Christward

The magazine of

union chapel

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November - December 2026

~ As I Heard It ~

Four weeks ago Steve and Gwyneth led our Sunday gathering. They looked at the fhree Lectionary Readings for the day which were as usual were read out loud. Following each reading Steve told us ***how he heard it****. For the Epistle he resorted to playing a song. The readings and how Steve heard them are printed below. The words of the song are also printed together with a link to the website where you can hear it sung.*

Matthew 21:33-46

"Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. Then he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.'

So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?

"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest

him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The parable of the tenants: As I heard it….

There was a creator who created a planet, a world full of beauty and complexity, the creator filled the oceans with good water and surrounded it with a nourishing atmosphere. He leased it to tenants and went away, leaving them to rule the world. But the ruling tenants were neglectful and did not care for the planet. When the time came the creator sent messengers, scientists who showed the tenants the damage they were doing, the planet was heating and the creatures dying. But the tenants ignored the messengers, denied the damage was caused by their neglect and carried on despoiling the world. Again, he sent other messengers with intricate models and detailed scenarios for the future of the world. But again, they ridiculed the messengers, denied the damage was caused by their neglect and carried on despoiling the world. Then finally he sent them droughts, floods and fire saying surely if they see real effects of their neglect they will change their ways? But when they saw this they said “let us not have to keep listening to the creator, let us stop all this noise, let us make more riches and power for ourselves. This world is ours, let us claim our inheritance. Drill baby drill.”

And inevitably, what the messengers foretold came to pass and there was great suffering. And the creator did not return to punish the wicked ruling tenants – indeed they prospered.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
you shall have no other gods before me.
"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.
"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.
"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labour and do all your work.
"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
"You shall not murder.
"You shall not commit adultery.
"You shall not steal.
"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
"You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

10 commandments: As I heard it….

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
You shall take care of the world they created

You shall not bear false witness
You shall not falsely report objective truth, deny scientific facts, or invent "alternative facts"

You shall not covet
your neighbour's land, nor their oil, nor their minerals

You shall not steal
Your neighbour's land, nor their oil, nor their minerals

You shall not murder.
I abhor your needless wars, your genocide, your neglect of those in desperate need

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
You shall not use my name to justify your lies, your murder, your theft

Honour your father and your mother
Care for the world you have inherited. Love and cherish all humanity, all creatures, all my creation

Philippians 3:4b-14
If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of

Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

As I heard it….

Song There's a wild hope https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkwjXQWZox8

There's a wild hope in the wind: her whisper is heard on the breeze. The gale is her shout that is calling us out. There's a wild hope in the wind.
O God in the wind, come gather us in, be our courage and promise. The future is dim, but we want to live into a wild, wild hope.

There's a wild hope in the skies: her gown is the blue of forever. The purple of night is her heart's pure delight. There's a wild hope in the skies.

O God in the skies, come open our eyes, be our courage and promise.
The future is dim, but we want to live into a wild, wild hope.

There's a wild hope in the earth: her body provides us with nurture. The dark underground is where life can abound. There's a wild hope in the earth.
O God in the earth, come aid our rebirth, be our courage and promise.
The future is dim, but we want to live into a wild, wild hope.

Lora Braun, Canada

~ The Crystal Ball June 2nd '92 ~

Searching through old papers, as I am accustomed to do on the day before the publication of Christward, I came across two copies of a report with the above title scrawled across the top of the page in Eric's handwriting. I do not know, or perhaps cannot remember, any group debates with this title occurring at Union Chapel. Perhaps they took place at the Baptist College or at a Minister's Fraternal. If anyone knows anything about 'The Crystal Ball' meetings or best of all has the 'theological reflector's later notes I would very much like to find out more about the outcome of the debates.

It is 34 years since the first meeting of the group and reading Eric's reflections the report could have been written yesterday.

I have been trying to fulfil my official function as theological reflector in relation to the first round of debates under the title 'The Crystal Ball'. Discussion has ranged widely but returned often to the difficulty of expressing and commending a faith that does not offer

the credal certainties and laid out programmes of the more popular expressions of Christianity today. A side issue arose about the cultural forms in which faith is expressed which I don't think we really got down to in the end. We failed to answer the questions about assimilation to culture which seems to be what is happening in "successful" churches. This is happening even at the same time as they loudly assert that theirs is a counter-culture, 'not conformed to this world' and level criticism of contemporary culture. We don't achieve this simply by retaining traditional or even antique cultural forms.

