

Lent Compline Series 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 1, Sunday 5th March
Prof John Morris

This year our Sunday morning sermons will be given by people in various occupations talking about their jobs in relation to their faith. In this series of Lent Compline addresses I will follow the same idea but looking at the occupations of various people in the bible. I want in particular to link this with our current thoughts about Church growth – many of you will have heard of or been to the LYCIG meetings – Leading your church into growth.

Gardeners and Farmers

This evening – we'll start with the earliest human occupation mentioned in the bible – the gardener or farmer. In the first version of the Creation story in Genesis, "And God said Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit" and God said to man "I have given you every herb bearing seed ..." and man was simply told to name them. In the second version (in Ch 2) "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden ... and there he put the man who he had formed to dress it and to keep it." – the first gardening manual!

Nowadays we think of both the garden and man arising by evolution out of God's original creation. The bible story of Adam and Eve perhaps represents a memory of the dramatic development of societies from a hunter/gatherer existence to a pastoral and more fixed life of cultivation and also tending flocks. (We'll come on to shepherds later in this series of talks).

Gardeners want their flowers and shrubs to grow; farmers whole aim is to work with nature to produce growth. All of us who are members of the church, whether we are gardeners or farmers or neither, have a responsibility to help the church to grow and to help bring more people to a knowledge of the Good News of Christ's message. Jesus speaking in Galilee about God to a largely pastoral community often focussed his parables on farmers: the sower who sowed his seed on different sorts of ground; the enormous growth of tiny mustard seed; the men being hired to work in the vineyard.

So, what can we learn from what gardeners and farmers do and what lessons does that provide for us in our church life. (Here I should come clean that at home I do very little in the garden apart from the occasional lawn mowing and heavy digging or pruning; Joyce is the planner and designer. I'm sure we can agree that there are certain requirements for successful gardens and farms.

Planning to decide what will be planted where. We as a church need to think out, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, where we can best use our efforts and who will be the best people for those tasks – for we all have our strengths and weaknesses.

Preparation of the soil is important for gardeners, and is equally important in evangelism and church growth. Preparing others to accept the Christian message may simply be by the way we talk to people we come across day by day, gradually letting them know how much we value our own church life and, after some preparation, inviting them to some sort of church function – not necessarily a service. Like the gardener, we must be content to work with God's time frame, not our own hurry. Some of that preparation may be what we could call "**heavy digging**" when we need God's strength if we are challenged about our faith or feel called to do something that we would naturally shy away from.

But one way or the other we do need to actually **plant the seeds**. We can do this by speaking directly about our faith. We may never know when or even if that seed has grown, and 'as in the parable of the mustard seed' what may seem to us to be a very tiny seed may turn out to produce a huge growth.

Once planted **careful tending of the** seeds is needed, whether or not we ourselves planted them. In church that may mean ensuring we talk to the person who seems to be new or alone, even when we have some important church business to do with a friend. In our daily busy lives it may mean careful listening to and tending to the needs of others.

Our church activities may even need **occasional pruning** – prayerfully reviewing what we are doing as a church and perhaps deciding to cut out certain things in order to let the rest of our mission flourish and grow.

In all this we need to remember that it is God's **time scale** that matters, not our own; some seeds lie **dormant** for many years before the conditions are right for them to flourish. And it is God's '**geography**' that matters – sometimes wonderful things can grow in what might at first sight be the most unpromising locations. We must recognise and celebrate those growths of faith in places very different from our own, and never be arrogant and think that we have the 'right' way of doing things.

But the growth that we need to work towards is not simply growth in the number of believers, but growth in our own life of faith. The start of Lent is traditionally the time when we are encouraged to examine ourselves so that we may grow in faith and, in so doing, may encourage others on that journey.

Finally, we must acknowledge that, however proud we feel of the results in our garden, or in the church, we didn't actually create any of it – we are just working with God's creation. There is a lovely story of the rather condescending priest leaning over the fence of a beautiful garden and saying to the man toiling away "That's beautiful – Isn't it wonderful what God can do with nature" at which the old man straightened up and said "Yes reverend, but you ought to have seen what it looked like when he had it all to His-self!". Always we must remember that we are just God's helpers in the work of the Spirit. But equally God has only our hands to do the physical work.

I think I am right that the last time the word 'gardener' is used in the New Testament is when, after the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene is weeping outside the empty tomb and thinks that the man who comes and stands by her is 'the gardener'.

In this evening's sense, she was absolutely right. God was the creator and Jesus, his son, came to show us how the Kingdom of God should be cultivated.

Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 2, Sunday 12th March
Prof John Morris

Shepherds

This Sunday I want to direct our thoughts on what occupations can teach us towards shepherds.

Last week we looked at gardeners, starting with Adam, the first human gardener. His son Cain was 'a tiller of the soil' – carried on his father's occupation – but Abel was a shepherd; a story reflecting the early domestication of animals. You'll remember story. Cain and Abel presented their gifts to the Lord. Cain's was not accepted; Abel's was accepted. Cain became jealous and killed Abel, which is where we get – 'Am I my brother's keeper'. Why, we may ask? It seems a bit 'mean' of God. I think that Here we can jump right on to concept of Jesus as the 'Good Shepherd' tending a flock of living creatures – that was what God preferred.

Next time shepherds appear is when Joseph (of technicolour dreamcoat fame) was abandoned for dead by jealous brothers, but after being sold into slavery in Egypt had established himself as a chief steward and by his prudent management saved Egypt from 7 years of drought. But that same drought brought his brothers and his father to Egypt begging for entry because the pastures in Canaan were dried up. They came with their flocks and herds and Pharaoh (on Joseph's advice) allowed them to stay because they were expert herdsman. Another example of the ability to care for other living creatures being seen as valued by God.

