

The dead of night

Heather Smith *reflects on* Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob's family is complicated. His brother Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for some stew because he is hungry, but then he is furious with Jacob. Jacob pretends to be Esau in order to steal his father's blessing. Jacob's uncle cheats him of the wife he promised, Rachel, and gives him Leah instead, then insists that he serve him for a second seven-year term to pay for Rachel.

Now Jacob is concerned about what will happen when he meets his brother again. There is nothing like family relationships to make us feel internal conflict. We wrestle with love, loyalty, duty, jealousy, hurt, to name but a few emotions. Theologians have puzzled about the meaning of this passage in

Genesis, where Jacob wrestles with an unknown stranger he presumes to be God. But in the circumstances, wrestling surely describes the uncomfortable feelings he must be feeling when he thinks about meeting Esau. Perhaps it is only the presence of a wrestling partner that prevents him from running away in the night.

The dead of night is exactly when we find ourselves at our most emotionally vulnerable, our minds not quite rational, unable to think things through logically and likely to find ourselves much more fearful than necessary. We may come through the night wounded, but God does not desert us and we are able to face whatever awaits us in the morning. ☺

Be with us, Lord, in the dark places of our lives and the dead of night, when worries beset us and rational thought deserts us. Bring us safe to the light of the morning and show us a clear path. Amen.

Hymn writers

Charlotte Elliott

by Caroline Hodgson

Charlotte Elliott, who lived from 1789 until 1871, came from an influential evangelical family. Her maternal grandfather, Henry Venn, was a founder of the Clapham Sect – a network of Christians who shared moral and spiritual values and campaigned for an end to slavery. As a young woman Charlotte was a talented musician, artist and

writer, known for her sparkling wit. Following a debilitating illness in 1821, however, she was largely confined indoors. Her life has been described as “hidden”, although she became a prolific editor and writer, penning numerous poems and hymns. It's said that she wrote her best-known hymn – “Just As I am, without One Plea” – when the family had gone out and Charlotte, left behind at home, became overwhelmed by a sense of her own loneliness and uselessness. It poignantly expresses her sense of being “poor, wretched, blind,” and her faith that Jesus will “welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve”. ☺



Summer holidays

by Andrew Lyon

A visible display of Christian faith is seen as terribly un-British. Faith is a private affair, says culture to Christians. In response many Christians say the opposite; we are to be salt and light, and by setting apart certain times and seasons we draw attention to the world beyond the here and now.

In truth, we don't often let the sacred intersect with the day to day. Last week I wrote about

how the concept of holy days fascinated me as a child. I think it was because interrupting the routine for an explicitly religious devotion showed confidence in our faith, something we are in danger of losing today. But the sacred has to break into the everyday. Sundays are our weekly reminder, and holidays in general are also a time set apart, to step back and take stock. That in itself is a spiritual act, particularly if Jesus is the larger framework for our life. ☺

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“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), writer and theologian

Focus on faith



Heather Smith *reflects on* Matthew 14:22-33

Commentators on this story about Jesus walking on the water very often focus on faith. Peter steps out in faith on to the water, but it fails him and he begins to sink. But in the earlier part of the story we read about weary sailors whose boat has been battered by the winds all night and who now find themselves far from land. When they see Jesus coming towards them, their exhausted minds imagine they are seeing a ghost. The alternative, a human being walking on water, is not something they can even begin to process. A ghost is the most likely explanation that their experience and understanding of life can produce.

It is very easy to see only what we are accustomed to seeing, or to interpret what we see and hear based on old, familiar patterns. But God is constantly bringing something new, if only we see it. How often we forget that the Christian life is all about transformation and change. God wants to change our way of thinking, to bring us different perspectives that change our understanding of the world around us. We often see only the old ghosts that haunt us with incidents and feelings from the past. God sends something alive and new, with infinite possibilities, if we grasp them with faith. ☺

God, who blows the wind of change across our lives, help us to feel the breeze it brings and, refreshed, move forward in new ways. Amen.

Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

It's quiet here in August, although everything is growing, some things faster than others! The poly tunnel is a riot of greens and we can't keep up. Lambs and ducklings seem to double in size every week. The grass is good and the sheep are grazing well.

In the "fat times" it seems easy to take it all for granted and assume that nothing will change and there will always be plenty. That is when I need to look beyond my own small space and be aware of bigger movements, greater events. Climate change and the pressure on land and water in other places, leading to more movement of people as refugees, have to be in my prayers and my political choices. My being here is deeply connected with their lives there, wherever that is. God is not my God, who cares only about me and mine, but is our God, who loves and cares about the whole of creation. ☺

Summer holidays

by Andrew Lyon

If all holidays are special, holy times, set apart from the world, then what might be the spiritual dimension to this? Is retreating from the world enough in itself, without a simultaneous movement towards something transcendent? Do all our holidays have to be holy days? The absence of our regular routine may be refreshing, and certainly creates

space, but what do we choose to fill that time with? Hopefully there will be fun and relaxation. But will we also make time for reflection and restoration – space to put everyday worries into perspective? And need the two, in any case, be mutually exclusive?

If God is creator, everything in the world is saturated with God. There need be no sacred-secular divide. Quietly orientating our minds towards God in the midst of whatever we are doing while we're on holiday is enough, perhaps, to make us conscious of the holiness that is already at work in our lives. ☺

“When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation, and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart! Then I shall bow, in humble adoration, and there proclaim, 'My God, how great thou art!'"

Based on a poem by Carl Boberg (1859-1940), Swedish poet

Hidden in plain sight

Heather Smith *reflects on* Genesis 45:1-15

Could you forgive someone who sold you into slavery? Joseph's brothers had a lot to answer for, but he didn't hold it against them. Even though things had turned out well for him, it had taken a long time to reach that point, and his story included false accusations and a lengthy period in prison. Although the false accusations were not his brothers' fault, it would have been easy to hold them responsible because they were the reason he was in Egypt in the first place.

We might think of Joseph's story as something that happened a long time ago – another time, another culture – but people are being trafficked today all over the world. Many end up "hidden in plain sight" in the West – in nail bars or car washes. For most, the story does not have a happy ending like Joseph's. There are no reunions or fabulous job opportunities. But it does not mean that God does not care.

Pharaoh's cupbearer, who met Joseph in prison, facilitated his release. Do we pay enough attention to the plight of those around us, to help them escape from whatever is entrapping them, be it modern slavery or other situations that imprison? Can we do something to help to restore mental and spiritual health? And do we ourselves need reconciliation and forgiveness to enable us to become whole again? ☺



God of those who are disadvantaged and persecuted, make us alert to the suffering of others, and brave enough to give practical help. Give us compassion to work with those who are wounded, to bring them to wholeness. Amen.

Cities of the Bible

Philippi

by Caroline Fletcher

Philippi was named by Philip II, Alexander the Great's father. In New Testament times it lay within ancient Macedonia, but today it is part of Greece. Philippi was a Roman colony under Roman law and governed by two magistrates (Acts 16:20-22).

The apostle Paul first visited Philippi on his second missionary

journey after being directed to Macedonia by a vision (Acts 16:9). Philippi lay on a significant Roman road, so it was a good place to begin building a Christian presence. The first to come to Christ was Lydia, who met Paul beside a river outside the city. She's often called the first European convert. Paul and his companion Silas were beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, too. Despite this treatment, Paul maintained a deep affection for the city, as his warm letter to the Philippians testifies.

Today ancient Philippi lies in ruins, but its rich archaeological remains are a UNESCO world heritage site. ☺

Summer holidays

by Andrew Lyon

There is a tradition in Celtic Christianity to speak of the "thin places", that is, holy spots, where the veil between this world and the next seems particularly thin. A sense of the world to come is almost discernible in these places, as though one might commune here with those who have gone before us, or even cross back and forth.

A sense of place is important for our spirituality. Nature itself, as part of God's creation, is, as the psalms tell us, already singing for joy before the Lord. Even certain locations seem sometimes to hold within themselves a memory of events that have taken place there, not only in physical marks, but also in the atmosphere.

