All Saints' Thornton Hough

Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads
Where old stories and our stories meet.

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Introduction

In his semi-autobiographical novel David Copperfield, Charles Dickens brings to life a wonderful collection of minor characters who the eponymous hero encounters as the novel progresses. They include Barkis who asserts his willingness to marry Clara Peggoty; the scheming and manipulative Uriah Heep, always ever so 'umble; Mr Micawber, who never quite gets his personal finances in order until he goes to Australia and Betsy Trotwood, perpetually worried by encroaching donkeys. They all play their part in the narrative of David Copperfield's life and his story wouldn't be the same without them.

As we read the Bible there are, of course, a number of major characters such as Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Peter, Paul and, above all, Jesus himself who shape the narrative and are fundamental to our understanding of what it all means. But there are also a host of minor characters, some of whom, like the strange and unknown priest Melchizedek who greets Abraham at Salem (the future Jerusalem) following his success in battle, only appear briefly (in his case in three verses, Genesis 14 v 18-20) and yet they enrich the story and open windows through which we can see more fully the nature and purposes of God. Melchizedek's importance includes the way in which the writer to the Hebrews uses him to offer a window into the nature of Christ's priesthood; something which occupies more verses than his original appearance to provide refreshments for Abraham.

In this series of reflections we are going to look at a number of these minor characters, some of whom may be quite unfamiliar, and see what we can learn from them as we journey through Lent. They were not all paragons of virtue and, like us, were flawed human beings. But their stories are included in the biblical narrative for a reason; they have found a place in God's word to us because they help us to better understand the story of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ.

At the end of each reflection there are some questions you might like to consider. There may, of course, be other questions that come to mind that are

worth exploring. There is also a short prayer but please feel free to make your own prayer response.

A note on referencing. When referencing from the passage for the day when it is contained within a single chapter the verse or verses only will be referenced, as in (v 6; v 3-5). If the reading contains verses from two chapters it will be chapter and verse, as in (6 v 7). All other references contain book, chapter and verse(s) as in (Rom 8 v 17).

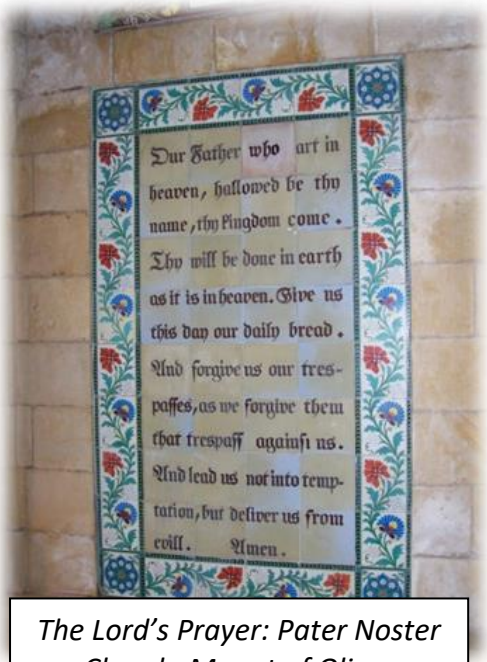
The photos included with each reflection were taken on pilgrimages to the Holy Land and reflect the beauty and the sometimes painful realities of life today in the land where those who appear on the Bible's back roads lived so many years ago. Many of them have a (sometimes tenuous!) link with the stories and the reflections on them.

Revd Rob Green

Acknowledgement

We are very grateful to Rob Green for giving us permission to use his Bible reading notes for our Lenten Conversation this year.

Ash Wednesday: February 17th: Cain – Genesis 4 v 1-17: 'Am I my brother's keeper'.



The Lord's Prayer: Pater Noster Church, Mount of Olives

The Old Testament takes a keen interest in fraternal relationships (I grew up with three brothers so have a bit of background here!). Interestingly on a number of occasions it is younger brothers, sometimes deservedly (Joseph) and sometimes by adroit use of skulduggery (Jacob) who gain the upper hand. In the story of Cain and Abel it is God's apparent preference for the younger rather than the older brother's sacrifice that leads to fratricide. Before looking at it more closely, it is worth noting that we shouldn't get too hung up about how literally to take this story; we just end up asking ourselves things like who on earth Cain's wife and the 'whoever' in verse 14 could have been if Adam and Eve were the first two human beings. As we are about to see, the teller of this story is challenging us with some much more significant and relevant questions.