The next notable shepherd we come across in the old testament is David, who was to become King of Israel after Saul who had turned his back on the Lord. Samuel was told to go to Jesse because the Lord had chosen one of his sons to be king. All the seven elder brothers were presented, but rejected, and finally when the youngest, David, was called in from looking after the sheep, he was anointed by Samuel at which "The Spirit of the Lord came upon David. At that time, the Philistines were attacking Israel with their huge champion Goliath. David's brothers were in the army, and David was sent to take food to them. When Goliath challenged the army to provide a warrior to fight him 'they ran in fear'. David went to Saul and offered to fight Goliath, saying that as a shepherd he had fought and overcome lions and bears. Disdaining the offered sword David went with his slingshot and five smooth stones from the brook, felled Goliath by a blow to the forehead, and killed him.

Two lessons here: first that God may choose what seems the least likely among us as his champion, and second that, as shepherds have to be very brave, so too we may sometimes be called to be very brave in the service of the Lord.

But shepherds must also be very **caring**. Psalm 23 – 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie in green pastures' – all the good things. And in Isaiah, familiar from Handel's Messiah "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gently lead those that are with young". How does a shepherd 'feed' his flock? He does so by leading them to pastures where they can feed. There are many parallels here with our communion service where, week by week, we are 'fed' in many different ways, all symbolised by the bread and wine. We are not forced to attend, to partake it has to be a willing following of the leading of our good shepherd.

In the New Testament, shepherds appear first in the fields, watching their flocks by night. But when they received the message of Christ's birth they left their flock to find and see The Lord. So, too, we may be called to leave our worldly cares to find and experience our Lord.

Given all this, it is no surprise that John, in particular, has Jesus referring to himself as 'The Good Shepherd' and listing the characteristics of a good Shepherd. The good shepherd **knows his sheep by name**: we can't understand how, but in some wonderful way we can have a sense, through faith and in particular through prayer, that Jesus knows each one of us individually – perhaps better than we know ourselves. **His sheep know his voice**: This we can understand rather better. Each of us, as we grow in faith and prayer, can sense the voice of Jesus speaking to us in many ways. The good shepherd **searches for lost sheep**: In his earthly ministry Jesus was often particularly concerned for those who had lost their way – the tax-collector, the woman taken in adultery. Luke reports Jesus saying "those who are whole need not a physician, but those who are sick". We, as Jesus' physical hands on earth, have been handed the difficult task of trying to help those who may seem to be most resistant and most difficult. A hard challenge. When Jesus said "there are other sheep of mine, not of this fold, whom I must bring in" I think he referred to those outside of the Jewish faith – he once said to a Roman centurion 'I have not found so great faith in Israel'. Together, these two examples must make us, who have a sense of God's love in Jesus, witness that love others by acts of kindness, by the way we live, by the spoken word.

Finally, and as a prophesy of his own death, Jesus said 'the good shepherd **lays down his life** for his sheep'. Nowadays we often think of a shepherd as having a gentle pastoral life. In reality the life of a shepherd is pretty harsh and would have been even more so in the time of Jesus. Sheep-stealing would have been just as common as now and often the thief would have had no qualms of using violence; and there were always wild animals to contend with. Jesus did lay down his life for us, to reconcile sinful humanity to God. But we must remember that he rose again. Jesus is not a 'dead shepherd' but a living Lord and shepherd to all who are willing to be a part of his flock of believers.

Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 3, Sunday 19th March
Prof John Morris

Lawyers and the Law Ps 4 & 91; Ch3; Pr 2,3,7

In our Lent Sunday morning services the next occupation in “My Faith and my Work” series will be lawyers, so tonight we will look at lawyers and the law in the bible.

The law, or at least a commandment, first appears immediately after creation. “And the Lord God commanded the man saying “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but NOT of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The next reference is Moses bringing the 10 commandments down from Mount Horeb, but this was only after the subsequent slavery of the Israelites in Egypt.

It is pertinent, therefore, to look at what we know of ancient Egyptian law. Very little was written down till late when 8 books of the law were produced. However, the evidence suggests that Egyptian law was based on common-sense ideas of right and wrong, the concept of Ma’at, responsible for truth, order and balance in the universe. Everyone except slaves was equal under the law; there were no professional judges, but councils of elders dealt with small claims and minor disputes. Much use was made of oracles, with yes/no questions put to a ‘god’ carried by priests, and some movement of the god indicating the oracular answer. Priests were very involved and, it seems to me, able to determine the answer.

It was the slavery in Egypt which provoked the Exodus and wandering of the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness. Moses went up mount Horeb where God gave him many instructions and the 10 commandments on tablets of stone. He was clearly gone a long time because the people came to Aaron and asked him to fashion a god for them, the golden calf (as in all polytheistic cultures then extant). When Moses finally reappeared, in his fury at the sight of people worshipping the golden calf, he broke the tablets. He therefore had to prepare two more tablets of stone for the Lord to write the words which were on the first tablets, and to make a covenant with many instructions which Moses was to write down over 40 days. The stone tablets were then placed in the Ark of the Covenant and in the Tabernacle with its veil – the origin of the veil of the temple which was rent at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

In the three books which follow Genesis and Exodus (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) and with it form the Pentateuch, which Jews refer to as “The Law” or the “Torah” nearly every chapter starts with “And the Lord spoke to Moses saying ...” followed by more and more detailed laws on offerings of meat, dealing with food, cleanliness leprosy, the ‘issues of men and women’, the high priests entry into the holy of holy etc. Numbers deals with the families and origin of the tribes of Israel, with the origin of the Levites (tribe of Levi) who were formed the priestly caste and their assistants. I’m sure we can interpret all this as humans continuing to codify the basic principles on their own terms. Judaism was becoming law-bound and peoples’ actions prescribed to the finest detail. As Moses was dying, he “wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant” The book of the law was put beside the ark of the covenant.

Who should administer the law? Toward the end of Deuteronomy, the Lord tells Moses “You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers, tribe by tribe, and they shall dispense true justice to the people; they must not show favours or take bribes”. These judges and officers seem to be in addition to the councils of the elders by who laws were applied, tribe by tribe. They obviously didn’t always live up to their calling, because Isaiah complains “none call for justice or pleads for the truth; they bring forth iniquity.”

