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#### WELCOME TO THE JANUARY RECORD



APPY NEW YEAR. I hope that you were blessed by the Christmas period, despite the circumstances. It truly is joy to remember that God's promises stand firm for ever and that, in Jesus, who was 'born for us on earth below', God is with us.

There is no aspect of our lives which is unaffected by that truth. This month, the Rev. Gordon Matheson begins a four-part series leading up to the Scottish Parliament election in May. He will encourage us to consciously develop a Christian worldview, considering matters of politics and public policy in light of the teaching of Scripture.

Given the year we have just finished, and in light of the unanswered questions in both politics and public health as we begin 2021, may we trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. As we acknowledge him in all our ways, he will make our paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

If you have any news articles please send them to dayspring.macleod@icloud.com.

Yours in Christ

John

#### That in all things he might have the pre-eminence

Colossians 1:18

#### CONTENTS

- **04 SET FREE** The Editor
- **08 WORLD NEWS** Argentina, UK, Switzerland, Nigeria, India, China, South Korea

#### **10 FREE CHURCH NEWS**

- **13 THY ROD AND STAFF** Ciarán Kelleher
- 14 CHILD SOLDIER'S PhD TURNS HURT INTO HOPE Helen Swingler
- **18 ETS NEWS: ONLINE LEARNING** Thomas Davis
- 20 CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW Gordon Matheson
- 24 COME AWAY WITH ME Dayspring MacLeod
- 26 WHY DID GOD RAISE JESUS FROM DEATH? PART 13 Iain Gill
- 28 AZARIAH: WHAT'S IN A NAME? David Randall
- 30 PAGES FROM ADAM'S DIARY, PART 6 THE CINDERELLA STORY OF A 65-YEAR-OLD REFUGEE
- 33 OBITUARY: MURDO MACKENZIE
- 34 BOOK REVIEWS
- **36 PRAYER DIARY**
- **37 POETRY PAGE** Minnie Louise Hoskins
- **38 MISSION MATTERS** David Meredith
- **39 SOLAS DOM CHEUM** Janet MacPhail
- 40 POST TENEBRAS LUX Catriona Murray



#### DEMOCRATIC RETREAT

During 2020, Malawi was a shining example to the world. According to *Freedom House*, a think-tank which advocates for democratic government, the condition of democracy and human rights has deteriorated in 80 countries since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. As well as the usual suspects like China and North Korea, the list includes established democracies like Denmark and the United States. Most other countries remained 'about the same'. Only one country in the world has stronger democratic credentials and greater respect for human rights at the beginning of 2021 than it did at the beginning of 2020.

Malawi has achieved this in very difficult circumstances. All of its neighbouring countries are among the 80 whose democratic conditions have deteriorated. Furthermore, Malawian democracy has faced up to a significant challenge from within. The nation's president died in 2012, a fact that was covered up to give his brother, Peter Mutharika, time to take over. Mutharika didn't succeed in seizing power at the time, but he was elected president in 2014 amid rumours of voting irregularities. He ran for re-election in 2019, a vote dubbed the 'Tipp-Ex election' because correction fluid was used to rig the count in his favour. This sparked widespread protests and a legal challenge. Despite being offered bribes, the judiciary annulled the election. Another election was run fairly in June 2020 and, as *The Record* reported shortly afterwards, Lazarus Chakwera, a former Pentecostal pastor and theologian, won with 58% of the vote.

There is much work still to be done, but Chakwera has promised to limit the powers of the president and to tackle corruption. He began his term with investigations into deals done by previous administrations and the suspension of corrupt contracts. He has raised the minimum wage and implemented social security benefits for households affected by COVID-19. His movement's rallying call of 'all Malawians together' is radical in the context of the decades-long political domination of the Chewa ethnic group. This dates back to the dictatorship of Hastings Banda, who ruled the country from the end of British rule in 1964 until democratic reforms were introduced in 1994.

If the historical context makes Malawi's achievements all the more admirable, it also makes Malawi's lonely position as the world's only improved democracy all the more stark. The free world's leaders are failing to lead. Citizens take their freedom for granted. This is a mindset fraught with risk.

#### **UNDER PRESSURE**

Within the recent trend of deteriorating democracy comes a threat to religious freedom. Today, one-third of countries experience high or very high levels of government restriction on religion – up from one-fifth in 2007 – according to *Pew Research Centre*'s latest findings. Action that lands a country into one of these categories includes bans on religious groups or prohibiting certain religious practices on pain of incarceration, as in China. Or implementing anti-conversion laws, such as those enforced in Uttar Pradesh, India.

