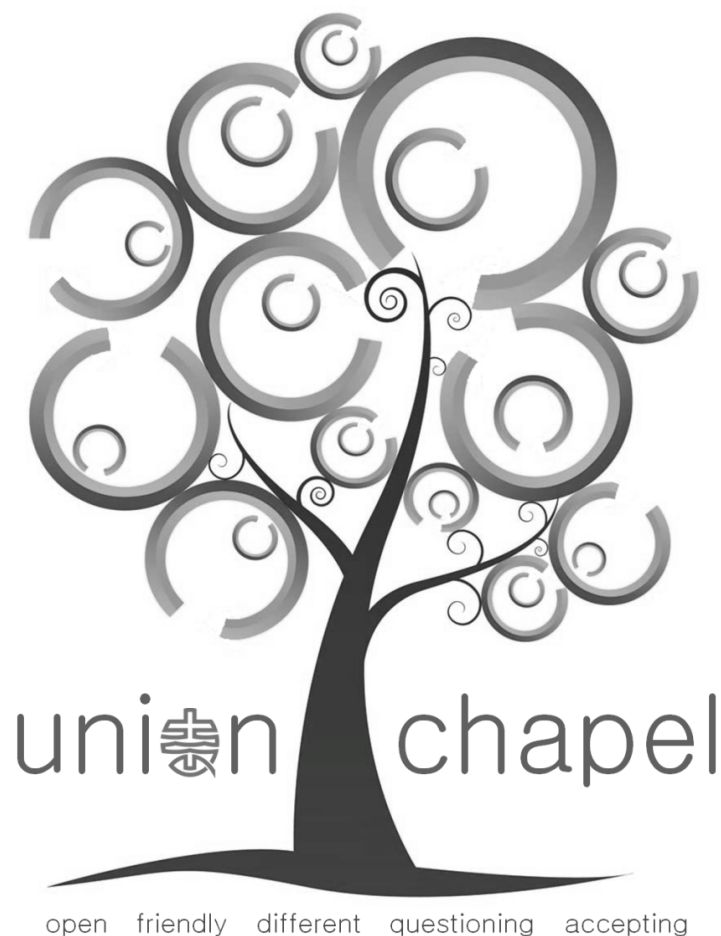


# Christward

The magazine of



September – October 2023

## ~ Journey's End ~

### Journey's End

[We have been having conversations about our spiritual journeys. So much of mine has been interwoven with Union Chapel and it feels like that stage of my journey is now ending, which leads to reflection on where I have ended up. Conversely, the religious background of my life has been the rise of the modern form of anti-scientific fundamentalism; as so much of my talk, and that of others, has inevitably been about defining myself against this corruption of Christianity, I wanted to write something that was a bit more positive]

*"Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.'*

*I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'*

*Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass*

- **I am a scientist:** Although always subject to new facts, we know a lot about how the world works, and a lot about what we don't yet know. I have to accept this true knowledge.
- **I am a medical statistician:** I require real evidence. I critically evaluate evidence.
- **I am a Christian:** I was raised and still remain part of a Church community, I am inspired and motivated by the person and stories of Jesus, the wisdom of biblical writers, the rituals of church life, the insights of those who have followed this path before me.

- **I am one person:** These statements of who I am have to have a consistency.

We know the Bible was written by people of their time and place. We know it has many voices with different perspectives. We know much of what was written reflects views about how the world works that have now been superseded. We know it is not consistent. This is what makes it great. There is such a rich source in there: of ideas, ways of thinking, questions and potential answers, food for thought and meditation. The Gospels tell us about the person of Jesus: four different pictures, all written significantly after his death and with varying degrees of post-hoc interpretation and imagination. Portraits, not history. The richness of art rather than a set of verifiable facts.

The New Testament writers, again from their own place and time, give us a variety of responses as they struggle to work out how to respond to the man who was Jesus. There is no consistent theology (attempts at that came much later). You can't derive any modern (or ancient) form of Christianity from the Bible.

From this eclectic source material Christians down the ages have come up with yet more interpretations and theologies – some helpful, others less so. A rich source of inspiration and contemplation. At its best Christianity has been a great source of inspiration, leading people to more whole lives and motivating those we see as good. It has of course also done great harm, from the imperial might of Christendom to the abuse scandals in more recent times.

It is not necessary to believe “six impossible things before breakfast” in order to be a Christian (although there are plenty who would tell us so). If something is impossible then it is impossible. So for me there is no need for a Divine Being out there somewhere, miracles are stories of their time written by people with a different understanding of what was and was not impossible and not to be interpreted as literal accounts of real events – and yes for me that includes physical resurrection. This life is indeed all we have, which

means it is even more vital that we live it as well as we can and try to leave the world in a better place for the next generation.

