

Thought for the Day: 12 – 18 October 2020

by Rev. Bill Church

Monday

In launching, with David Attenborough, the Earthshot environmental prize, Prince William said that one aim was to harness people's optimism and hope. In other words, while one way to stir people to action is to confront them with inconvenient truths and painful predictions; another way is to persuade them that useful practical things can be done.

By happy coincidence, the latest magazine from the Suffolk Wildlife Trust had an article listing a 'famous five' of birds which have flourished from a low or nil base. My 'famous four' would be two who were fostered back and two who had a DIY recovery.

The avocet went extinct here in the 19th Century and only returned in the 1940s. With a lot of conservation work, numbers grew and in the late 1970s we were seeing some almost every sailing trip. The red kite



also went extinct in England and was deliberately reintroduced. It has flourished. The first time I saw a red kite flying over our house, about 15 years ago, I was so excited I rang my ornithologist brother-in-law. Now, of course, they are a regular sight all over Hertford.

Also regularly seen are buzzards, but they spread eastwards from Wales all of their own accord. Hear their amazing mewing as they soar on thermals on a sunny day. And little egrets, who were the victims of

a craze for hat feathers, have reintroduced themselves and are often seen by the side of our rivers.

Pessimism can lead to despair, which is a branch of the sin of Sloth. Bluster and hype undermine trust but true hope is a Christian virtue. *'Finally, brethren... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'* (Philippians 4. 8)

Tuesday

Richard Hooker, the great Anglican thinker of the 16th Century, wrote that theology should be based on scripture, reason and tradition, in that order. So, bible study is essential; but it can also be fun!

The next four Thoughts are about intriguing gaps in the New Testament – gaps in the sense that I would love to know a detail the writer left out. All are from the Gospel accounts of Holy Week; none



are central but all would throw a little more light on those eight days so crucial to our faith. Did Jesus have a Fifth Column, a network of secret supporters? (Matthew 21. 1-3, 26. 18; Mark 11. 1-3, 14. 13-16; Luke 19. 29-32, 22. 10-13)

As Jesus came towards Jerusalem, he sent disciples to fetch a donkey, with a password if they were challenged. Was it a miracle that such a donkey was in place and found? Or a hire arrangement that someone (? Judas the treasurer) had made? Or a special provision by an unnamed helper (? Lazarus, as

this was Bethany)? And then, in order to find a room for the Last Supper, disciples are told to look out for a man carrying a jar of water, who would show them an upper room, fully prepared. This cannot have been the usual way of arranging room hire, so what is going on?

Was it a miraculous happening?

Was it just a provider of accommodation for pilgrims who did not want to be openly associated with a controversial preacher?

Did any of the disciples have relations with a suitable room? Was it a well-meaning, wealthy but secret follower? Could that be Nicodemus? or Joseph of Arimathea?

Sorry. No Poirot, no answers; just thoughts.

(PS. I favour the last option in each case!)

Wednesday



Who was the other disciple? (Part 1)

John 18. 15-16: *'Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. As the disciple was known to the High Priest, he entered... while Peter stood outside. So the other disciple... went out and spoke to the maid who kept the door and brought Peter in.'*

Peter was thus in a position to deny Jesus thrice, one of the best-known incidents of the trial.

But who was the other disciple?

An obvious candidate would be John, because this episode is found only in John's Gospel, although the 'beloved disciple' seldom hid his presence. And, although Zebedee and Sons were a big fish in Capernaum (sorry) as they employed others, that would not count for much in Jerusalem.

Maybe it was just another disciple (remember, this word does not just mean the 12) whose name had been forgotten. But John's Gospel claims to be an eye witness, so that would be a lapse.

Or an influential member of Jesus' Fifth Column?

Or, very speculatively, Judas. He was certainly 'known to the High Priest'. This could mean that he assumed Jesus would be provoked to use his Messianic power to overthrow the regime and establish a new Israel, as many had hoped; or that Judas had already repented. But would Peter have accepted his help?

No Poirot, no answers; just thoughts.

(But I have to opt for John.)

Thursday

Who was the other disciple? (Part 2)

Luke 24. 13, 18: *'That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus... Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered.'*

Two disciples were leaving Jerusalem on the first Easter Day and encounter the risen Jesus. One of them is named as Cleopas, the other is not named. Who was it?

We know nothing else about Cleopas, but he was not one of the Twelve.

If the other had been one of the Twelve he would surely have been named, and probably would have been the one to speak to the unrecognised Jesus.

Luke does not claim to be an eye witness, so it is possible he did not find any source which recorded the name of the other. So, it could have been anyone.



Or, speculatively... while 'Cleopas' is not mentioned elsewhere, in John's Gospel, 'Mary, the wife of Clopas' was one of the women standing by the cross.

If Luke or John had made a small mistake with the name, they could be the same person, in which case the 'other' on the

Emmaus road could well be his wife, who was one of the women standing by the cross.

An argument against would be that Luke, of all the Gospels, gives an emphasis on the place of women and would he have missed this opportunity?