As you travel during the summer months, be conscious of place, and your interaction with it. Listen to what each place has to teach you, and pray for God's blessing upon it. ☺

“Faith does not eliminate questions. But faith knows where to take them.”

Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015), author and speaker



A lightbulb moment

Heather Smith *reflects on* Matthew 16:13-20

If you had asked an ordinary Jewish person in the first century, or even a Jewish scholar, about their expectations of the Messiah, they would have been unlikely to say that he (and it would have been a he) would be the Son of God. In Jewish circles there was, and still is, no such expectation. Yet this is what Simon (soon to become Peter) declares when asked who he believes Jesus is.

What kind of person must Jesus have been, to elicit this response from Peter? He must have been quite extraordinary. We have the sense that the response was not thought out, not something that Peter had been considering, not something he had been waiting for an opportunity to say.

Sometimes we surprise ourselves by what we say. We might find ourselves uttering a profound statement that seems to have simply bypassed the brain and come from nowhere. The quote, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?", attributed to E. M. Forster, puts the experience well.

Jesus explains Peter's surprising, and surprised, belief statement by saying that it is his Father in heaven who has revealed it to Peter. Whether or not we call it divine revelation, there is certainly something spiritual about lightbulb moments that come when we least expect them. They can send us down a completely different track in life. 🌱

Living God, speak to us through our misunderstanding and the fog of life and change the way we think about you. May our lives reflect new perspectives and inspire different relationships and better choices. Amen.

International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition

by Lisa Tulfer

On this day in 1791, a group of slaves in what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic started an uprising which was a crucial step towards the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. In 1998 the United Nations declared it International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition.

We tend to think that slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, thanks to campaigners such as William Wilberforce, and John Newton of "Amazing Grace" fame. But slavery is alive and kicking. Worldwide, an estimated forty million people are enslaved. It is hard to be certain of figures, but estimates for the UK vary from ten thousand to more than a hundred and thirty thousand, in domestic servitude, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. As followers of Jesus, whose mission was to "proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18), we are challenged to be vigilant for signs of modern slavery in our midst: www.antislavery.org/slavery-today 🌱

“The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.”

Martin Luther (1483-1546), German professor, composer and monk

Summer holidays

by Andrew Lyon

Andrew Lyon concludes his series of reflections on the summer holidays.

In a few weeks' time, in September, Jewish people will mark the High Holidays, or High Holy Days, a time of family, retreat and celebration for the start of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. But this is also a time of judgement, with a period of repentance of one's sins and forgiveness of others, until Yom Kippur.

September also marks the beginning of the new academic year and, even for those of us whose schooldays are long gone, that back-to-school feeling marks the end of summer. Holidays are about a time of restoration and, ultimately, re-energising. They help us reorientate for new beginnings. So while we're enjoying this time let us promise ourselves to preserve something of this holy time of holidays each month, each week and even each day when the new term starts. Where might we find spaces of restoration, introspection, retreat and reorientation in our busy routines? How might we stay refreshed and focused? 🌱

What are you running away from?