And this is where the resources of our faith come in. In our Bible and our tradition, we have a vast cornucopia of stories, interpretations, poetry and ways of responding to what this life brings that we can draw on. Inspiration from those who have gone before us to listen to, reflect on, argue with, learn from, agree or disagree with. Metaphors of resurrection, salvation and the Kingdom of God to remind us that this world can be a better place. The world gives us facts and reality, pleasant and unpleasant, our faith gives us metaphors and poetry to help us use this experience to live life better than we otherwise would, to care, and work to make this world a better place for all.

In meeting together, in our Sunday rituals (such as they are in our very non-conformist corner of the Church) we create space and time to reflect on life and on those deeper things that get crowded out in the chaos of daily life, in a community which (at its best) supports each other through what life brings and can inspire us with insights and stories.

Space to reflect, metaphors, community. That will do fine for now.

*With gratitude to those at Union Chapel and beyond who have given space to explore and freedom to express thoughts beyond the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle. Thanks to you, the journey will continue...*

*Steve Roberts*

## **~Snippets of Hebrew ~**

It is by no means an unusual practice in Hebrew for the writers to reverse the usual word order, to draw attention to something else implied in the text. However, even where the word order is conventional, Rabbis reverse it and explore whether there is anything interesting implied as a result.

One such example is in early Genesis where we find some very famous words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. Lexicons reveal that the word for create, really does mean create. No surprise there then! However, what the lexicons don’t say, but the Rabbis know very well, is that the word for create, which is Barah in Hebrew, also means to reveal. Thus one might say “In the beginning God revealed the heavens and the earth”. But the idea that the heavens and the earth were already there and had been for all of past eternity, is never going to gain much traction. However if the word order is changed it might imply that “the heavens and the earth revealed God”. King David says just that in Psalm 19 v 1 “The heavens declare the glory of God”. The word declare is not the word for create, but it is very close to the word revealing.

(A minor point: the word for declare is an active participle, but the King James Version still uses declare as a simple present tense. “The heavens are declaring the glory of God”, would be a better reflection of the original. Translations are full of this sort of change.)

In the Hebrew the word order in the creation account is “Created God the Heavens and the earth”. Substituting reveal, we get “Revealed God the Heavens and the earth”. Reversing the statement yields “God revealed the heavens and the earth”. Another twist could be “Revealed the Heavens and the earth God”. Whilst the text states clearly that God created, or revealed, the heavens, all the other options are quite “revealing”, pun intended. So God revealed the heavens, and the heavens revealed God.

If the heavens and the earth reveal God, do they merely reveal his existence? And is that revelation in some sense all we need to know? Do the mysteries and wonders of nature contain enough clues about who we are and who God is? Is it sufficient to understand, that despite the struggle for life, biological life has survived and flourished on earth for quite a long time?

For a Rabbi’s fuller perspective see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni0pgVRzBtU>

Or, enter the following into the search line on Youtube instead of typing in the long line above: Bible REVEALS God's reason for CREATION

Video lasts 31 mins 37 seconds!

Geoff Walker

### ***From the Sunday Service Archive***

In the past I have asked leaders of our services for permission to print their Comments on the Lectionary readings used in their services. Reading Steve's article above which includes comments about faith and metaphors recalled a service I led when I thought that St John had pushed the use of metaphor a little too far.

Alan Redhouse

### ***Reading; John 6:51-58***

*Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."*

## ***~A Metaphor Too Far~***

When I read Mark, Matthew and Luke I frequently find myself thinking Jesus actually said the words I have just read or something

very like them. The story of the Good Samaritan is 'just Jesus'. It is grounded in the everyday, the characters are all people we recognise, it deals with the question 'who is my neighbour?' straightforwardly and in such a manner that even a child could tell you who was neighbour to the Samaritan.

When I looked at today's Gospel reading I found myself thinking Jesus of Nazareth could not have spoken those words not even in a million years. What we have just read is theological propaganda. We are reading the point of view of the writer who is out to persuade us to accept his view of Jesus. Indeed the whole book is a work of propaganda from the first chapter 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us' through the great 'I ams' I am the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life and their lengthy expositions, right up to the penultimate chapter where John makes his purpose clear 'this book is written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

I should say here that because a book is propaganda that does not mean that it is in some way worthless. We all know that this Gospel contains wonderful things and that in the Authorised translation it is surely one of the glories of the English Language.

However John 6 is not, in my opinion, one of those wonderful things. The metaphor 'I am the bread of life' occurs twice in the chapter and a further time in our reading as a variant. It is in John's exposition of this metaphor that he goes too far. Of course he does not mean people should eat the flesh and blood of Jesus, that would be impossible anyway. Although the future church would certainly have capitalised on this if it could. Canterbury pilgrims in the 14th Century were sold bottles of the watered down blood of St Thomas Becket to drink for healing purposes.

