

## **Sunday March 22**

Happy Mother's Day or 'Mothering Sunday' as my late mum Renée used to prefer. It is strange that we're not together worshipping in church today - giving and receiving the little posies of flowers that recognise how special our parents are. Today's rather long and complicated gospel reading from John's gospel (Ch. 9:1-41) invites a series of sermons - but I'm not going to try that here (you'll be relieved to hear!). At other times it's a broader sweep that's useful - particularly as we near the end of Lent and anticipate the events of Holy Week.

I have a friend, Dave Kitchen, ex Headteacher, poet, author and disc jockey who is based in Cardiff. Dave and I used to do concerts together: he's read his poems and I would sing songs...ah the days when I used to have hair and a beard. One of his recent projects has been to do a quick romp through the Bible, book by book. I've used his stuff through the years but

thought it helpful to reproduce John's account for you.

Dave introduces what he's about as follows:

Most people have books on their shelves that they've been meaning to take a good look at but they've never got round to it. Often, it's a matter of how busy life can be. And the books that look as if they need time and effort tend to stay safely stacked on the shelves.

The Bible suffers from sitting quietly, waiting to be opened, more than most. Pick it up for a quick browse and you'll quickly realise both how big and varied it is. That's what makes it so interesting. But it's also what makes it challenging for a reader. So it's not really a shock to discover that someone responding to a survey of bible knowledge thought David and Goliath was the name of a ship. That's what happens when people think they ought to know the answer and have a go.

Knowledge is better amongst those who attend church regularly but, even in the pews, there are unexpected gaps. When I was working with Rob Lacey on educational materials for The Word on the Street/The Street Bible, we both became aware of not only how little young people knew but also how few adults really

knew their way around the books of the Bible. They were familiar with the main stories and the key beliefs but knew very little about the side streets of God's story.

It's not all that surprising. This is a hurrying world and all kinds of media demand people's attention. My own idea was simple enough – to be able to present a book of the Bible within a worship service. A cameo is how one friend described it: a brief look at what the book was and possibly how it came to be, a brisk summary and a selection of highlights to maintain interest and encourage further reading. The approach allowed me to fill in some of the gaps that might be left from a verse-by-verse approach to bible teaching. After all, if you are to make sense of the detail, you need to see the big picture into which it fits.

So this book is for someone who wants to know about the whole bible but hasn't read all of it so far. Or, indeed, someone who has read faithfully through one of those bible-in-a-year schemes and is now amazed at how much has slipped out of their memory banks!

So here goes....**John: the word is out**

In the beginning, he was there: the Word, the breath that begins everything. Not a single thing got made that didn't have his signature on it.

Then, suddenly, he was here, the light for everyone. Some people walked right past him but others saw what was happening and life suddenly felt new again.

That's how John draws his listeners to him - with a kind of mystery story. Eventually, he admits who it is he's been writing about: Jesus, called Christ, the one announced by John the Baptist who will take away the sin in this world. People meet the new teacher, are impressed and ask to follow him. In next to no time he's turning water in to wine at a wedding party. Everyone is stunned and those who listen get the message that this really is someone they can believe in.

You'd think that would be the first chapter of the good times but it isn't. John turns next to arguments in the Temple in Jerusalem. Good and bad jostle each other in this book. People believe in the miracles they see but their hearts aren't

in it. Jesus knows it and does not trust himself to them.

However, at least one heart is changed. Nicodemus, a senior Pharisee, comes to him privately one night. That's a shock in itself. The Pharisees are the "equipped to be strict" people, the ones who maintain the old standards at all costs. "You're from God," he declares but what he's saying trails off. Doubt hangs in the air. You're searching, Christ tells him, but if you want to begin again, you need to be born again and feel God's spirit at work.

Month by month, the news about Jesus spreads. John the Baptist says that's absolutely right because it's God's Spirit in full flow. The trouble is success breeds enemies and Jesus returns to Galilee via Samaria.