Moving forward to the time of Jesus, Israel was under Roman occupation. The elders, judges and officers (Sanhedrin) in each locality continued to administer justice with public hearings at the city gate. They could punish including the death penalty for 12 specific categories of crime, which included idolatry and blasphemy. There was also the special tribunal of priests in Jerusalem led by the high priest.

Toward the end of his ministry, in Jerusalem, Jesus clearly didn’t have much time for some lawyers, many of whom were Pharisees. In Luke we read of the lawyer who stood up and tempted him, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus refers to the law, which the man clearly knows, but then continues “but who is my neighbour”, provoking the story of the good Samaritan. Elsewhere Jesus says of the Pharisees that “they pay tithes but have no care for justice and love of God; they just love the seats of honour in the synagogue” at which one of the lawyers said “you are insulting us too!”

At the Passion, Jesus had to be tried by Pilate because he was charged by the priests with disloyalty to the emperor and state, for which the normal penalty was crucifixion. The Gospel writers, in an attempt either to lay all the blame on the Jews, or to curry favour with Rome, portray Pilate as sensible if irresolute; a man prepared to let Jesus go or make him a candidate for the Passover amnesty because he finds no fault in him. This image contrasts sharply with the Pilate of history, who was harsh and ruthless and in the end was sacked as governor and sent to Rome to account to the emperor for his many misdeeds.

What was Jesus’ view of the law? In the sermon on the mount, he appears to be uncompromising: “Do not suppose I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to complete. As long as heaven and earth endure, not a letter or stroke will disappear from the law, and anyone who sets aside the least demand of the law and teaches others to do the same is condemned. You must be better men than the doctors of the law”. He goes on to say that it is not just the act such as theft, but the thought to do the act that is culpable in the eyes of God. However, Jesus clearly had little time for what we might see as human additions to the essentials of the law: he was often chided, for example, for picking corn or healing on the Sabbath, or eating with sinners.

To conclude, while lawyers may be fallible humans, all the truly important laws are based on what is God’s law expressed clearly in the ten commandments, and completed by our Lord when he commanded us to ‘Love one another’

Lent Compline Talks 2017 Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Lent 4 and Mothering Sunday, Sunday 26th March
Prof John Morris

Women and their occupations in the bible

Given that today is Mothering Sunday – it is only appropriate that this compline we look at the roles and occupations of women in the bible. Of course, major occupation in biblical times (as often now at least world-wide) is to be a full-time wife and mother. There are very few named occupations of women – Deborah the prophetess and fourth and only female Judge of pre-monarchic Israel who helped the Israelites to conquer a Canaanite king; Abishag, the concubine of the aged King David; and Lydia, the seller of purple and one of Paul's first converts. You may be interested that, in the USA, there is a movement entitled 'Biblical Womanhood' which urges women to be "a virtuous woman, serving primarily from home as a submissive wife, diligent home-maker and loving mother. No women's lib there!

We will therefore look at the lives and what is said about a number of women. Some have had a rather bad press, perhaps reflecting the very male-dominated patriarchal society of the time (and still promulgated by some religious groups). First, of course, there was Eve – whose job was to be a partner or 'help-mate' to Adam and for ever after is cast as the model temptress with the apple. Delilah – who Sampson loved – and who was persuaded by the Philistines to discover by 'pillow talk' the source of Samson's strength and then to cut off his hair so that he could be blinded and imprisoned. Jezebel – the wife of Ahab, who worshipped Baal and who persecuted all those who believed in Jehovah until only Elijah was left as the last prophet. In the new testament, Salome was persuaded by her mother Herodias to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Just weak, perhaps, and it is her mother who takes the real blame. Nothing much in any of these women in terms of role models for modern day Christians, except in the negative sense of what to avoid.

What about more positive role models. In the old testament, most women we hear of as only daughters, wives or mothers. We can start briefly with Sarah, Abraham's wife, who conceived though Abraham told God it was not possible because of their ages. Sometimes we feel we are being asked to do something difficult by God and protest "Lord – that's just not possible" – perhaps we should take a deep breath and remember Sarah and Abraham. Next comes Jochabed and Miriam, the wife and daughter of a Levite when the Israelites were in Egypt and Pharaoh had commanded all male Hebrew children to be drowned; Jochabed, having given birth to 'a goodly child' hid him for three months, then put him in a waterproof ark by the side of the river so that when Pharaoh's daughter came to wash and saw the baby and had compassion on it, the sister (Miriam) who was watching offered her mother as wet-nurse to bring Moses up for Pharaoh's daughter. And so began story of Moses and the Jewish religion. What we learn from these two women is never to be afraid to go against the ordinances of the state if they are patently unjust, and that even if you are a young child you can influence the highest in the land.

The last old testament woman I want us to consider is Ruth. Ruth the Moabite woman who refused to leave her widowed Israelite mother-in-law when the other daughters-in-law returned to their parents' home to find husbands. Ruth, who said "Where you go I will go; your people shall be my people, and your God my God (the Moabites worshipped a god called Chemosh). They journeyed back to Bethlehem at harvest time, and because they had nothing to eat, Ruth went to the fields to glean some ears of corn, and eventually married the landowner Boaz – a happy

ending. Here again we have a woman sticking with what she thought was right, even to her own apparent disadvantage at the time.