It isn't entirely clear why God favoured the offering of Abel. It could be argued that he had taken a bit more care in choosing some of the very best of his flock to offer but the text offers nothing definitive to back this up. God simply made his choice. It is, however, in the violent response of Cain that much of the warning this story embodies is to be found. He considers himself slighted; hardly surprising when, in the cultural milieu from which this story arose, it was the firstborn son who should have had everything going for him, something we see this reflected at their respective births. When Cain is born Eve expresses a delight (v 1) entirely missing from the birth of her second son Abel (v 2). The continuing use in the context of royal succession of the adage 'the heir and the spare' contains a faint echo of this.

Cain's fury at having been apparently snubbed and his deadly jealousy that his younger brother had, in his eyes, put one over on him reflect a sense of entitlement that we recognise as being very much present in the world in which we live. It often manifests itself in a feeling of superiority leading to an over developed sense of one's own importance, unrealistic demands on other people

and an overweening desire for power and influence. It follows that when these needs are unmet there is considerable potential for conflict. Such attitudes exist in government and in all parts of society; they are not entirely unknown in church life.

It is Cain's sense of entitlement, his sense of outrage that God has not recognised his intrinsic superiority as the elder brother and effectively cheated him of the recognition that he believed was his by right that leads him to take the life of an entirely innocent younger sibling. And one terrible mistake then leads to another as he tries to lie his way out of it with his rhetorical and immortalised question, 'am I my brother's keeper?' (v 9 - roughly translated as 'search me, guv').

The point for us is that Cain's deep seated rage, an anger that is a grown up and much more lethal form of throwing one's toys out of the pram, has got out of control and mastered him entirely (v 7). Before continuing one thing needs to be made clear; anger isn't always destructive and self-centred. It can be an appropriate response to injustice. Attitudes and actions involving nations, communities and individuals that cause poverty, disempowerment, prejudice, despair and death should make us angry enough to want to get out of our seats and do something about it. Jesus got into a furious rage with those who had desecrated the Temple by using it to line their own pockets by extorting money from those already very badly off (Mat 21 v 12-13). He was quite unable to stand to one side and leave it unchallenged. It is surely very appropriate, in the face of global trading arrangements that benefit rich countries over poor ones, elections being rigged so that despots can cling to power, basic human rights being denied to so many and conflict causing such death, destruction and suffering, that we become angry enough to do more than wearily accept that this is 'the way of the world'.

But in complete contrast the destructive and misplaced nature of Cain's anger can achieve no good thing. it is the anger of one who believes that he or she should have got the promotion that another colleague was given and who never forgives them for it, the anger of the person in charge addicted to having it their own way whose authority is questioned, the anger of one jealous as others are praised, the anger of one who considers himself to be better and more worthy than others. Those who allow this kind of anger to become their master hurt other people in all sorts of ways and sometimes end up, as in the case of Cain,

finding the intended or unintended consequences a profound cause for lasting regret.

It is worth noting that although Cain does not escape punishment for his violent act he is not as a result placed beyond God's care – indeed the 'mark of Cain' (v 15) protects him from the same fate as his brother (backed by the threat of severe divine vengeance! v 16). It's a reminder that anger does have a habit of multiplying and causing a chain reaction. At the time of writing self-isolation is being used as a way of protecting people from Covid-19 and here God acts to isolate the sin of Cain and to draw its sting knowing its destructive and replicatory force. It's a reminder of the words of Jesus from the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing' (Luke 23 v 34). As those who, however imperfectly, seek to make known the forgiving love of God we too are called to interrupt the chain reaction so often caused by sin, including bitter and belligerent anger, as we work for justice and peace and make the forgiving love of Jesus more fully known.

And if we look into our own hearts we may find some misplaced anger that we are often barely conscious of but which surprises us from time to time with its vehemence. It might even relate to something that happened a long time ago and has never been properly addressed and sorted out. Such anger has the power to cripple us emotionally and spiritually meaning that through prayer, good advice and maybe, if needed, professional counselling, we need to find a way of moving on. It is often in the letting go that we find the path to freedom and new life.
Questions: Have you ever allowed misplaced anger to be your master? Why was Jesus able to forgive those who crucified him?

Prayer: Lord, forgive us when we become needlessly angry and help us to forgive those who have been needlessly angry with us. Amen.

Saturday February 20th: Melchizedek: Genesis 14 v 18-20; Psalm 110 v 4; Hebrews 7 v 1-22: 'You are a priest for ever'.

Melchizedek is a figure that we know almost nothing about – and that, as we shall see, is actually the point. In the three verses in Genesis 14 that describe his encounter with Abraham we learn that he is king of Jerusalem, referred to here as 'Salem', which at the time in which this story is set was a Canaanite city.