But government action is not the only factor influencing freedom of religion. *Pew* also measures social hostility towards religion. This takes into account hostile acts by private individuals or groups, such as violence and harassment against particular groups of worshippers. Adding in those experiencing high or very high social hostility brings the total number of countries which significantly restrict religious freedom to 80. That is, 40% of the world's countries.

We do not experience the overt state oppression that besets our sisters and brothers in China. Nor do we face the level of social hostility endured by our brothers and sisters in India. But still we are often left with a vague sense that our own freedom to practice Reformed, biblical

Christianity is under increasing pressure. Perhaps it is. Most of us will have experienced disrespect or derision as a result of our faith. How often have we heard, or expressed, the view that Christians are the last acceptable group to attack and criticise: 'they'd never get away with saying that about...' But why?

*Pew* has found that the religious citizens of the United Kingdom live under Moderate government restrictions, but a High level of social hostility. The latter places the UK among the 80 countries in which religious freedom is restricted significantly. We score 6 out of 13 on *Pew's* social hostility index. For comparison, India receives the highest score, 12.5, while Ukraine is highest in Europe, with 8.

But, a look behind the scores shows that this is not describing pressure on expressions of Christian belief. The UK's high score for social hostility towards religion is almost entirely made up of actual violence, threats and harassment committed against people because of their religious identity, and is not related to doctrine or its public policy consequences. The majority of incidents are perpetrated against Muslims and a significant number are anti-Semitic. In Scotland, sectarian crimes are a factor, with 319 anti-Catholic and 174 anti-Protestant crimes registering in the statistics. On the whole, it is not our religion to which the UK is socially hostile.

#### CHURCH AND STATE

Strangely enough, it is *Pew*'s other category – government restrictions – which helps to explain the pressure that we feel, but not in the way we might expect.

In the broad sense, Satan and the natural person (1 Corinthians 2:14) always oppose the Kingdom of God. Jesus warned us not just to expect opposition, but hatred and persecution also (John 15:18-25). This spiritual battle is at the root of enmity towards biblical Christianity. Beneath this, though, the specific pressure we feel in our culture has a specific cause.

Pew identifies a moderate level of government restriction on religious freedom in the United Kingdom. But the reason the researchers reach this conclusion is not because they have identified an ascendant secularism which advocates the passage of laws opposed to Christian teaching. In fact, the research methodology leads to the conclusion that the UK government restricts religious freedom in favour of Christianity, privileging it at the expense of other religions. Adopting the conclusions of the US State Department, Pew's methodology assumes that the presence of an official state religion is contradictory to the idea of religious freedom. Christianity also receives privileged access to government in the form of Church of England bishops sitting in the House of Lords. It is difficult to find any contemporary examples of this institutional privilege translating into legislation founded on Biblical principles. Nevertheless, symbols are influential. Even mere ceremonial involvement in the operation of the state gives the impression that Christianity has power. And therein lies the licence to attack.

The rules have never changed: to punch down is bullying, but to take on the privileged and powerful is not just fair, but laudable. Many of our forebears have benefitted from this. John Knox told Mary, Queen of Scots that if a ruler should 'exceed their bounds,' then 'they may be resisted, even by power'. Similarly, we celebrate Martin Luther for his stand against corruption in the medieval church, even though he deliberately went beyond a reasoned critique of doctrine. His Ninety-Five Theses accused priests of being ignorant and wicked (Thesis 10), selling indulgences out of 'greed and avarice' (Thesis 32). He even called them 'the enemies of Christ' in Thesis 53.

The approach Luther took was not polite, but it was effective and it is still accepted for use against power. Our culture approves the use of similar personal attacks against Christians and Christianity because our religion is considered to be in a privileged position in society. But we don't feel powerful, certainly not anymore.

Of course, there are Christians who wield power. Some sit in Parliament. Others use their wealth to lobby for particular causes. Often these individuals are pursuing divergent goals, but the assumption of religious power persists.

In many ways, it is understandable that our culture sees little distinction among those standing under the banner of Christianity. For those who don't accept God's existence, far less his sovereignty, the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism mean nothing. Even the fact that the law does not establish a state church in Scotland, simply a national one, is overshadowed by the symbolism of the Archbishop of Canterbury crowning the monarch. Our culture's perception of Christian privilege is unlikely to change.