In the new testament we have four Mary's to consider. First, Mary the mother of our Lord, who gives us many things to ponder. First, the young girl found to be pregnant in a very conservative society in which such things would have been anathema. She must have been terrified. But, believing that this was God's will she not only goes along with it, but rejoices "My soul doth magnify the Lord". At the time of Christ's birth we hear little about Mary except that she 'pondered all these things in her heart'. We have Mary, the concerned and even cross mother who when Jesus goes missing on the return trip from Jerusalem, has to go back to find him; normal maternal behaviour. We see Mary with Jesus at the wedding in Cana where she shows total confidence in her son, telling the stewards to follow Jesus' instructions to fill the wine jars with water and serve to the guests. And finally, we have Mary standing at the foot of the cross with Mary, the wife of Cleopas and Mary of Magdala, watching her son being executed in the most horrific way. A life of devotion to God's will and to His Son. All three Mary's had followed and supported Jesus throughout his ministry. A fourth Mary echoes the devotion to Jesus, but her devotion is contrasted sharply with that of her sister Martha. Martha who would be applauded by the "Biblical Womanhood" movement, fussing about in the kitchen when Jesus visited and upbraiding her sister Mary for ignoring all the jobs to sit and listen to Jesus. How often are we so tied up with day-to-day concerns that we fail to hear our Lord speaking quietly to us? I'll finish by returning to Mary of Magdala. Mary, who Jesus had freed from 'seven devils' early in his ministry and who had followed him, who may be the Mary who anointed Christ's feet with the expensive perfume, and who stood with the other Marys at the feet of the cross. What I think has particular resonance for us is the very last time we hear of Mary in the gospels – when she goes to the tomb on Easter morning to prepare Jesus' body for burial and, finding the tomb empty and the body gone, stands weeping and is approached by the risen Jesus who she at first mistakes for the gardener. But it is this same Mary – a woman who at that time would not have even been considered competent to give evidence in a court – who is entrusted by Jesus with the task of announcing his resurrection to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord". What does that mean for us? It means that a life of following, devotion and service to Christ will empower even the apparently least able of us to pass on to those around us that most momentous news in history. For we also can say "I too am a witness to the RISEN Lord".

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Lent 5, Sunday 2nd April

Prof John Morris

Military Officers

This week I want us to think about three military officers in the bible and what we can learn from them.

There are many military leaders mentioned in the old testament, which records the long struggle of the Israelites to establish themselves in what was politically a very fluid area, but predominantly controlled by the Philistines who have, of course, got a very bad press in the OT because they worshipped Dagon and Baal, but who modern archaeology shows to have been a very cultured people.

The first military leader I want us to consider is Naaman, the commander of the King of Aram's army, who suffered from leprosy (a disease which can be passed on by close physical contact and is greatly feared. This is because it attacks the nerves, causing people to lose a sense of pain and cause great damage especially to their limbs). We read "On one of their raids, Aram's army brought back as a captive from the land of Israel a little girl, who became a servant of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master could meet the prophet who lives in Samaria [that was Elisha] he would get rid of the disease for him". Naaman reported this to the King of Aram who decided to write to Ahab, the king of Israel. Ahab immediately thought this was a ruse to pick a quarrel "Am I a god that this fellow sends to me to cure a man of his disease" and he rent his clothes. But Elisha, hearing of this said "Let the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came to Elisha, who did not even bother to come out of his house but sent a servant to Naaman telling him to wash seven times in the Jordan and he would be clean. The response from the high-ranking general was pretty predictable – he felt insulted. "I thought he would at least have come out and invoked the name of his god, and waved his hand over the leprous area; we've got plenty of rivers in Damascus better than any in Israel" – and he departed in a rage. But it was his servants who said to him "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? But he's told you to do something easy" So Naaman bottled his pride, dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, and was cured. The reading in church often ends there, but the next bit is instructive: Naaman went back and said to Elisha "Now I know that there is no god anywhere except in Israel" (presumably he previously worshipped Rimmon) and he offered a token of gratitude which Elisha refused repeatedly. So Naaman said "I will no longer offer any sacrifice to any god but the Lord" – but being a man who also knew his place he added "Sometimes I have to go to the temple of Rimmon and pray there with my master. For this only let the Lord pardon me."

There are so many lessons in this passage: some of the *dramatis personae* are the highest and mightiest in the land; but however high up or experienced we may feel, it tells us we should never be too proud to take advice. Second, it is a lowly Israelite slave who has the courage to speak about what she knows and it is Naaman's servants who persuade their master not to go off in a rage. This tells us that we should never be afraid to speak truth to those in power. Third, as Elisha felt called to demonstrate the healing power of Yahwe, we are all called to be prophets of the good news of Jesus Christ to those of other faiths. I'm not suggesting that the best way to start is to appear to be rude and antagonise them, but what we learn from Elisha is his total confidence in the power of God.

Let's move on to a centurion in the new testament, as related in Luke Ch 7. The centurion had a much-valued servant who was dying. Not wishing to approach Jesus directly he sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and save the servant's life. As they approached his house the centurion sent a message saying "Don't come into the house, just say the word and I know my servant will be cured. I know what authority means; I have soldiers under me. I say to one "go" and he goes .. and to my servant "do this" and he does it". And Jesus' response to the assembled crowd "Nowhere, even in Israel have I found faith like this". The messengers went back into the house and found the servant in good health. This time the military man is clearly a much more thoughtful person. Though a commander in an occupying force, he was prepared to learn from an itinerant local preacher; we too must continue to learn from the life and actions of Jesus. Presumably the centurion had heard much about Jesus' power to heal without waving his hands over the sick person and invoking the name of God (for example, the healing of the daughter of Jairus the president of the synagogue). Though we still have laying on of hands and prayers for the sick, we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that it is those actions that matter – it is the power of God to heal that is the important thing. The ceremonial actions are just that; both for the sick person, to concentrate their mind on God's healing power, and for those who are trying to help the sick person feel that healing power.

The final military man I want us to consider is the centurion who commanded the crucifixion party that dealt with Jesus and the two thieves. Crucifixion was a standard penalty administered by the Romans, and this was no one-off event. It was a Roman punishment to terrorize and dissuade those who watched from committing the same offences. There were obviously a lot of bystanders, some of whom came to taunt those being crucified. Public executions such as beheadings are used in some countries for a similar purpose today, and have been throughout the ages. Beheadings are fast; crucifixion was intended to be particularly slow and painful – literally ex-cruciating. So, this would have been routine for this centurion, and certainly the soldiers under him took little notice; they were busy gambling for Christ's garments. So, what was it that made the centurion exclaim either "Beyond all doubt this man was innocent (Luke)" or (Matthew & Mark) "Truly this man was a son of God" when Jesus expired. We can't know what was in the centurion's mind, but if he – who would have seen only how Jesus conducted himself at Pilate's trial and at the crucifixion – can proclaim publicly "This man is God's son" how much more should we – who have the opportunity of a lifetime of thinking about Christ's whole message as recorded, preached, discussed, and experienced in our own lives – be ready to proclaim "Truly, Jesus is God's son" to all those with ears to hear.