There are overtones of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, in the reading but I don't think John is thinking of that rite. For a start in John's account of the Last Supper the bread and wine are not mentioned nor are any words such as 'This is my body', 'This is my

blood'. The only action in John's account is the washing of the disciples feet everything else is theological exposition.

John takes a perfectly good metaphor 'I am the bread of life' with all its possibilities, staple food for all his readers, nourishment, building up the body, etc and pushes it too far. In order to 'live for ever' and abide in Christ you must in some mystical way eat the flesh and drink the blood of our Lord. The trouble is most of John's readers were not, and still are not, mystics. Today's reading leaves them at best puzzled and at worst slightly nauseous.

If you want to know what you have to do to inherit eternal life you have Jesus's answer more directly spelt out in Mark and Luke. Both are infinitely more difficult and challenging for most of us than John's requirement to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and to abide in him. In Mark it is the call to obedience to Jesus which is made clear in the reply given to the rich young ruler 'Go sell all you have, give the money to the poor and follow me.' In Luke it is the requirement to love your neighbour as yourself as Jesus deals with the lawyer's question by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Living the life Jesus requires of us will always be more important than theological metaphors especially ones which are pushed too far.

*Alan Redhouse      15.08.21*

## **~ News of the Family ~**

It was good to welcome from Kenya the **Revd James Mwadzi, together with Christine Mwadzi and their children Nicole and Jonathan** to our service on 27th August. They are in Manchester for a year while James is studying for an MA in Theology at Luther King House. We hope that they will enjoy their stay in our city.

## **~ Make a note in your diaries ~**

***Saturday 9th September  
7.30 pm at Union Chapel.***

***Sophie, 'our' BMS missionary, is coming to update us on what has been happening in Tunisia since we last met her at the church weekend in 2022.***

***All welcome and light refreshments provided.***

## **~ Minutes of the Church Meeting held on August 20, 2023 ~**

**1. Present:** Alan R, Margaret R, Carole W, Geoff W, Gwen M, Margaret E, Brenda M, David G, Margaret G, Enid W, Steve R, Gwyneth HR, Andy H (Chair), Lorna R

**2. Apologies:** Nicola H,

**3. The Minutes of the July Church Meeting** (circulated in advance) were approved.

**4. Date of the Next Meeting:** 17 September 2023

**5. Note of AOB:** Review of the current church service format

**6. BU consultation on marriage and Ministerial Recognition Rules**

The there was discussion around the current request from the BU to complete a survey on the position of the church regarding Ministerial Recognition Rules. This is with reference to the following statement in the Ministerial Rules on misconduct.

*‘Sexual Misconduct which brings the church and ministry into disrepute. NB This specifically includes sexual intercourse and other genital sexual activity outside of marriage (as defined exclusively as between a man and a woman).’*

It is proposed to remove the words in brackets, however it was felt that this does not address the larger issue of gay marriage. Another area of the rules states;

*Homosexual orientation (whether male or female) is not of itself a reason for exclusion from ministry, but homosexual genital practice is to be regarded as gross misconduct.*

**Andy H to circulate 1st draft to Deacons before September meeting and Gwyneth HR to add any additional comments.**

## **7. Update on Lettings Administrator**

MG updated the meeting on the current position. Naheed Akhtar who was to take up the Buildings and Lettings Administer post withdrew her application before starting, due to family matters. The interviewing panel thinks it would be too difficult to support the other two candidates and suggest that we carry on with Margaret G doing the Lettings and Brenda M doing the Buildings management until discussions are completed on the future of the church.

It was mentioned that in the interim we might not want to take on any new users.

There are added complications in that we no longer have a caretaker. There was discussion on our communication with the users and the possibility that someone might help out if we asked. In the past there was more face to face communication with users and this was fruitful. It was agreed not to approach Users in writing until the church completed discussions of its future.

## **8. Longer term future of church**

Gwyneth HR opened the discussion with the following list of concerns ( in italics) :

1. *The purpose of the church – what is important to people, what can be let go of, when do we cease to be “Union Chapel” in our own minds?*

2. *Our responsibilities - who is carrying them, and to what extent willingly? Including:*

- *Sunday worship*
- *Buildings maintenance (Chapel, Large Hall, Linton House site, Manse)*
- *Lettings on the main site*
- *Manse tenants*
- *Governance and compliance with regulations*
- *Financial matters*
- 

*Big questions we need to discuss, including:*

- *Selling the Manse*
- *Selling the whole church site and moving elsewhere as a group*
- *Selling the whole church site and merging with another church*
- *Calling a new Minister*
- *Having a membership drive*

*We need to approach the questions on the basis of ascertaining what we want, what is achievable by us as we are, and what is achievable with help which is realistically available.*

There was support and agreement over the need to have this discussion and the ways it can be organised.

