do Christians learn from the Creation story? What is it like for someone to follow God? What kind of world did Jesus want?

Year 5-6 (Age 9-11) Why do Christians believe Jesus was the Messiah? Creation and science: conflicting or complementary? For Christians, what kind of king is Jesus?

Personally, I'd like to see members of our congregations tackling some of these questions for themselves. What do you think?

# NEW TESTAMENT GREEK READING GROUP.

JANET HEDLEY IS A READER IN THE PARISH OF MORPETH



**9.30 on a Friday morning. By Metro, car and bus, from across the diocese, and one even from 'over the water', five people are travelling to that mecca of learning, Church House in North Shields.** "Why?" I hear you ask. No, they aren't all studying for a degree in Divinity- or even convening for a Mothers' Union meeting- they are coming together to read the New Testament in its original language- Greek. It all started a while ago, whilst on a trainee Readers' /priests' weekend. One of the most memorable speakers was Paula Gooder, and over breakfast, we were discussing our Bible reading habits. She told us, a little apologetically, that, actually, she read the Bible completely each year, in English, Greek and Hebrew. Well! Jaws dropped over cornflakes. Here was this rather glamorous, busy young Mum- a Reader herself, who wrote books AND found time to read the Bible in three languages. "I wonder if I could do that?" I thought to myself. I've always been really interested in languages.

Fast forward a few years, and I heard about a New Testament Greek course being offered by Rev. Dr David Bryan. Was this my chance? Sadly, the course was already well on the way, but David said I'd be welcome to join, and a friend already on the course- Rev. Pat Moran- kindly offered to coach me in all the lessons I'd missed. Soon I was part of the team. We worked our way steadily through a NT Greek primer by "Duff". The alphabet was under our belt- we were getting better at spotting our verb tenses and especially the participles of which the Greeks were so fond. We could translate simple verses from the New Testament, and we could even translate from English into NT Greek- with a little (make that 'rather a lot of') help from our

Leader, David, ably assisted by our expert in Gospel comparisons, Rev. Canon Richard Bryant.

Now when you read 'verbs' and 'participles' you probably think, "Grammar! Ugh! Dry as dust. Had enough of that at school." Or, "Grammar- we never learned any." In fact, our lessons were fascinating. David said that teaching Greek is keeping his own Greek refreshed. Richard, with his knowledge of Aramaic and Modern Greek, can give us extra

background and useful insights on vocabulary.

And both David and Richard, being Bible scholars, can give us chapter and verse when the NT refers back to the OT. We have now moved on from "Duff".

Instead of just learning NT Greek, we are now a 'NT Reading Group'. Our monthly meeting starts with a cup of rather nice coffee. A short 'how are you?' session follows, after which we launch into our chosen chapter.

Having 'done' Mark, we are now well on the way to finishing Matthew. We take

turns to read a few verses in Greek- we are becoming far more fluent!- then translate them. We discuss any interesting grammar, then move on to comparisons with the other Gospels, as well as any OT links. Sometimes Richard notes how the NT Greek relates to modern Greek. (He always uses modern Greek pronunciation.) We end by praying the Lord's Prayer and the Grace in Greek.

"Well," you may say, "All very interesting. But what use is it?" Let me give my view. Most of us have a favourite translation of the Bible, and sometimes feel quite miffed when confronted with a different word to what we expected. But being part of this group, I have learnt that so many words have several possible meanings. Even a respected translation of the Bible doesn't always give the most accurate reading, and sometimes they even seem to miss out a key point! As a Reader, this gives me extra ideas when preaching. Also, doing my own translation helps me understand the main messages better. In addition, because David and Richard know so much, we've learnt key features of the Gospel writers' styles and their different perceptions of Jesus' ministry. We've been given extra insight into the background- for example, of what Capernaum was like in Jesus' time. All grist to the preacher's mill.

Several years later, and still going strong. We are still learning...getting closer to the Gospels in their original form...closer to what the writers were really saying..closer to Jesus. And we are enjoying it! (Did I mention the laughter? The Dynamic Duo leading us have a great sense of humour.)

**Fancy joining us?**

# WHAT IF GOD IS HERE?



## HILARY ELDER IS A READER AT BEDLINGTON ST CUTHBERT

What if God is here, all the time, after all,  
Was here all along? Blowing dust onto my desk,  
Teasing the houseplant blooms to unfurl,  
Snapping the shaft of pain into my shoulder?

In the hand-clasp of dad and little daughter  
Crossing the road to school, in the flight of  
House martins returning to summer in our street,  
In the soft, cool space between the ink and the paper?