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On a visit to Jerusalem some years ago I went to have a look at the somewhat controversial archaeological excavations taking place underneath the Palestinian township of Silwan funded by an association called Elad, one of whose aims is to move Jewish settlers into the neighbourhood. These have uncovered not only the city that King David built in the 10th century BC but also the remains of a sizeable Canaanite fortress dating back to the 18th century BC, a reminder that Jerusalem has a history stretching back many centuries before David captured it and made it his capital (2 Samuel 5 v 6-10).

Melchizedek is described as a priest of 'God Most High' (El Elyon) rather than Yahweh, Israel's God. Melchizedek is neither Jewish nor does he worship Israel's God. His name means 'king of righteousness' and it is significant by submitting to his blessing and offering him a tenth of his booty (from his recent raid on those who were holding his nephew Lot as a prisoner - see Gen 14 v 1-17), Abraham is implicitly acknowledging the validity of both his kingship and priesthood.

The writer to the Hebrews makes the most of the fact that we know so little about Melchizedek. He uses the reference in Psalm 100 v 4 to the Messiah being '…a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek' as a bridge to link Jesus with this mysterious king and priest. To be a priest in the Jewish nation you had to be descended from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron – it was your family tree that validated your priesthood. But even though we don't know who Melchizedek's ancestors were (Heb 7 v 6) or how he came to be a priest king, Abraham seems happy to acknowledge him as his peer (v 7).

The point that the writer to the Hebrews wants to communicate is that the priesthood of Jesus does not depend on his family background. In his lifetime it was still only members of the Levite tribe who had authority to act as priests in the Temple in Jerusalem (10v 11) as they were still doing when Hebrews was written (probably a few years before its destruction in 70 AD). Jesus was actually a member of the royal tribe of Judah (v 14) which begged the question as to how he could be a priest. He sees in the unknown figure of Melchizedek, who makes such fleeting appearance in the Old Testament, the one who points to the real nature of Jesus' priesthood. Whilst Melchizedek obviously had a family background we have no idea whether his priesthood was in any way hereditary. It is the silence about this in the few verses in which he makes an appearance in the Old Testament that is crucial to the writer. It is the fact that he is just there, appearing from nowhere and having his priesthood acknowledged by no less a person than Abraham that offers an illustration (and it is no more than that) of the kind of priesthood Jesus exercises.

So whilst Jesus isn't a Levite, he can be a priest of the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6 v 6) because that kind of priesthood doesn't need to be validated by a family tree. This gives him the freedom to achieve something beyond the abilities of any priest who served in the Temple; which is to give his own life for the sin of the world (Heb 7 v 3).

The unknown author of Hebrews argues that the endless sacrifices that lay at the heart of Jewish religious life were a bit weak and useless (v 16), didn't work (v 18) and have become obsolete (Heb 8 v 13) which is pretty strong language given that much of the Old Testament revolves around the sacrificial system! But this new High Priest, one who like Melchizedek relies on his own greatness rather than who he was descended from, has once and for all become a great high priest, dying on the cross for the sins of the whole world and passing into heaven (Hebrews 4 v 14).

So where does this take us? One thing that the writer to the Hebrews points out is that Melchizedek was king of 'Salem' (Heb 7 v 2) which he associates with the word 'Shalom' meaning peace. So in Melchizedek the writer of Hebrews identifies someone who by being both king and priest and with a name speaking of peace points to Jesus. What Jesus has done as king and priest is to bring peace between us and God by taking our sins upon himself. This is not because of any sense that he has changed God's mind; that God was angry with us but isn't any more because of Jesus' sacrifice. Appeasing the wrath of the gods by

throwing them a victim is something more akin to pagan rituals and Jesus came to do away with that sort of thing. What Jesus does, by his death and resurrection, is to take into himself the totality of the sin, suffering, sense of alienation and hurt that fracture our vision of God and our relationship with him and assure us that God does, and always has, loved us more than we could ever know. As the song puts it, 'peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ our Lord'. Whilst some of this may seem a bit dense and somewhat obscure, the bottom line is that Jesus' authority does not depend on any human institution but comes directly from God. This is why we can, in a way beyond even the many heroes of scripture listed later in Hebrews (11 v 40), prayerfully put our faith in him, even or especially in the kind of painful situations that the recipients of the letter, under the cosh for their faith, found themselves in. So, in the words of the writer, 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (12 v 2).

Questions: What do you understand by the phrase, 'Jesus died for our sins?' What difference does the fact that God loves you enough to send Jesus make to the way you live your life?

Prayer: Lord, peace is your gift to us in Jesus, help us to worship and share his peace in our daily lives. Amen.