#### **LIVE FREE**

How, then, do we respond? First, we should maintain perspective. If we were to limit the data sample to government actions and social hostilities which disadvantage Christians, the UK would be in the lowest of *Pew Research Centre*'s categories of religious restrictions. From both a historical and a global perspective, the level of religious liberty we enjoy is rare, and becoming rarer. We must inform ourselves of the circumstances our fellow-believers face in other places, and pray.

Second, we should defend and advocate. We enjoy broad freedom, but the trend across the world is negative. The freedom to express biblical Christian teaching in our society has been challenged, and will be challenged again. So we must not be naïve, and we cannot take our liberty for granted. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights gives us absolute freedom to hold beliefs and convictions, but only relative freedom to manifest them. While the Convention gives strong protection to the right to put faith into practice, it permits limitations being enacted to protect the rights of others. In other words, religious freedom is in competition with other freedoms, so it needs defending.

This is our job to do. But we don't need to do it alone. Freedom is for everyone, or else it is effective for no-one. In his book *Sacred Liberty*, Steven Waldman exhorts evangelical Christians to 'regain their position of moral leadership' in relation to freedom of religion. He observes that, in the past, evangelicals 'have done more to advance religious liberty than any other group.' But, more recently, insular and narrower concerns have distracted us from the great principle of religious freedom, and consequently the 'great champions of religious freedom have switched to the wrong side of history.'

Evelyn Beatrice Hall memorably summed up Voltaire's view of free speech: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' Similarly, we can defend freedom for everyone's religion in the knowledge that this protects us best from tyranny. There is no risk for us in doing so. We know that we stand upon the inspired Word of God. We have utmost confidence in our religion, in our worldview, in our confession. We know that it stands up to scrutiny. In a free marketplace of ideas, we will not be ashamed of the gospel 'for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16).

We have felt, and we will again feel, that Reformed Christianity is under attack in our culture. The gospel gives offence in all societies. But in ours, the appearance of power and privilege makes our religion an acceptable target. We can't change that perception. But we must not buy into it, either. We enjoy broad freedom to practice our faith, but we can't take it for granted. Freedom and democracy are showing signs of retreat across the world. In response, Christians should defend religious freedom for all.

07

# **WORLD NEWS** AMERICAS AFRICA EUROPE ASIA AUSTRALASIA

### PREACHERS TAKE POLICE



Four street preachers are accusing the police of a 'sustained campaign of harassment' after they faced criminal

charges. Supported by Christian Concern and the Christian Legal Centre, the four accuse Avon and Somerset Police of assault, false imprisonment and infringement of human rights. The preachers have highlighted an incident in 2016 when they took turns preaching outside a shopping centre in Bristol (near a statue of John Wesley). The men say they presented the gospel and addressed a number of topics including Islam and homosexuality, debating with a gathered crowd. It is reported that the crowd was loud and aggressive at times. They were eventually arrested and questioned for six hours, and charged with violating the Crime and Disorder Act. At trial, prosecutors argued that quoting the King James Version is 'abusive' and 'a criminal matter'. They were acquitted.

In a statement, Andrea Williams, Christian Legal Centre CEO, said, 'Any suggestion that there is a right not to be offended must be stronglyresisted. In today's democracy, we need the freedom to debate, challenge and disagree. 'We cannot allow the gospel to be shut out of public debate, and that is what is at stake in this crucial case.'

#### ABORTION LAW IN ARGENTINA



At the end of 2020 Argentina took a step towards legalising abortion in the

first 14 weeks of pregnancy. In a move supported by the country's recently-elected president, Alberto Fernández, the lower chamber passed the bill by 131 votes to 117. The legislation must now be debated in the Senate, which rejected a similar law in 2018. The debate on abortion has proved to be divisive in Argentina over the last few years. In expressing opposition to the proposed change to the law, the Alliance of Evangelical Churches of Argentina added that 'dissent, even on issues as serious as the defence of life, must occur in an attitude of dialogue and respect for differences'.

#### CHURCHES RE-OPEN IN GENEVA

Church services resumed in Geneva in December following an interim decision by

the Constitutional Chamber of the Canton of Geneva suspending a total ban on religious services. The court will now decide whether the ban is a violation of the right to freedom of religion. The Chamber indicated that the case against the law, which was brought on religious liberty grounds, has a 'high or very high' chance of succeeding. The law was part of Geneva's COVID-19 response. However, while religious services were banned, activities like choir practices were permitted.