What if it is God who causes the phone to ring,  
Who nudges my arm to spill my tea, who distracts?  
Who pulls me away from the thoughts that I thought mattered?

What if is it all God? And all of it acts of love?  
If I were to pull up a second chair to the desk,  
Would God sit at it? Would I see God there?

# BOOK REVIEW

**NORTHUMBERLAND A GUIDE BY STEPHEN PLATTEN, SACRISTY PRESS, DURHAM 2022. ISBN 978-1-78959-3**

**Stephen Platten explains he was inspired to write this book by the Shell County Guides of former years. In his clear enthusiasm for Northumberland, he presents a delightful book which might accompany a physical or a virtual journey.** In the preface he explains that he has undertaken his 'project' to provide information for people who wish to learn more about where they live and those who may visit. He explains that since the original Shell guide was written many changes have taken place in the topography and demography of his adopted county.

In this guide three linked essays introduce a carefully cross-referenced gazetteer. A helpful glossary, indices of Place, People and Subjects, a Bibliography and some maps are provided. The book is illustrated throughout with black and white photographs emulating the original guide which inspired the author. Platten considers that black and white photography brings out contrasts as well as being an art in itself. There are also thirty-two colour plates where colour enhances the verbal descriptions. Those who have contributed to the production of the book are carefully acknowledged. They include the artist, Matthew Rice, who provided the endpapers which appear to be a homage to the earlier guide.

With the intention of explaining how "the nature of the land itself has shaped the character and life of the county" an essay on "The land" outlines the geology and geography of Northumberland. Rock types, rivers and lakes are described and linked to local agriculture and industry. The flora and fauna are considered. A second essay, 'The Story', has a historical focus, looking at the county from days of hunter gathering to the present. The author then asks the question "What sort of people and culture has Northumberland begotten?" and sets out an answer in the third essay.

In the pages of the guide the reader is introduced to many people including the eighteenth-century curate in Allendale town who was caught up in the 1715 uprising but later turned King's evidence. One also learns that Katherine, the wife of Charles Parsons, who developed the steam turbine, is buried with him at Kirkwhelpington. Katherine was a talented engineer and she and her daughter set up The Women's Engineering Society. One finds that the artist J.M.W. Turner was inspired by Norham and Phillip Lowry by Berwick-upon-Tweed. Many other notable historic figures are written about. The miners of lead

and coal, the railway builders, farmers and labourers, are not forgotten.

In the gazetteer the objective descriptions of the buildings in towns and villages use standard architectural terms, however the author's personality and feelings are also charmingly expressed more subjectively from time to time. For example, when he states Newcastle and Berwick castles were "despoiled in the Victorian "railway race" or laments the loss of Ashington's interesting buildings. He speaks of the journeys to both castle and church in Warkworth as a "delight" and sounds sad when he describes buildings that, once beautiful, have fallen into neglect and desuetude. In describing the changes to St Wilfred's church in Kirkharle, he says it "retains a proper sense of holiness."



The author then asks the question "What sort of people and culture has Northumberland begotten?" and sets out an answer in the third essay.



If the guide is read away from an actual journey, then the photographs become important. They all enhance the written word and would also be an aide memoire when recalling a visit. Angelo Hornak's images of the night stairs in Hexham Abbey, full of shapes and shadows, are beautiful as is Michael Sadgrove's spiralling staircase taken in Seaton Delaval Hall. Peter Burton's picture of the Flodden Field memorial and Ian Hall's of Ashington World War 1 airfield are emotionally affecting. The eye Stephen Platten has for noticing detail is expressed through his own photographs as well as his words. I would mention particularly his Berwick Shelter, the photo of the former Gas research centre at Killingworth and that of the suffragette, Emily Davison's statue in Morpeth. His colour pictures of the Berwick Hay Harvest and the Lighthouse at the end of the pier are also lovely.

In a book this size, that one might carry on a trip or read in bed, one could not say everything there is to say about a whole county. This guide undoubtedly encourages readers to seek out more information about the land, history, and people of Northumberland and where possible to go and see it for themselves.

**JAN PORTER.**



# WHO WERE THE MAGI?

**CHRISTOPHER SAYERS IS A READER EMERITUS**

**Back in the time of the Babylonian empire, a large number of Jews were held in captivity, some having been captured by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and acquired by the Babylonians when they defeated the Assyrians, and others by the Babylonians themselves in 586 BC.**

One of their leaders being Daniel, who had been trained by the Babylonians. It is highly possible that, when the Median and Persian empires (also known as Parthians), under its King Cyrus, attacked and defeated Babylon, about 481BC, they were assisted by the Jews. This would explain why Cyrus was so generous in helping the Jewish people to rebuild their land and capital city of Jerusalem.