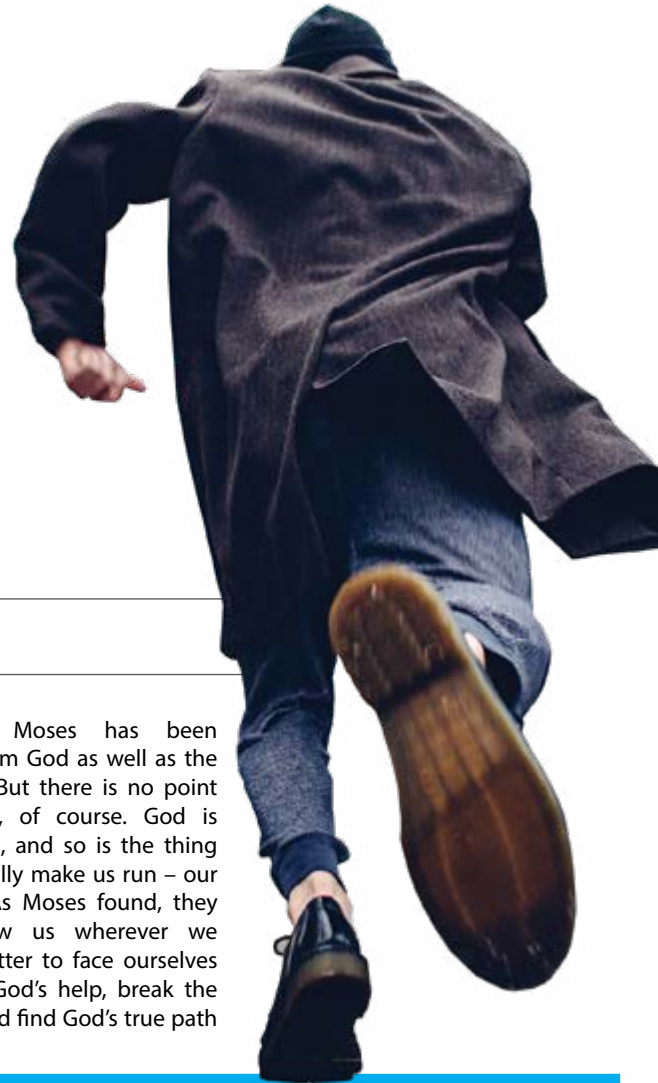
Heather Smith *reflects on* Exodus 3:1-15

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Moses chose not to be known as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh, but rather to “share ill-treatment with the people of God” (Hebrews 11:25). He must, then, have known his Israelite father. Later we learn that his name was Amram, a descendent of Jacob’s son Levi.

In today’s reading from Exodus we could easily miss the fact that

when God calls Moses he says, “I am the God of your father” (Exodus 3:6). Only then is it followed up with the information that this is also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God who speaks to Moses, then, is very close to him – the God of the family. It makes it seem odd that Moses asks for a name. This is a God Moses knows well and whom he has chosen to follow by throwing in his lot with the Hebrews, rather than with the Egyptian royal family.

Perhaps Moses has been running from God as well as the Egyptians. But there is no point in running, of course. God is everywhere, and so is the thing that generally make us run – our own self. As Moses found, they both follow us wherever we go. It is better to face ourselves and, with God’s help, break the patterns and find God’s true path for us. ☺



God, who has sustained your people through the ages, help us to know ourselves and to turn to you, in good times and in bad. Set us on the right path, that our lives may be a reflection of your goodness and truth. Amen.

Back to university

by Tabitha Francis

Oh my goodness, what have I done?!

I’m twenty-six years old. I have a good undergraduate degree and I’ve had a stable job of four years that pays and supports me well. I have never dreaded work, knowing I would be spending each day with friends and working

for a charity that I’m passionate about. Yet for some reason, I guess people call it vocation, I’ve taken the plunge and decided to go back to university.

Graduate medicine. That’s what I’ve decided to do. Or, more accurately, what God has called me to do. I’ve not even started and it’s already been a huge trust exercise. People have tried to warn me off it, saying, “You don’t want to work for the NHS,” and “Do you really want to lose all your free time?”

Yet here I am, following God’s calling, and all I can do is believe that God will carry me through... ☺

Walking with Poppy

by Gillian Cooper

I’ve broken a toe and I’m waiting for it to heal. Walking is all right so long as I keep going. Unfortunately Poppy’s idea of a walk is to stop and sniff a corner, go back to sniff behind us, walk on a bit, then stop and ask for a treat. So walks with her have become a bit of a challenge.

Eventually, of course, I lose patience and march her along, wishing I had kept up her puppy training a bit more conscientiously.

But I have to empathise with her, because I know that I too, in a different way, have a tendency to get distracted, to take steps back when I should be going forward, to concentrate on small things and miss the bigger picture. Fortunately, God’s patience with me is infinite, and God has all the time in the world to wait for me to be ready to move on. ☺

“Worrying is arrogant because God knows what He’s doing.”

Barbara Cameron (born 1949), author