Important as this side issue is to a large extent commending our faith will be greatly affected by the ways in which it is expressed. This today often means the ways in which it is set to music or 'imaged'. I believe that the formal doctrine we have been wrestling with is the doctrine of Salvation. We are trying to find ways to talk about what we really believe because we do not find it possible to agree to ideas about Salvation which make it a yes or no, a once off, then it wasn't now it is, type of thing. We see it as a process, a movement towards a goal down a path open on both sides to changes of route, offering the possibility for turning back, stepping aside, or taking a new track altogether.

Traditionally, the philosophical problem for Christians has been the stubborn basic idea that the truth we hold is fixed upon and originates from a particular person in a particular place at a particular time and even on a certain weekend! Out of this basic assertion it is easy to see how to construct all the "exclusive" certainties that mark conservative Christianity to this day, fairly and properly summed up in the question, "Brother are you saved?" What is not so easy is to sum up is how the faith brings **us** a sense of at least a movement towards Salvation. We talked of this in terms of trying to specify the value of the church to our individual lives. I think that is secondary and want to drive it back to the fundamental question not of what the **church** does for us, but how we talk about what the **faith** does for us. If we can get this right, or at least moving in the right direction, we can make the church or at least our little corner of it do what we want it to do. We must not complain

about the church – it is entirely within our power to either alter it or start another one!

I overheard the American author Robert Stone talking on the radio. Asked why his novels were sometimes a bit grim he denied that they were and offered words like this: *life is rich, pleasurable, and full of glory. It is also lonely, dangerous and full of suffering. There is not much salvation about, either religious or secular. My salvation lies in "getting by" and understanding these mysteries a little and with great difficulty.*

If you turn your face away from the absolute certainties of conventional Christianity is that your salvation too? Is our faith a piece, the key piece, one of her few key pieces, in the jigsaw which when completed, or even sufficiently complete to offer a grasp of the picture, helps us to "get by"?

We have all met the person who bellows about being saved and testifies to the experience whilst being obviously unhealed, broken and on the edge of falling apart. We reject this black-and-white self deception no doubt. If Robert Stone correctly analyses our feelings, how can we proceed to define the value of our faith to us and begin to speak of it and express it in worship and life?

Eric Bray

~ Does Nothing Change at Christmas? ~

Thick and fast they come through the letter box. Each one with heartbreaking stories of war, famine, disease and pestilence. Each story illustrated with coloured photographs which would move even the hardest of hearts. Each one ending with the words Donate Now.

Christmas time is approaching and the Charities are gearing up, just like the High Street, to take advantage of the altruism, in the case of charities. and the desire to buy presents for loved ones. in the case of the High Street, which seems to flow through our veins as Christmas comes nearer and nearer.

The churches rail against consumerism and urge people to give generously in order to help those in need, the shopkeepers tempt people to spend generously in order to give the family, (and the shopkeepers) a happy Christmas. Torn between the two rights we try to strike a kind of balance between the needs of the poor and the needs of our family and friends. What is a just and ethical distribution of our wealth between the two?

As the letters continue to come through the letterbox we have choices to make and questions to consider. Is giving to charity, if you can afford it, an easy way of avoiding our responsibility to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'. Should we really be doing something more, perhaps become an activist on our neighbours behalf as well as being a donor. It is the same old question which comes every time an appeal letter lands on the mat. It's an ongoing question it just becomes more intense at Christmas because there are so many more letters. The unavoidable question is always 'What am I going to do about….the inequality in society, the famine in Ethiopia, the war in Sudan, the refugees.

A feeling of powerlessness creeps in and guilty feelings begin building up. We start to become like Mr Bennett in Pride and Prejudice who worries about how he will repay his brother-in-law the money he spent on rescuing Mr Bennett's daughter Lydia from an unscrupulous lover. When asked by his other daughter Elizabeth what he is going to do about it replies "Nothing it will soon pass."

However after Christmas the New Year comes in and with it hope. The hope that this time I will stick with my Resolutions and some things will change.

PS Also the hope that I will get more than one contribution for the January Christward!

Christward Number 541 Published 2nd November 2026

The magazine of Union Chapel Fallowfield(Baptist),

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