In the Parthian empire at that time, there was a religious group, who also had considerable political power and regarded themselves as “king-makers”. They were known as Magi and kept alert to any signs that a new king might be in the offing. They, no doubt, studied all the religious records of the surrounding nations and would be aware of the promise of a special Jewish Messiah/king who would be a gift from God. When they saw a strange star or conjunction of several stars or even a supernova (exploding star), they realised something was about to happen and some of their brethren set out to investigate.

Such an important group would, of course, have been accompanied by a considerable group of servants and soldiers for their comfort and protection. As it could be a journey of 1,000 miles or so they would need to carry tents, food and water for everyone, including the camels. The Bible doesn't state how many magi there were but, as there were 3 gifts, it might indicate that there were 3 magi but there could have been more – or fewer. They would naturally assume

that a king would be born in a royal palace in the capital, hence their arrival in Jerusalem amid general consternation.

Herod's concern would not only have been about the probable loss of his job and life, but also a disturbance of the political situation. He was king because the Romans had put him there, even though he was not a Jew. However, there had been a continuous rivalry between the Romans and the Parthians and the balance of power was still very sensitive. He would be anxious not to annoy this large group of Parthians but, at the same time, anxious that a new Jewish “King David” should not be allowed to establish himself and raise a Jewish army and, with the cooperation of the Parthians, drive the Romans out of Palestine – as had been expected to happen when the Messiah appeared! This might be why it was said that all Jerusalem, including possibly, the Roman garrison, was frightened, as well as Herod! Of course, had they known what sort of Messiah Jesus was going to be, they needn't have bothered!

We are told that the magi were told to return home by another route, so Herod commanded his soldiers to kill all boys under two years in Bethlehem and surrounding area, because that was the time since the star had been seen. However, Joseph had been told to escape to Egypt, probably attaching themselves to a caravan of merchants for protection – perhaps the magi's gifts being used to fund that and the return trip.

However, it is strange that the historian, Josephus, who loved to write about anything questionable that Herod did, never mentioned the massacre of the innocents! Indeed, no mention of it was made by anyone else!

# LAST WRITES

● GLORIA BRYANT IS A READER WITH PTO AT ST FRANCIS NEWCASTLE AND EDITOR OF THIS MAGAZINE.



since only a little later in the gospel Matthew will make clear that Joseph played no part in Jesus' conception. Be that as it may, it was clearly important to Matthew to be able to trace Jesus' descent from King David. Rather surprisingly, four women figure in Matthew's record of Jesus' ancestry. Three are named, one is not but her identity is obvious because her first husband is mentioned by name.

**One of the most divisive issues of present times is how to define a woman. What it is to be a woman has become a trap for politicians, academics, writers and lawyers, and what is most problematic in Britain is how to balance the rights of biological females, which are enshrined in law, with the rights of those who, though biologically male, identify as women.**

In this piece I have no intention of plunging into the culture wars which are bedeviling our nation and other liberal democracies, but what I write is about four remarkable women. Of course, until very recent times no one had any trouble defining womanhood; the problem was, and still is in too many places in the world, deciding what women could and should do and whether they were entitled to the same individual rights as their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Over many centuries, equality before the law and equality of opportunity have been hard-won by the women of these islands, as in many parts of the developed world.

Of course, through their achievements some women did leave their mark upon history but there are many fewer of them than men. At a very basic level, if you have ever dabbled in family history, you will know that the women in your family are more difficult to trace than the men. This is partly because it has been customary, though not required by law, for a woman at her marriage to change her surname to that of her husband. Also, the further back one goes, the less likely it is that a woman's maiden name will have been recorded in the parish registers. It seems that for centuries a woman's family name was regarded as less significant and by implication the women in our lineage were also. So, what about the women from whom Jesus was descended?

The liturgical year that begins on Advent Sunday 2022 is the Year of Matthew, and Matthew's Gospel begins with Jesus' genealogy through Joseph's line – a chapter which, as far as I am aware, has no place in the Church of England's lectionary. It seems odd that such a genealogy was necessary,

“However, the story has a dark side: David's liaison with Bathsheba began when she was still married to Uriah, a Hittite officer in David's army.”