**It was decided to hold discussions after a shortened worship on some Sundays in the autumn. The Deacons will look at the organisation of the series.**

9. **AOB** Due to time, it was agreed to forward this to the agenda for the next church meeting.

The Meeting closed with an Alleluia.

## **~ from the Christian Aid Website ~**

### **Sudan**

Almost three months after fighting first broke out in Sudan, nearly 3 million people have fled their homes, including more than 600,000 people who have sought safety in neighbouring countries.

So far over 150,000 people have crossed into South Sudan. Most are South Sudanese but this number also includes Sudanese refugees and people from other countries. Almost three-quarters of the people arriving into South Sudan come through the Joda border crossing in Upper Nile State.

Christian Aid recently travelled to the border of Sudan and South Sudan as well as to the Renk transit centre some 45 kilometres to the south to see firsthand the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

Below are some of the stories and challenges faced by those fleeing one crisis to another.

#### ***At the Joda border crossing***

A steady stream of people arrive at the Joda border crossing every day. Most come through on foot carrying whatever they can while locals help to bring others and their luggage across on donkey-drawn carts. Once in South Sudan, the new arrivals are transported onwards to Renk town.



At the Joda border crossing, Christian Aid met 29-year-old father of two, Joseph. Joseph is originally from Warrap state in South Sudan but left in 2019 to go study. Joseph and his family were living in an area northwest of Khartoum when the fighting broke out. He described the dangers his family faced as they escaped.

***It wasn't easy to get out. When you leave your house, you sometimes meet fighting and crossfire and you have to go and hide.***

### ***Joseph***

While Joseph says he is relieved to have made it to South Sudan, he remains deeply concerned for those who haven't been able to make it out of Sudan, including his wife's family who are still there. They plan to come but they haven't got money yet for transport to get here. Joseph is hoping his family can help him get home to Warrap.

### ***At the transit centre in Renk***

Some 45km south of the border lies the town of Renk. The UN estimates that around 50,000 people are now staying in Renk across several displacement sites. Christian Aid visited a transit centre which was set up within the walled grounds of a rundown building just on the outskirts of the town

The transit centre is severely overcrowded. It's only meant to hold between 1 and 2,000 people for a short time – however, according to the UN, the number of people currently at the transit centre is nearly 4,700. Some have been there for weeks, others months

At the transit centre, Christian Aid met 40-year-old mum of ten Martha. Martha has lived in Khartoum her whole life. She had fled Sudan with her family, including her 65-year-old mother Grace, who is originally from Wau state in South Sudan.



Martha and her family felt they had no choice but to flee their home after their neighbourhood in Khartoum was attacked during the fighting.

‘A bomb fell and part of it hit the top of my house. I was woken up by the noise and my body was covered in dust. All the windows and the door of my house were opened,

***When I woke up, I went outside. One of my neighbours had been blown to pieces by a bomb. I knew then that I had to leave Khartoum..’***

*Martha says*

Since crossing the border, life has been hard for Martha and her family in Renk. ‘Our major problem in the transit centre is food. We have been eating only boiled sorghum for the past two months,’ she says. ‘The second challenge is the poor hygiene. Children are dying every day from diarrhoea. This is because there is a lack of health facilities.’

The conditions in the transit centre are particularly hard for Martha’s children. She says ‘This has messed up their lives. They have been living in good conditions where they have been watching TV and playing computer games. Now they are really exhausted with the situation we are in. If it wasn’t for their aunt arriving and telling them that the situation in Khartoum is getting worse and worse, they

would have forced me to take them back,'. Martha has been living at the transit centre since 20 April. She's frustrated that promises to transport her family out of Renk have not materialised. As Martha explains, she hopes that no other person will ever have to experience what she is going through.

***This is not a life I expected to live, this life was forced on me. I wish this life that I am living will never repeat itself for another person because nobody should endure such a life. It is my wish that I could be the first and the last person to live the life that I am living in now.***

***Martha***

***You can donate to Christian Aid's work in Sudan on their website: [www.christianaid.org.uk](http://www.christianaid.org.uk)***

## **~ Egrets - I've had a few...~**

On the Church walk we found a Great White Egret – a bird that was a rarity only a few years ago, but we now find quite often – but still notable at Newmans Flash:

(Photo is the first one we saw in 2011 and it was a bit closer than the one we all saw)



A week later Gwyn and I found 60+ Little Egrets sitting out the high tide at Thurstaston on the Dee Estuary:



Not that long ago these were only found in a few locations on the South Coast, now we expect to see them in many wetland sites – and we have even seen them on the Mersey. Yes, they really do roost in trees!

Good conservation work or climate change?

*Steve Roberts*

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