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington
Palm Sunday, 9th April
Prof John Morris

Fishermen

This week, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about fishermen.

There's rather little reference to fish or fishermen in the OT: the Israelites were a desert rather than a maritime people. They clearly knew about fishing but fish and fishing only appear in the texts rather late on. For example: in Ecclesiastes "For man knoweth not his time, as the fishes that are taken in a net, and as birds that are caught in a snare"; or in Habakkuk's prophesy about the Chaldeans who it seems were greatly feared and treated men like fish in the sea to be gathered up into a net as slaves. Both quotes echo a similar view of how uncertain are people's lives, both naturally and as a consequence of the actions of others. The people of Syria and South Sudan, not to mention those in Stockholm would surely echo that.

A fish does, of course, appear in the story of Jonah – who on receiving God's command to preach against their wickedness of the people of Nineveh, took fright and fled toward Tarshish (either Tarsus in Turkey (Paul's birthplace), or more likely Sardinia), taking a boat from Joppa (what we now call Jaffa, and then the principal port of Israel). God sent a great storm, the mariners cast lots to see which of them was the cause of the storm; Jonah pulled the short straw, and the mariners asked him what he had done to cause this terrible storm to occur. Jonah told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, and suggested that he should be thrown overboard. It's interesting that at first the mariners were reluctant to do this, and rowed all the harder, but when it became clear that all their efforts were in vain, Jonah was cast overboard and the tempest abated. The story then continues that the Lord had sent a great fish to swallow Jonah, and he was in the fish's belly for 3 days and 3 nights. From there he prayed fervently, and the Lord caused Jonah to be 'spewed out onto dry land'.

Whatever the origin of the story, the gospel writers clearly seized on this as a prophesy of Christ's entombment for 3 days and nights before his resurrection. For us, though, the important message is that, if we really feel that God is asking us to do something difficult, we will never be at rest until we have at least tried to do it and that, in all probability, God will give us the means beyond our expectation. Jonah did, of course, go on to preach to Nineveh which was then the largest Assyrian city in the world, the remains of which should still be visible on the outskirts of modern Mosul. There Jonah prophesied that, because of the wickedness of the city, it would be destroyed in 40 days. Alarmed by this, the local king covered himself with sackcloth and ashes and ordered the whole populace to fast, repent and pray for deliverance. God, we read, heard their cries and relented. Interestingly, this is one of the first occasions that we see the God of the Old Testament as being merciful rather than – as so often – destroying the unbelievers. Perhaps even more interesting for us is Jonah's reaction – he was "displeased exceedingly and very angry" that God hadn't fulfilled his prophesy of destruction. We would do well to remember God's mercy when we think that someone has "received the punishment they deserved for some crime"; only God knows what goes on in our mind and in that of those around us.

It is not till we get to the New Testament when the northern groups of Israelites were settled round the sea of Galilee, that fishermen and reference to fish and fishing are prominent in the bible. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, then a small village about half way between the sea of

Galilee and the coast, but now the capital and largest city in northern Israel, but he was clearly very familiar with the lake and there are many references to the lake and to places like Capernaum and Bethsaida on the lake shore. In Matthew we read that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been arrested, he left Nazareth and settled at Capernaum and from that day began to proclaim the message 'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is upon you'. Walking along the lake shore he saw the brothers Simon and Andrew casting a net into the sea, and simply said to them "Come with me and I will make you fishers of men" and immediately they left what they were doing and followed Jesus. It was the same with the brothers James and John who were in a boat mending nets with their father Zebedee and a group of hired men; they too left everything and followed Jesus on his preaching, healing mission which drew enormous crowds.

What an amazing preacher and healer Jesus must have been; and what a magnetic personality. If you were to ask what sort of working people would be the most likely to join a religious movement, of the twelve apostles you might perhaps have picked Bartholomew, who was said to be a scholar of the law and prophets (but maybe not – too academic!); you might also have picked Jude, Simon and Judas all of whom were said to be religious nationalists hoping for an overthrow of the Romans. I suspect it is unlikely you would come up with fishermen, and yet at least 4 of the 12 were just that. Perhaps it was more that they were Galileans who, according to the 1st century historian Josephus, "were ever fond of innovation and by nature disposed to change; they were ever ready to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection; they were quick in temper and given to quarreling but they were very chivalrous men". That certainly describes Peter to a tee! But there are other characteristics of fishermen, particularly in Galilee where sudden storms blow up. Fishermen have to work together as a team, each looking after the other in dangerous conditions; they have to be very observant to all the signs around them; and they have to be very persistent – even when things aren't going well. You'll remember that, early in his ministry, Jesus had been speaking to the crowds from a Simon Peter's boat, and afterwards Jesus asked Simon to steer to deep water and put down the net. Simon protested "We were hard at work all night and caught nothing, but if you say so, I will let down the net" at which they made a great haul. Simon's amazed reaction was "Go Lord, leave me, sinner that I am!" and it was apparently after this that all the 4 fishermen left everything and followed Jesus. You'll remember that also, after the crucifixion and resurrection when some of the disciples had decided to go back to fishing, they were in the boat all night, but again caught nothing. It was not until a figure on the shore that we are told they did not know was Jesus, told them to "shoot the net out on the starboard side" that they had a huge haul, at which point John says "It is the Lord", and Peter, impulsive as ever, plunges into the sea to be first with his Lord, and of course went on to be the leader of the Jerusalem church.