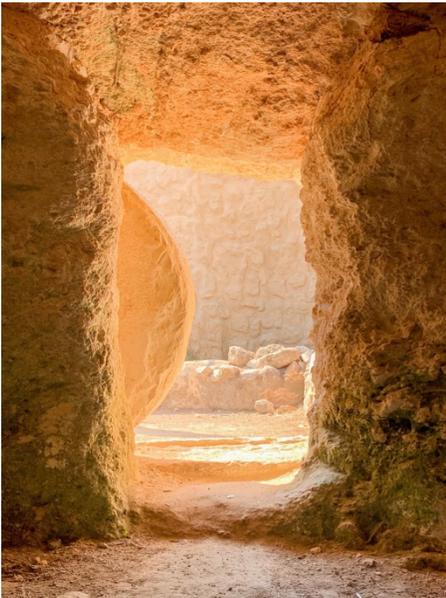
No Poirot, no answers; just thoughts.

(But wouldn't it be nice if the speculation was the right solution?)

Friday

The case of the missing verses

Mark 16.8: *'...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'*



Most authorities agree that this was the end of the Gospel in the oldest manuscripts, and that verses 9-20 were added later, perhaps because verse 8 was too downbeat an end to the Easter story.

Quite apart from the logical problem that if they really had told nobody anything, how did the author know, it is a ragged end compared with the other three Gospels.

A pious tradition had it that the author died as soon as he had written these words.

A more practical explanation would be that the last page of the original manuscript fell off and was lost.

But what if the ending was deliberate?

By definition, there was a Christian community to hear the Gospel, so it would show Christ had overcome the silence of his followers.

Or it may have been a big putdown for Mary Magdalene and the other two women at the tomb.

Or – and this is a bit complicated – in the Greek, verse 8 has a unique grammatical similarity with Genesis 45. 3 in the Greek Old Testament (which early Christians used rather than the Hebrew version), where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Make a match of those.

The eleven remaining brothers/disciples believe that their brother/leader is dead, but they find he is alive and in a position of power. They fear he will scold them for their violence/desertion, but he is loving and forgiving. Read 'us' for 'brothers/disciples' and that IS a good finale to the Easter story.

No Poirot, no answers. Take your pick.

Saturday



Who was the crowd? Another conundrum.

'Sometime they strew his way and his sweet praises sing, resounding all the day hosannas to their King; then "Crucify" is all their breath and for his death they thirst and cry.'

From 'My song is love unknown' by Samuel Crossman (17th Century).

Samuel Crossman clearly believed that the crowd shouting "Let him be crucified!" before Pilate (Matthew 27. 22-23) were the same people who had greeted Jesus on Palm Sunday.

That would be a strong warning against inconstancy.

But were they? The Gospels do not specifically say so, and hint otherwise. Luke talks of 'the whole multitude of the disciples', and John of 'a great crowd who had come to the Feast'. This suggests that the crowd before Pilate, early in the morning, was not drawn from among the many pilgrims in Jerusalem, but more likely from supporters or retainers of the High Priest, summoned there specifically to demand Jesus' death.

That would be a warning against unscrupulous violence towards those who challenge your authority. And it puts Matthew 27. 25, 'his blood be on us and on our children', in a completely different light.

Even if parents could bequeath responsibility for their sin to their children (which Jesus denied), the children would be only those of Caiaphas' rent-a-crowd.

No Poirot, no answers.

(But I much prefer the 'different crowd' theory.)

Sunday - The Feast of St Luke

Who was Theophilus?

'It seemed good to me... to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.' (Luke 1. 3)

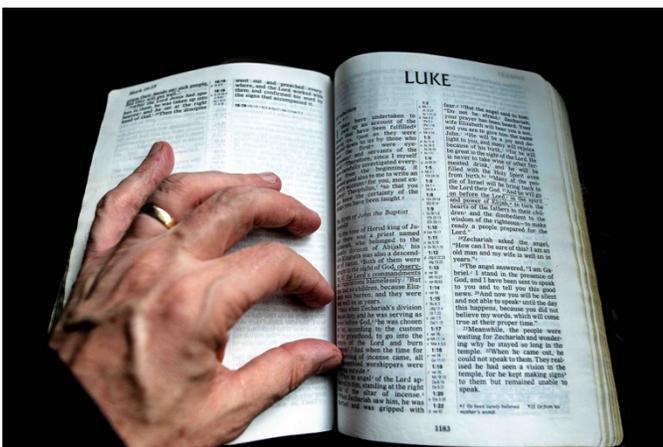
'In my first book, O Theophilus...' (Acts 1. 1)

But who was Theophilus? He is mentioned nowhere else.

It is possible he was Luke's patron, a person of substance who had a Greek name meaning 'lover of God' and who was being instructed in the Christian faith.

Or it may just be a literary device on the lines of 'Dear Reader', but assuming the Reader is seriously interested in Christianity.

Maybe it matters little.



It introduces the works of St Luke, whom we honour today – a two-part series. The first part tells of the journey of the Word from Nazareth to Jerusalem, the great religious centre; and the second tells of the journey of the word from Jerusalem to Rome, the centre of a great empire.

On the way, Luke's Gospel gives us much found nowhere else – most of the Nativity story, the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and a notable concern for the excluded. And Acts gives us a fast-moving story of evangelism, persecution, journeys and a famous shipwreck.

Give thanks to God for Luke (and Theophilus, if he existed).