The first named woman in the family tree is Tamar (16th century B.C./Genesis 38) who was the daughter-in-law of Judah, Jacob's fourth son. Married in turn to Judah's two oldest sons, who both died, she was sent back to her father's house to live as a widow until Judah's third son reached marriageable age. Time passed and Tamar was ashamed of her childlessness. Yet Judah did nothing to fulfil his promise. Feeling that she was the victim of injustice at Judah's hands, Tamar took drastic action. When the recently widowed Judah set out on a journey, Tamar, dressed as a prostitute, waylaid him and persuaded him to sleep with her. However, she took the precaution of asking Judah to give her his personal seal and cord along with his staff in pledge of future payment. Later, Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant and, outraged at his daughter-in-law's immorality, ordered that she be put to death. Whereupon Tamar sent him the evidence of the pledge he had made, saying that she was pregnant by the man who had made it. To his credit, Judah believed Tamar and revoked the death sentence. Six months later Tamar gave birth to twin sons: Perez and Zerah. From Perez's line would come King David.



The next woman to be named in the genealogy is Rahab (13th century B.C./Joshua 2), a prostitute who lived on the city wall of Jericho. Joshua, who had succeeded Moses as the leader of the Israelites, knew that to complete his people's quest for the Promised Land it would be necessary to capture Jericho, so he sent two spies into the city who lodged in Rahab's house. Rahab hid them from the authorities when they promised that the Israelites would spare her and her family if they took the city. The spies instructed her to tie a scarlet thread on her window as a sign. She then lowered them with a rope through her window down the outside of the wall. When Jericho fell, the spies returned to rescue Rahab and her family and they took them to the Israelite camp outside Jericho before the city was burnt to the ground. Rahab, Matthew tells us, became the mother of Boaz.

Better known to most Christians than either Tamar or Rahab is Ruth (11th century B.C./Ruth). We tend to remember her more for her loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi than for her risqué behaviour with Boaz. At the beginning of the wheat and barley harvests, Ruth and Naomi, both widows, had returned from Moab to Naomi's native Bethlehem. Destitute, Ruth went into the fields to glean the ears of corn left by the reapers, hoping that the farmer would be kind to her. The farmer, Boaz, was kind to her and happened to be a relative of her late father-in-law. Naomi explained that under Israelite law a dead man's next of kin had the right to claim his land and marry or 'redeem' his widow. If the next of kin renounced his right, it would pass to the next male kinsman. Naomi encouraged Ruth to go to the winnowing of the harvest because, when the work was done, Boaz would spend the night on the threshing room floor. Ruth waited until Boaz fell asleep and then turned back the edge of his cloak and lay at his feet. When he woke, she told him who she was, but he explained that he was not the closest next of kin to her father-in-law. Unphased by her bold behaviour, Boaz acquired the land from the man, who had first claim on it and on Ruth, and made her his wife. In due course they had a son, Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

Finally, in Matthew's genealogy we come to Bathsheba (10th century B.C./2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles). She is not named in the genealogy, but referred to as 'the wife of Uriah', and we can only speculate as to why the Evangelist chose not to mention her by name. The love story of Bathsheba has had a strong romantic appeal throughout the ages. However, the story has a dark side: David's liaison with Bathsheba began when she was still married to Uriah, a Hittite officer in David's army. When Bathsheba became pregnant, Uriah, on David's instructions, was sent on a dangerous mission during which he was killed. The child who was born as a result of David's illicit relationship with Bathsheba

died, but later a son was born who was named Solomon. In his dotage, David's love for Bathsheba was reflected in his decision to agree to her request to name Solomon as his heir, even though Solomon was one of David's younger sons.

If you are contemplating a Bible study, why not focus in the year of Matthew on these four women and why their lives are so interesting. There are a large number of images to enrich such a study, including Marc Chagall's painting of Tamar, a scarlet woman with a big heart, Danny Ashton's (a modern illustrator) image of Rahab in the red-light district of Jericho, Francesco Hayez's portrait of Ruth which captures her daring action in turning back Boaz's cloak and putting her head at his feet, and Rembrandt's painting of Bathsheba who holds David's note in her hand yet continues to reveal her charms to a sleepless king.

"If you are contemplating a Bible study, why not focus in the year of Matthew on these four women and why their lives are so interesting."

All four women mentioned by Matthew to reveal Jesus' lineage behaved in an unconventional way and were careless of their reputations in order to overcome their powerlessness in a patriarchal society. Most, if not all, were outsiders: Rahab was a citizen of Jericho, Ruth was a Moabite and Bathsheba's name means 'daughter of Sheba'.

None of them is what the Victorians would have considered a virtuous woman (neither are some of the men associated with them), and yet God used them to do his work. And, of course, the story ends with their descendant Joseph marrying a young woman who is pregnant before they are married, who will give birth to the Saviour. Right at the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew sets out his message that the Good News of Jesus is for the sinner and the outsider, not just for the virtuous and the chosen few.