What do we learn from these fishermen who became Jesus' closest companions? We learn that we must be brave, we must work hard with other Christians in the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us, even in the roughest spiritual weather; we must be prepared to follow Christ's instructions, even when our own experience would suggest giving up; and dare I suggest – we must even be impetuous for Christ, knowing that sometimes we will make mistakes because, as it is said "the person who never made a mistake never made anything!" Finally, if we think about the continuation of that last gospel story, when Peter is asked by the risen Jesus three times if he loves him (to mirror Peter's three denials) we learn that, however bad a mistake we may have made (and denying that you had ever known Jesus must rank right up there with the very worst), Jesus is still ready to forgive us and, more than just forgiving us, is ready to entrust us – poor, weak sinners that we are – with the continuation of his mission on earth: In Jesus' words "feed my sheep". May God's Holy Spirit strengthen us to do just that.

It is shepherds and sheep that we will think about during tomorrow's compline.

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Monday, 10th April

Prof John Morris

Administrators

This week, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about administrators – not you might think the most likely of subjects for a compline address. The administrators I want us to think about are Joseph in the Old Testament, and Pontius Pilate and two tax-officials Matthew and Zacchaeus in the New Testament.

It is the end of the story of Joseph that I want us to concentrate on. You'll remember the early part of the story. Joseph, the youngest and favourite son of his old father Israel (who had made him the long-sleeved coat of many colours) had antagonised his elder brothers by his self-promoting dreams. The elder brothers were very jealous, and when they had the chance stripped him of his fancy coat, threw him into a pit, from where he was sold to a caravan of Ishmaeli merchants on their way to Egypt with a caravan of balm and myrrh. In Egypt he was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, was imprisoned after Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, but then, because of his ability to interpret dreams, became famous and was freed. His ability brought him to the attention of the Pharaoh for whom he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as signifying years of plenty followed by a famine. He became a chief administrator, giving wise advice on the steps that should be taken to reduce the effects of the up-coming famine, which proved entirely successful, such that "the whole world came to Egypt to buy corn from Joseph" He brought his father and his brothers and their flocks to Egypt during the famine, where they not only survived but prospered. But it is the last part of the story, not often read in church, that I want us to take note of this evening, and it comes after Joseph's father died and had been buried. At this point the brothers began to worry and said to themselves 'What if Joseph should still bear a grudge against us for the wrong that we did him, but did not act for love of his father" So they went to Joseph and told him that, in his last words before he died, Jacob had given them a message for Joseph asking him to forgive the brother's wickedness "for we are servants of your father's God". On hearing this Joseph wept and said "Don't be afraid; you certainly meant to do me harm, but God meant to bring good out of your sin by enabling me to save the lives of innumerable people during this famine" And he promised to provide for them and their families.

Here we have a number of thought-provoking points. First, that even a really brutal human crime (such as allowing one of your family to be sold into slavery) can apparently be used by God to bring good to many and, second, that a really skilful administrator, whose care is only to do the right thing for the future, can be God's chosen vessel for good. Today, we don't often hear good things said about administrators – they are often portrayed as seeking to increase their own power base; getting sacked from one job in which they have made a mess, and moving on to another with some sort of golden handshake. The story of Joseph tells us not only to be generous even when we have every reason to feel we have been wronged, but also that thoughtfully caring for the lives of other people is part of the work of God.

In the New Testament let's think first about Pilate – according to Roman sources the very antithesis of a good administrator; but someone from whom we can still learn – if only what to avoid. Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judea, which included Samaria and Ideumea from AD26-36, appointed by the Emperor Tiberias. A prefect's primary function was

military, but prefects were also responsible for the collection of imperial taxes and had limited judicial functions – the rest being in the hands of local officials (in Judea the Sanhedrin and its president, the high priest, who was actually appointed by Pilate). Pilate lived in Caesarea, but travelled round, often to Jerusalem, and especially at times of religious festivals when he was expected to keep order. He started off his rule in Judea offending the religious leaders by bringing images and effigies on their standards into Jerusalem, and continued by setting up gold-coated shields honouring Tiberias; he purloined money from the temple to build an aqueduct, and was said by Roman writers to be “vindictive, inflexible, a blend of self-will and relentlessness”. Finally, he was sent back to Rome by his boss, the Roman Governor of Syria, to account for his many crimes, but particularly a massacre of Samaritans worshipping on mount Gerizim.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, the four gospels portray him in a rather more positive light, even if weak and able to be swayed by a crowd, all of which seems unlikely. I’ve mentioned before that some scholars believe that this is because the gospel writers were trying to curry favour with Rome, where Christianity was growing. Be that as it may, all the gospels have Pilate finding Jesus innocent of all the charges against him and being reluctant to acquiesce to Jesus’s execution – even to the extent of offering the Jews a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a well known criminal, and finally trying to wash his hands of his guilt in their choice.

So what can we learn from Pilate? From the more historical perspective, only what behavior to avoid; but, from the gospel narratives, that we must not listen to the insistent voices of a vociferous crowd bent on doing wrong; and that no amount of hand-washing physical or metaphorical will absolve us when, through weakness, we fail to do what we honestly believe to be the right thing.

The other administrators we come across in the New Testament are tax-collectors. The first is probably one of the gospel writers – Matthew. Matthew was among the earliest followers of Jesus. He was apparently a Galilean like the fishermen we considered yesterday, and we must remember that Galilee was not part of the Roman province of Judea, but under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas. Matthew was apparently ‘sitting at the seat of custom’ in Capernaum when he was called to follow Jesus, which he did, immediately and without question. There is some uncertainty as to whether he is the same as the tax-collector named Levi in Mark and Luke, and the same as the Matthew who is listed as one of the twelve disciples and apostles. Certainly the Talmud lists a “Mattai” as one of the five disciples of “Jeshu”. Whatever his identity, Matthew the tax collector would certainly have been literate in both Aramaic and Greek and hence is a good candidate as a gospel writer. However, as a collector of taxes from the Hebrew people for Herod Antipas, who was effectively a puppet ruler for the occupying Romans, he would have been despised by most of his fellow Jews for what was seen as collaborating with the Roman occupation. He was clearly also well off because after his call we read that Matthew invited Jesus home for a feast. The hostility of other Jews and particularly the religious leaders is clear from their criticism of Jesus for accepting the invitation; “this fellow eats with tax-collectors and sinners”. Which prompted Jesus’ response “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance”

So, like the fishermen we considered yesterday – what an apparently curious choice for one of Jesus’ chosen disciples! Tax collectors were seen as both cheats and traitors by the Jews. But follow Jesus he did (like the fishermen, just leaving their previous working life) and Matthew is listed as one of the witnesses of the Resurrection and Ascension, after which it is thought that he went on to preach the Gospel to the Jewish community in Judea.

