

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: MONDAY 10 AUGUST 2020

A long time ago, in a borough far away...
the members of the Council were pressing for a pedestrianisation scheme.
Their professional advisers were not at all keen – they said
it would paralyse traffic, it would stifle trade, it would drive away shoppers etc.
The members persisted and passed the scheme.
On the first day that it was to come into force,
the Town Clerk and the Borough Surveyor
went to the town centre to observe the predicted chaos.
But the traffic flowed freely, shoppers came in droves, the shopkeepers loved it.
The Town Clerk and the Borough Surveyor left quietly and without comment.
They would have sympathised with Jonah.
He had been sent by God to the city of Nineveh to denounce its undoubted sins
and to proclaim their impending doom.
After a well-documented false start, Jonah did just that, but
to everyone's surprise, Nineveh repented and God seemed likely to spare them.
It seemed to Jonah that the wicked city had got away with it
and he was annoyed with God and generally fed up.
I heard somebody say that what people usually want is
mercy for themselves and justice for other people.
That rings too true, and too close to home.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: TUESDAY 11 AUGUST 2020

The book of the prophet Jonah is a real goldmine. Yesterday's Thought was based on it, as is today's and as will be tomorrows.

Everybody knows about the shipwreck and Jonah being swallowed by the fish, and vomited up on the shore, but there are nuggets elsewhere. Towards the end of the book, Jonah is sitting outside Nineveh, looking down, still hoping that God would do something drastic to the city. He had a little shelter and God considerately provided a plant to shade him. What sort of plant? Nobody knows. The King James translation says "a gourd"; another says "a bush"; a modern translation gives up and uses the Hebrew "qiqayon". Anyway, Jonah was very happy. But next morning God sent a worm which attacked the plant and it withered. The sun was scorching and the wind was hot and Jonah complained bitterly. God reproached Jonah for worrying more about the plant (and his own comfort) than he worried about fate of Nineveh.

Jonah had briefly enjoyed the unearned benefit of the shade from the plant. It was very human to complain about its loss, but was it reasonable? How much do we come to rely on good things which just happen to be there? Should we feel entitled to them? How would we cope with losing them? And how much should we strive for them to be there for others too?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: WEDNESDAY 12 AUGUST

The very last words of the book of Jonah are, in the King James translation, “and also, much cattle”. God explains to Jonah that it is right for him to have pity and mercy on the teeming thousands of people in Nineveh, and on the animals as well. Perhaps this refers back to the earlier comic scene of the King of Nineveh decreeing that cattle and sheep, as well as humans, should fast and wear sackcloth as a sign of repentance.

But it is a remarkable assertion that God does care about his non-human creation. There are some other passages in the Old Testament dealing with what we would now call “animal welfare”; but more or less nothing in the New Testament. I wonder if one reason is this. Although Jesus was familiar with the life of the countryside, and regularly used examples in his teaching, the early church was very much an urban movement.

Until fairly recently it was not much of a topic among Christian thinkers, although it is now a live issue, as is care for the wider wild creation. From the beginning of civilisation mankind has relied on animals for food and fibre, transport and companionship, and this is not likely to stop any time soon. So, remember God saying it was right for him to have pity on the people of Nineveh “and also much cattle.”

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY THURSDAY 13 AUGUST 2020

The PBS America TV channel showed a moving 4-part programme about the Dust Bowl, the man-made ecological and human disaster which struck the Southern Plains of the USA in the 1920s and 1930s.

In it, farmers in the Oklahoma Panhandle were described as “next year people”. And it was not a compliment. It meant that their reaction to drought and windblow and low wheat prices, was “next year it will rain”, “next year the wind will blow less”, “next year wheat prices will rise”, and then they carried on with just the sort of behaviour which had caused the problem in the first place.

Optimism and perseverance are, in the right place, virtues. Blindly ignoring reality when things go wrong is not a virtue. One of the less inspiring things about Covid has been the inability of authority figures even to contemplate publicly that their decisions may not have been 100% right.

Church, state and agriculture all need to learn - from experience, from advice, from the wisdom that flows from God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY FRIDAY 14 AUGUST 2020

Commonly, people talk about views from a high point, understandably because you can see further from there and you may have had the satisfaction and sense of achievement that comes from climbing the hill or mountain.

Another view is what you see from low down. I was in a wood the other week, lying nearly horizontal and looking up through the canopy. I saw the light blue sky fringed by bright green leaves. I heard the mew of a buzzard and the tapping of a woodpecker and the buzz of insects, all from below them.

The psalmist lifted his eyes UP to the hills. (Ps.121.1)

From there, it is harder to be too proud. And I also looked at an oak, already four times my age, and good for another century or two. I was not seeing so far but I hope I was seeing myself in my right place.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY SATURDAY 15 AUGUST 2020.

Today in our Calendar is the Red-Letter festival of Mary the mother of Jesus. In southern and eastern Europe, it is the feast of the Assumption.

We were in a mountain village on the Greek island of Lesbos one 15th of August. It was like one great street party –all welcome. The only road was completely full of tables and chairs and people of all ages. There was plenty of food and drink and everybody was given ladlefuls of a local seasonal delicacy (some sort of meat porridge). And the high point was the visit of the splendidly bearded Bishop.

Some Anglican churches also make this day the highlight of the year. Another 15th of August, we were at Walsingham, much more restrained than Lesbos but very grand. The Eucharist in the parish church was concelebrated by 11 priests.

Most churches of the Reformation note that there is no basis for the doctrine in Holy Scripture. In the words of Article 6, it “is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby” so that it may not be asserted as necessary to salvation. The reformers were concerned about the extent of beliefs about Mary which had grown up luxuriantly throughout the Middle Ages, but this did not mean overlooking her role.

St. Mary was and is by far the most common parish church dedication in England. And the Book of Common Prayer, which is not a Romish handbook, has no fewer than five festivals of Mary (in addition to Christmas).

Quiz question: can you name them?

(Answer: Purification, Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Conception).

Common Worship includes them all and adds today.

We believe Jesus to have been both human and divine. It was from Mary that he derived his humanity.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY SUNDAY 16 AUGUST 2020

Nowadays there is widespread, and justified, anxiety about prominent figures in politics and administration accepting hospitality from the rich and influential –on private yachts, at holiday villas, at lavish parties. The assumption is that the bad will influence the good and seek favours from them.

Exactly the opposite happened with Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19). Zacchaeus was not a righteous man. He was the local top of the dishonest pyramid by which the Roman empire collected taxes. It was assumed that he was swindling his fellow Jews. Yet, despite mutterings from bystanders, Jesus invited himself to stay at his house. And the result was dramatic – Zacchaeus repented and offered help to the poor and restitution to his victims.

Jesus declared: “Today, salvation has come to this house”, much as he said to another unlikely penitent, the thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in Paradise”. (Luke23)

Jesus’ followers need to be as wise as serpents in perceiving evil, but as innocent as doves in seeing possibilities of redemption in even the worst of sinners.