Monday February 22nd: Bezalel and Oholiab: Exodus 31 v 1-11: 'See I have chosen…'

St George's Anglican Cathedral, Jerusalem

Back in the 1990s I remember visiting the (now defunct) Waterford Crystal plant in Ireland. I was very struck by the fact that becoming a glass blower or cutter (you had to decide which you wanted to be – one or the other rather than both – at the beginning of your training) required an eight year apprenticeship. This sounded far-fetched but seeing the quality (and price) of the finished items for sale in the shop at the end of the tour, the immense skill of such expert craftspeople was on display for all to see.

It's lovely and very significant that the book of Exodus pays tribute to the wonderful God given skills of Bezalel and Oholiab. The Tent of Meeting, which they were so instrumental in beautifying, was a sort of mobile worship space that, as the Israelites moved around in the wilderness, could be packed up and carried with them. It housed the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets, and was the place in which the presence of God was localised; in that sense being a portable precursor to the Jerusalem Temple.

Bezalel, Oholiab and their colleagues were able to make it into a very beautiful space which greatly enhanced the sense of God's presence within. They had a pretty wide remit that included the decoration of the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Covenant itself, everything necessary for sacrificial offerings to be made and the garments worn by the priests. We can imagine them working together to create somewhere wonderful for the worship of God. It puts me a little in mind of the television programme DIY SOS in which tradesmen of all kinds; bricklayers, plasterers, joiners, plumbers, electricians, landscape gardeners and many others come together to give their time and skills to create a beautiful home for family with particular needs who are not able to help themselves. In their hard hats and heavy boots they are using their considerable gifts and

expertise to create a space in which a family can live and thrive. I don't think that Bezalel, Oholiab and their colleagues had hard hats or hobnail boots and they used far more primitive tools than their latter-day counterparts, but they produced something of immense beauty that worked powerfully on those who came there to worship.

The church buildings we worship in, whether they are ancient or modern were all built to enhance Christian worship. Stonemasons, glass blowers and cutters, carpenters, joiners, artists, needle workers, candle makers and many other craftspeople have beautified our churches. In that sense they continue to minister to members of church families across the world who sing, pray, share bread and wine and have fellowship in them (when there isn't a pandemic). For instance, the art of creating stained glass is an amazing skill. Whether dating from ancient or modern times, it is there to tell stories and express profound truths in a way that words cannot. For example, the panels in the 13th century Sainte-Chappelle in Paris depict over a thousand figures from the Old and New Testaments reflecting the need for visual storytelling in an era where few people could read. But I also vividly remember being struck by a depiction of the astronaut John Glenn in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, built in the 20th century, which powerfully symbolised the basic and God given human yearning for exploration and discovery. What Bezalel, Oholiab and their latter-day colleagues are able to do is transcend words as they open hearts and imaginations to the reality of God's love and the transformation of humanity that results from responding to it.

We read in Exodus 31 of Bezalel that God had '…filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge…' (v 3). A few verses further on God declares, with reference to Oholiab and those working with him, that 'I have given ability to all the skilled workers…' (v 6). Although it might be tempting to see gifts such as these as more natural than spiritual that would be a big mistake. Whether worship is taking place in an ancient tabernacle or a modern church it is not just the leaders 'up front' who using God's gifts. In Paul's list of spiritual gifts alongside such things as teaching and healing we find other qualities such as administrative abilities that on the surface might seem more mundane (1 Corinthians 12 v 28).

Continuing this line of thought reminds us that every human being has been given gifts by God. And whilst some of them, such as preaching, teaching, offering pastoral care and leading worship as well as administration and

creating stained glass windows, are specifically for use in church, there are so many more! Some are gifted technicians, sportspeople, cooks, engineers, school teachers, doctors, nurses, designers, artists, plasterers, decorators, builders, cleaners, woodworkers, organisers, listeners, carers, encouragers and gardeners, to name but a very few of many. Everything we are and all we can do is a gift from God to us and through us to others. And the great thing is that each of us has something unique to offer. In an age that idolises fame it's easy to feel that we are useless and have nothing of any value to contribute. But Bezalel, Oholiab and their unnamed colleagues remind us that God is no respecter of persons and inspires those gifted people who work quietly in the background and just get on with it without asking for their names to be up in lights. What is it that you uniquely have to offer? It may even be something you haven't discovered yet!

Questions: Do we sometimes feel useless? What is the antidote?

Prayer: Lord, you have given so many gifts to humanity. Help us to use the gifts you give us for the good of others and the growth of your kingdom. Amen.