'Restrictions on fundamental rights must always be proportionate and proven to be truly necessary. Given that other public gatherings are still permitted, we do not see the proportionality of this restriction — it targets religious groups in a discriminatory way,' Dr. Samuel Sommaruga, who brought the case, told *ADF* International.



弹在坟墓里。 耶稣使五千人吃饱 (太14:13-21; 第9:10-17; 對 6:1 星龍由他里面发出 30使徒聚集到耶稣那里,非 正像先知中的 作的事、所传的道全告诉他。 《知说:"是我所斩的 "你们来,同我暗暗地到成 历去歌一歌。"这是因为来往的 "先是希律为他 纤希罗底的缘故, 差人 他们连吃饭也没有工夫。32他们. 颜在监里,因为希律已 船,暗暗地往旷野地方去。33众 18约翰曾对希律说: 知, 如何是在这个人的人们的,就 妻子是不合理的。" 各城步行,一同跑到那里,比他们; 他,想要杀他,只 赶到了。<sup>33</sup>耶稣出来,见有许多的人 1道约翰是义人, 就怜悯他们,因为他们如同羊没有牧 保护他,听他 人一般,于是开口教训他们许多道理。 目乐意听他 35天已经晚了,门徒进前来,说:"这 是野地,天已经晚了,36请叫众人散 不定")。 展到地,人口上的一, 开,他们好往四面乡村里去,自己买 TT Lando montanta da la serie 十两银子的饼给他们吃吗?" 38取做 F 说:"你们有多少饼,

#### SCHOOLBOYS RETURN SAFE, BUT SECURITY CONCERNS REMAIN



344 schoolboys returned home safely

following their kidnap on 11<sup>th</sup> December. It is unclear what action the government took to secure their release, but it is thought that quick action was key. The kidnapping recalled the 2014 abduction of more than 270 girls from a boarding school in Chibok. It took weeks of international outcry to force the government to intervene on behalf of the Chibok girls, and around 100 are still missing.

'While we congratulate the Federal Government for working hard to secure the release of these boys, and the parents for the joy of having their children back, more needs to be done,' Supo Ayokunle, president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, told *Christianity Today*. He called on the government to 'place high value on all lives' and increase security in the country. Christians in northwest Nigeria are said to be on 'high alert' after Boko Haram's leader released a video message, claiming responsibility and promising further attacks on the Christian community.

Meanwhile, the US State Department redesignated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for tolerating 'egregious violations of religious freedom'.

#### CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING SUPPRESSED

Religious liberty watchdog *Bitter Winter* reports that Xian Renguo, a director of the Good



News Mission in China, has been sentenced to three years and ten months in prison for publishing Christian books. 25 others involved in Good News Mission's printing of two volumes of testimonies were also sentenced. Some were given fines but several printing house managers were imprisoned.

This follows the news earlier in 2020 that the Chinese Communist Party is in the process of re-writing the Bible. Officials intend to remove passages deemed incompatible with the Party's values. Xi Lian, a professor at Duke University Divinity School, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the government fears Christianity's 'transcendent vision, transcendent values', which present an insurmountable 'moral and ideological rivalry'.

#### KOREA BALLOON BAN

South Korea's government has passed a law, which comes into effect in March 2021, banning balloons from being launched into



North Korea. For decades, helium balloons have been used by various groups to send money, goods and information to the North. It is a tactic which has also been adopted by missionaries seeking to get the gospel into the country.

The South Korean government has described balloon launches as 'tension-causing'. Although the balloons often don't reach their intended destination, instead causing litter issues in South Korea, the law met with significant opposition from human rights groups. *Human Rights Watch* suggested South Korea was pandering to Kim Jong-un while Tae Yong-ho, an opposition politician and former North Korean diplomat, said the law would help the North to enslave its own people.

#### INDIAN PASTOR KILLED

Salim Stephen Surin, a pastor and evangelist in Jharkhand state, India, was shot and killed in December as he returned from



baptising five people in Putikda village. Surin, who also ran a shop in his own village of Rania, was travelling with his wife by motorbike when they were confronted by three unidentified assailants, according to *International Christian Concern*. Tarsis Surin told ICC, 'They killed my husband in front of my own eyes. I was terrified seeing my husband collapse having been shot in the chest. I started to think about my children and loudly cried out to God to save me and take care of my children.' She ran into a nearby forest, and walked more than ten hours to reach home, avoiding the road for fear of her attackers. There have been local reports that threats have been made against Christians in Putika village, as well as demands that they renounce their faith. Local police are investigating Pastor Surin's murder.