Now that's an area where the people aren't properly Jewish. They don't do things in the 'right' way. When Jesus meets a woman at the well, he asks for a drink. She is shocked: "From me? But you're Jewish. You can't stand people like us." "Ah," says Jesus, "If only you

knew." Then they talk about what quenches your thirst and what meets life's deeper needs. A new day is coming, Jesus tells her, and everyone can be a part of it.

Arriving in Cana, he meets a government official who is desperate because his son is seriously ill back in Capernaum. "Come with me and heal him sir," he begs. Jesus observes that people only seem to believe if there are miracles. "But my boy's going to die," the official pleads. "He's going to live," Christ says. "Go home to him." Instead of arguing, he sets off faithfully. On the road, meets his servants who've come to tell him that his son is now getting better. Sometimes, you simply need to take Jesus at his word.

The next miracle is for someone who can't walk home...or anywhere. After 40 years paralysed, he just sits by a pool with alleged healing powers. Perhaps he hopes; perhaps he's given up. The question Jesus asks him sounds too obvious: do you want to get well? Of course, he does...except you can get comfortable in your

problems after a while. The man doesn't answer Christ's question. Instead he explains how it's only the first one in who gets healed when the waters move and that's never him. Whether it's an excuse or a good reason, we don't find out. Jesus simply tells him to get up and walk. And, to everyone's amazement, he does.

That convinces the Jewish authorities of Christ's power. It also shoots him up their chart of dangerous things to be got rid of. On one level, the problem is that Jesus heals people on their Sunday when 'good' people are supposed to be taking a rest. On a deeper a level, it's about who's in charge. Old leaders don't like making way for new.

What no one can deny is that remarkable things are happening. His disciples get caught in a storm on Lake Galilee and he walks to them across the water. They are terrified. "Do not be afraid," he tells them, a phrase he'll repeat time and again.

On the hills above the lake, he feeds a crowd of thousands from next to nothing but

people just don't get it when Jesus talks about being the bread of life. It means he's there to fill lives with what we truly need rather than all the nice things we want. That requires a move away from seeing Jesus as a really good man to accepting him as the promised one from God himself. Sadly, it's too much for many and they drift away. "Do you want to go, too?" Jesus asks his close disciples. "Lord," says Peter, "where would we go? The words that give eternal life come from you, nowhere else."

These are hard times. Jesus is hated, moves around secretly, even his own brothers aren't convinced. When he does preach in public, opinion is divided. He continues to talk about lighting up the world and letting the truth set you free but the religiously rigid crew remain determined to miss the point. They think they're already home and dry with God. Christ tells them that life is not about good connections but right actions.

In the midst of this, Jesus heals a man born blind. Plenty of people can't believe it's

actually the person they once knew. Must be his twin? Or someone who looks like him? "No, it's me all right," he tells them. The establishment decide they need to quash the story. However, the man at the centre of the storm sums up their problem neatly: "Once I was blind, now I can see." He gets banned for his honesty!

The challenge for Jesus is to get people to understand that he's the one who will save them and open the road back to God; the shepherd who will protect his flock and give his life for them. It's too big a claim for many. Not for the first time, people get ready to stone him and Jesus is forced to slip away quietly

In no time, though, he's preparing to go back. His disciples are flabbergasted: "But they tried to stone you!" The reason for the change is a message from Mary that her brother Lazarus is ill. By the time Christ arrives, he is dead. Mary's sister, Martha still hopes desperately that something can be done. When Jesus weeps for his lost friend, people see the love he has but, as he calls him out of the tomb, they see a

dead man walking. Suddenly life after death is not simply a discussion topic.

Now, an event like that doesn't take long to become front-page news. The religious bosses in Jerusalem are more worried than ever. The Romans are not going to like this, they observe, and we'll feel the effects of their anger. Caiaphas, the high priest, is clear: it's better than one man dies for the people rather than lose a whole nation.