Our second tax collector is Zacchaeus, who Jesus met when he was visiting Jericho. He was said to be the chief tax collector and very wealthy – doubtless because at time, there was always the opportunity for a tax-collector to take a proportion of the taxes for himself. Being short, he climbed a sycamore tree to get a view of Jesus amid the following crowd. Whereas it was Matthew who invited Jesus to his house, this time it is Jesus who sees Zacchaeus and calls out to him, “come down at once, I must stay at your house today” Again, there was the same critical response to the assembled Jews “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner” But Zacchaeus said “Look Lord, Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody, I will pay back four times the amount” to which Jesus responded “Today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost”. Whether Zacchaeus went on to be a disciple of Christ we can never know, but the message for us from the two tax collectors is clear. If we want to follow our Lord, we must do something that we instinctively find very difficult – that is to go to those in our society who are the most despised, those whom we consider least likely to be receptive to Jesus message. And why, because an encounter with Jesus can literally be life-changing for them as it should be for us.

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Tuesday, 11th April

Prof John Morris

Musicians

Because this is our one sung compline, in this series of short addresses on work and faith, I want us to think about musicians and music which, with the linked dancing feature a lot in both the old and the new testament.

One of the early references is to a harpist. When Saul was troubled in spirit he asked his servants to 'seek out a cunning harp player' – who turned out to be David, who would be king after Saul and one of the most prominent persons of the old testament. "And it came to pass that when the evil spirit was on Saul that David took a harp and played so Saul was refreshed and was well." Music can literally reach parts of the brain that other sedatives cannot touch. MRI shows us that music tends to be represented on the opposite side of the brain to speech – and is associated much more with emotion than with logic. It is interesting that even when well advanced in dementia, people can often join in singing a song that they know. Music in one form or another has been known to rouse people from a coma when other stimuli such as words have failed, and music therapy is a well-known part of therapy for various mental disorders.

Music and dance form an important part of all celebrations. Continuing the story of David in 1 Samuel, "When David and Saul returned from defeating the Philistines, women came out of all the cities of Israel with singing and dancing, tabrets and instruments of music." But you will remember that this was when, because they praised David more than him, that Saul started to become suspicious and eventually tried to kill David. Music heightens emotional responses in all sorts of ways.

Some of the psalms – particularly 149 and 150 the praise psalms – have extensive mention of the music of the day. "Praise the Lord, for it is good to sing praises" (Ps 149) and best known in Ps 150 "Praise him in the sound of the trumpet, praise him with psaltery and harp; praises him with timbrel and dances; praise him with stringed instruments and organs; praise him upon the loud cymbals" Praise to our God has always been associated with music, dance and singing.

But music is used not only for praise and joy, but also for in displays of grief. When Jesus was preaching, a ruler came to him saying "my daughter has died but come and lay your hand on her and she will live' When Jesus went to the ruler's house, it was surrounded by musicians and many people making a great deal of noise, who Jesus sent away before he healed the child. And where would our Remembrance Day services be without the solemn music? Music is often a source of great comfort at funerals when so often whatever has been a favourite piece of music or song is asked for.

Music and religious ceremonies have been yoked together since time immemorial and in all civilisations. For example, it is clear from countless wall murals that in Ancient Egypt instruments of all kinds, including string, wind and percussion were widely used with the numerous religious rituals, with associated dancers and those listening clapping their hands. Sadly none of the music itself has come down to us. In the Christian church, church bells announce that services are about

to occur; bells announce the consecration of the host. It's not just the hymns and settings of the mass for services, but also the wonderful solo organ music used as voluntaries. Most of the great early vocal music has a religious aspect. One only has to think of some of the greatest classical choral and orchestral music and its popularity even among those with little or no religious faith. Last weekend Woodstock Parish Church was packed out for two nights running for a performance the highlights of which were Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus and his Requiem Mass. And music of a very different style forms a huge part of the worship of gospel and evangelical services.

But music can also stir the emotions in very different ways. Music of a variety of types have played a large part in military action. I suspect that it was not literally the blast of the ram's horn trumpets that made the walls of Jericho come tumbling down, but that the Israelite army, hyped up by parading round the walls of Jericho for six days, were all keyed up waiting for the trumpet signal. So that when the blast of the trumpets finally came it signalled the final successful advance – 'every man straight ahead'. Reading that phrase brought back to my mind descriptions of the battalions of Scottish soldiers who marched, to martial bagpipe music – every man straight ahead – into no-man's land during battles in the first world war. Yes, music is capable of arousing very deep emotions, for good or for ill – you only have to think of Hitler's passion for the music of Wagner and how that affected his world view.

Another very different way in which music with dance was used for ill is illustrated by the party that Herod threw for his birthday, with all his lords and captains round him. Down below, in the dungeons was John the Baptist who had dared publicly to criticise Herod for taking Herodias as his wife despite the fact that she had previously been married to his brother. Herodias was at the party, as was her daughter, Salome. The dance – doubtless to music – that Salome performed before Herod and his assembled guests so entranced Herod (who had also no doubt drunk copiously at the party, but it is quite possible almost literally to become drunk on music) that in the hearing of all the guests he told Salome to ask 'whatever she wished – up to half his kingdom'. And, as you will remember, Salome asked her mother for advice and asked for, and was given the head of John the Baptist on a plate because Herod could not take back the promise given in front of all his guests. Yes, music and dance (particularly when coupled with wine) can be dangerous stuff.