# FREE CHURCH

# RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S EQUALLY SAFE CONSULTATION

HE FREE CHURCH HAS SUBMITTED A RESPONSE TO A CONSULTATION FROM THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT IN RESPECT OF THE EQUALLY SAFE FRAMEWORK, A STRATEGY TO ERADICATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. The consultation seeks views on how best to challenge men's demand for prostitution in Scotland, to reduce the harms associated with prostitution and to support women to exit from it.

In our response, the Free Church of Scotland commends the Scottish Government's 'Equally Safe' strategy recognising that prostitution is a form of violence against women. As Christians, we believe all human beings have inherent dignity and value, having been made in the image of God. Accordingly we have a duty to speak up for the vulnerable and exploited. However, while we support the Equally Safe strategy, we do not believe that Scotland's current approach to prostitution is sufficient to prevent violence against women and girls.

We think that the approach known as the 'Nordic Model' would go a long way toward addressing these problems. This model has three strands: (i) it decriminalises those who are prostituted; (ii) it offers prostitutes high-quality support and exiting services, including genuine routes out; and (iii) it makes buying people for sex a criminal offence. This last point reduces the demand that drives trafficking and prostitution. We would emphasise, however, that for the Nordic Model to be effective in combating violence against women and girls, it is vital that all three strands of the model are adopted.

We also believe the Nordic Model is consistent with the teaching of the Bible. In the Old Testament prostitution was unacceptable and fathers were condemned for selling their daughters into prostitution (Leviticus 19:29). Nevertheless the Old Testament challenges treating prostitutes as stereotypes and treats them as real people, worthy of dignity and respect.

This is then the attitude that Jesus brings to those he encounters. Jesus welcomes outcasts, tax collectors and prostitutes, stating that they are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of religious leaders (Matthew 21:28-32). Jesus was not here endorsing the validity of prostitution as a lifestyle, but he was implicitly rejecting the idea that prostitutes were inherently worthless and was welcoming repentant prostitutes into the Kingdom of God. He sought to restore them.

We see many principles in the Bible which we believe lead us to support the Nordic Model of decriminalising women engaging in prostitution, treating them as the victims, whilst making a strong statement that the behaviour is wrong by criminalising the buyers and the third parties who profit from their prostitution. We also note the desire of Jesus to help women escape prostitution, welcoming them into the Kingdom of God while extending mercy and forgiveness to them as they are called to make a new life.

#### YOUTH CAMPS UPDATE BY KIRSTEN MACDONALD, CAMPS ADMINISTRATOR

E AIM TO COME TO A DECISION BY THE END OF JANUARY ON WHETHER WE THINK FREE CHURCH YOUTH CAMPS WILL BE ABLE TO GO AHEAD IN SUMMER 2021, although we'll be keeping the situation under constant review. We would hugely appreciate your prayers at this time – for wisdom, discernment and clarity as we work together to come to a decision. Although we can't see the future, we know the One who does, and know that his plans will come to fruition in his time.

If it looks like camp will be able to go ahead, bookings will open at the end of January, with the Allocation Day at the end of February. Please pass on these dates to anyone you know who may be interested and ask them to keep an eye on our website, where all the information will be available from the end of January (www.freechurchyouthcamps.org).

## **FREE CHURCH IN THE ANDES ARCHIVE AT SABHAL MÒR OSTAIG**

N ARCHIVE OF MATERIAL HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED WHICH RELATES TO THE HISTORY OF THE FREE CHURCH IN THE PERUVIAN ANDES. The collection of printed, typescript, manuscript and photographic material is held in the library of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye. The archive has collated by Iain Fraser Grigor, editor of the recently-published book The Free Church in the Andes, with assistance from people throughout the Free Church.

Grigor said, 'It would be very strange if the extraordinary story of the Free Church missionaries in the Andes were to be forgotten. This collection of material is intended to help to ensure that that does not happen.'

The collection includes a number of books which are not always to be found in immediate proximity to each other. These comprise two biographies of John Alexander Mackay, John A. Mackay: un Escocés con Alma Latina by John H. Sinclair, and The Hand and the Road, by John Mackay Metzger. Other titles in the collection are J.B.A. Kessler's A Study of the Older Protestant Mission in Peru and Chile, and Indians of the High Andes, edited by Stanley Rycroft (who once taught in the Free Church school in Lima).