Not that there seems to be much of a threat when Jesus enters the city for the Passover. Crowds are cheering and yelling his name. It feels like the one promised who will take over where King David left off has finally arrived. The Pharisees think they're getting nowhere but Christ is already troubled by the days ahead. He knows how quietly and quickly day turns to night.

At the Passover meal on the Thursday, Christ washes his disciples' feet. Peter is shocked. Servants are supposed to do that work.

But that's exactly what Jesus is and he wants his team to care about people, not their own status.

Love one another, he tells them, as I love you. And don't let worry take over. I'm going ahead so that there'll be a place in my father's house ready just for you. The disciples don't really understand him but Jesus promises a Spirit who will transform them and make sense of it all. They'll need to stay connected to him like fruit on branches. If they do, all that is good in them will come from him. Yes, they'll face troubles but they will know deep peace, as well. Across the years, there'll be more to learn but he promises that everything will work out. Then he prays for them and sets off to a quiet garden called Gethsemane.

That's where the soldiers swoop, guided by Judas Iscariot, who's betrayed him. Now, while Jesus is being questioned by the authorities, Peter is warming himself by a fire and pretending he doesn't know the prisoner in order to hide his own identity. It works but, as the morning comes and a cock crows, he

remembers how Jesus had warned he'd deny him. As for his master, he's shunted across from the Jewish authorities to the Romans and to Pontius Pilate.

By this time, there's a crowd gathering who want blood. Pilate can't find a good reason to condemn Jesus but that's not enough to save him. He gives way and sends his prisoner to be whipped, then crucified. Christ is taken to the Place of the Skull and hangs there upon a cross while those who loved him so much watch on as soldiers gamble for his coat. Night starts to fall; the soldiers check the crosses and find that Jesus is dead. Just to make doubly sure, one of them stabs his side with a spear.

Then, the strangest twist of the story: two members of the Jewish Council which condemned him - Nicodemus and Joseph from Arimathea - decide to break ranks with the establishment. Joseph asks Pilate for permission to bury the body decently and they place it safely in a tomb in Joseph's garden. Thirty-six hours pass; Friday becomes Sunday. Mary

Magdala sets out to finish the burial rites. The sun is hardly up but the tomb is open and the body is missing. Running to Peter, she screams: "They've taken his body and we don't know where it is."

Peter and John set out to see what's happened. There's no sign of forced entry, just a neat set of grave-clothes. For the two disciples, hope dawns. For Mary, it still seems desperate. She stays in the garden, sobbing quietly. "Why are you crying?" says an angelic voice. "They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they've put him." Then another voice, a man, asks her who she is looking for. Thinking it's the gardener she doesn't even look up but gabbles: "If you took him, tell me where he is and I'll get him."

"Mary," says the man and she realises who she has been speaking to. "Teacher," she says and holds Jesus as tightly as she can, never ever wanting to let him go again. Eventually, Jesus gently gets her to release him and Mary runs to tell the others.

The disciples are astonished by Mary, particularly Thomas. He misses the first visit by Jesus and declares grumpily: "Unless I can touch the scars myself, I'll never believe." On the next occasion, Jesus lets Thomas do just that. No more doubt, he tells him, just believe. Then Jesus tells his disciples how great it will be for those who don't get the chance that Thomas does and yet still believe. The faith and lives of future followers provides a great place to finish. But, after a tidy final sentence, something happens.

Like so many writers, John adds a P.S. Much of it consists of a fishing story from Galilee. However, it's not the fish that matter but Peter's chance to get right with Jesus. He's let his master down by denying he knew him...but he still loves him. Jesus gives him the chance to say it out loud: this is a new chapter of second chances. The stories could go on forever, John observes, but this time he really does stop. So we're left wondering about all that happened which wasn't written down and, perhaps, thinking

of all the lives that continue to be part of the  
story.

**Amen**