Perhaps that is why St Paul urged the Ephesians 'and be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and making melody in your heart to the Lord'. And perhaps that is why the Quaker's (the Society of Friends) eschew any form of music in their services – they don't trust it not to engender the wrong sort of emotions.

Musicians, through their art, have very great powers to affect the emotions, and music can be chosen to represent things of supreme importance. And nothing could be more important than the point at which we are finally called to meet our maker. Who can hear the trumpet solo that starts "And the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised" in the Messiah without the hair on the back of their neck standing up – I know mine always does. Matthew gives us a graphic vision of the end of time "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens, and we shall see him coming in great glory, and he shall send his angels with a great sound of trumpets." Yes, the angels of God are also musicians!

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

Holy Week Wednesday, 12th April

Prof John Morris

Carpenters

For this final compline of holy week, looking at occupations and faith in the bible, I want us to think about Jesus' own occupation for the majority of his adult life, that of a carpenter, the trade in which he would have been deeply involved as part of his earthly father's business. Throughout history, and particularly in earlier times, wood was the principal building material and wooden objects and carpenters common place. For that reason they are rarely mentioned, and certainly not by name.

Many carpenters must have been employed in the building of Noah's ark, made with ribs of cypress, covered with reeds and coated with pitch to waterproof it. Genesis suggests it was a huge vessel by comparison with known boats of the time. To house all those animals it was said to be 300 cubits in length (the cubit varied a little from country to country, but was between 18 and 20 inches – the distance from the point of the elbow to the tip of the middle finger) in other words about 100 yards in length – huge. Be that as it may, the carpenter's skill here was – if we take the story of Noah at face value – responsible for physically saving all human and animal life. Fitting then, that it should be a carpenter from Nazareth who we regard as our saviour and our guide to eternal life.

Exodus tells us that the Ark of the Covenant was a chest fashioned of acacia wood, and the related tabernacle and accompanying altar were also partly built of acacia wood, though much of the wood was covered with gold, all of which would have required some skilful carpentry as well as metal working. It is likely, however, that the altars built by Noah to give thanks after the flood, or by Abraham to give thanks on being told that the land of the Philistines would be given to his descendants, were just piles of stones, because the altar was a support for burning sacrifices. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac he laid his son on a bundle of wood placed on the altar; the first altar built by Saul is stated to be a 'great stone'; and the altar built by Elijah when he defeated the prophets of Baal was made of stones on which the wood was laid for the burnt offerings.

Altars in Christian churches are not, of course, designed for burnt offerings, and come in many sorts of elaborate construction, but all derive from the simple wooden table that our Lord would have used for meals throughout his life. Our church altars represent not a place for burnt offerings but the table used at the last supper and the institution of the eucharist. Our new modern altar, beautifully constructed in oak incorporates another wooden structure as an integral component, the wooden cross which we will think about later.

As soon as the Israelites started to live a settled rather than a nomadic existence, in the time of King David, houses were needed and temples became fixed structures. Early houses had a lot of wood as part of their construction. David 'lived in a house of cedar' but it was Solomon who built the great temple, sending 80,000 men to quarries in Lebanon where they quarried the huge massive blocks of stone which are still evidence in the base of the Jerusalem temple mount. Solomon's original temple was not huge; just 60x30 cubits (only about 50 feet in length). The wood for the temple also came from the cedars of Lebanon, provided by Hiram the king there in exchange for yearly supplies of wheat and olives. Cedar wood was used to line the walls, the

floors were of pine; the inner most holy place was entirely of cedar wood, with no stone left visible, the cedar carved with open flowers and gourds. Here we have the concept that wood is particularly appropriate for a holy place; interesting then, that Japanese Buddhist temples are traditionally built entirely of wood, with perfect joints rather than any iron nails. All such constructions require expert carpenters.

The other wooden construction that we must consider tonight did not require much carpentry skill. The cross on which Christ and many others were crucified was a commonplace at the time, and crucifixion was used by the Romans as a visual deterrent and even as a grisly attraction at Roman games. The condemned person was sometimes forced to carry the crossbeam (the entire cross would have been too heavy and the uprights were fixed permanently in the local place of execution). Why in Jesus' case Simon of Cyrene was given the task we shall never know. What we can know, however, is that this symbol of the ultimate humiliation and degradation of a person has become, for us, a symbol of the ultimate giving of himself by Jesus, so that by his death, without which his resurrection could not have occurred, we are brought closer to God.

Jesus, the carpenter's son, spent all his early years until he started his preaching ministry at about 30 as an assistant helping his father in his trade. We know this only because of disparaging remarks about carpenters recorded in the new testament. It was when Jesus was teaching in his local synagogue in Nazareth that, in amazement, his hearers asked "where does he get this wisdom from, is he not the carpenter's son? (Matthew) or, in Mark, "Is this not this the carpenter, the son of Mary". Clearly carpenters were not thought to be either very bright or well versed in the scriptures. So, what are the aspects of a carpenter's life that would have contributed to Jesus' development and therefore could have relevance for us all?

One skill that carpenters have to develop is the ability to choose the right wood for a particular job; some woods are hard, some are soft, but all have their uses. In his life, Jesus showed a wonderful ability to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of those around him. Good carpenters always work 'with the grain of the wood'. We need to work with others and fully appreciate their gifts if we are to be effective witnesses and workers in the mission that we believe Jesus would have for our lives.

And finally, carpenters work with wood that was, earlier, a living part of God's creation and which in its natural state is just a tree. It is only when that living tree is cut down and, in a sense dies, that the carpenter can start to craft a fine and beautiful object from the wood. Human beings – as we know only too well – in their natural state are often selfish, aggressive and acquisitive, disregarding the needs of others; in other words, we are prone to be sinful. Like the wood from the tree, it is only when we have died to sin that Jesus the carpenter can work on our lives to make us a little more like himself – truly loving and giving of ourselves for the sake of our neighbours – and be crafted into something that is fine and beautiful for God.