Other books in the archive include *Wanderings in the Peruvian Andes* by Dr. A. M. Renwick (who also taught in the school in Lima), and *Dawn Beyond the Andes* by Phyllis Thompson – the story of the pioneer missionaries Annie Soper and Rhoda Gould.

Grigor said, 'The archive also includes a copy of lan Allan's magnificent *West the Glen*, primarily for its biography of Sarah MacDougall of Glenurquhart and Cajamarca in Peru. Mind you, it should be said that this book – a history of the Free Church in the area of Glenurquhart – is a model for the sort of local Free Church histories that deserve to be written as book, article or dissertation, for every other Free Church congregation in Scotland'.

Some of the material in the collection has never been published at all or in its entirety. One item is the typescript account of Dr Kenneth Mackay's arrival and early days in Peru in 1926, only a fraction of which has ever been published. It has been made available by the Rev. Willie Mackay, nephew of Dr Kenneth. Mr Mackay also contributed two important booklets related to the story of the Free Church in Peru. The first of these is *Peru and its Free Church of Scotland Mission* (1921), and the second is Free Church of Scotland Missionary Enterprise (1949).

Another typescript item, which has never been published at all, is *A Joyful Life* by Netta Milnes. An account of her time with the Free Church in Moyobamba, and later with her husband David Milnes in the southern mountains of Peru, it was made available by her sons John and David Milnes.

The collection also includes David Milnes' two booklets on his time as a missionary doctor – *Inca Stronghold* and *Children of the Inca Stronghold*, as well as the typescript contributions by the Rev. Ronnie Christie, the Rev. Charles Douglas and Margaret Fraser, wife of the Rev. Andy Fraser, to the book *The Free Church in the Andes*. These three also contributed a large collection of photographs relating to the Andean missionaries. Mr Douglas also made available a film strip and accompanying sound-tape entitled *A Town Called Jesus*, made in the 1980s by Tearfund.

Other material includes a printout of the guide to the papers of Latin Link (formerly known as the Evangelical Union of South America) held at the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh, and a manuscript index to items in the Monthly Record, 1914-2014, as they relate to missionary operations in the Andes.

As well as a quantity of incidental material, the collection includes a copy, from the Monthly Record of November 1915, of part one of John Alexander Mackay's reports to the Free Church on his visit to South America with a view to establishing a Free Church mission somewhere in that vast continent. The archive also comprises typescript and manuscript correspondence that has never been inspected by any historian, far less published.

Grigor added, 'The history of the Free Church in Peru – whether on the coast or in the mountains – is an amazing one, especially for a relatively small church in faraway Scotland. That history deserves continuing attention from all sorts of historians whatever their focus: Scottish, church or missiological. Surely there is a place for undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations and theses – whether written in English, Spanish or indeed Gaelic – in this area. And that, above all else, is what this archive of material is intended to inspire.'

# FERINTOSH & RESOLIS WOMEN FOR MISSION

#### BY SANDRA REA

T HAS BEEN A WEIRD AND WORRYING YEAR, and yet there have been so many examples of compassion and creativity in spite, or perhaps because, of the situation.

Aware that donations to charities have been way down this past year, the Ferintosh & Resolis WfM group recently organised two 'socially-distanced' events to raise funds for the current WfM projects.

Firstly, Anne Fraser hosted a garage sale, by appointment, on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> November. Those blessed with the ability to make things contributed an amazing array of jams and chutneys, cushions and Christmas decorations and more. The sale raised an incredible £633.

The second event, on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> December, was a Zoom meeting. After an introduction to the current

WfM projects, Marion Gray of North Kessock Free Church, part of the Moldova Support Group team and a frequent visitor to the country, spoke eloquently and comprehensively about the needs in Moldova. She described its general poverty, lack of good infrastructure and government and the difficulties faced by those who become Christians. Helen Brown then hosted a silent auction of, among other things, beautiful tweed wraps and animal-themed cushions, and Christmas decorations professionally crafted and donated by Marilyn Cameron and Catherine Taylor. (We expect to see some beautifully wrapped ladies in our congregation over the coming weeks!) The auction raised an amazing £622.50 on the night. Subsequent sales and donations triggered by these events have further boosted the funds.



**The Free Church in the Andes** is exclusively available at just £12.99 from Lumphanan Press.

Search: 'Free Church in the Andes', visit bit.ly/AndesBook or phone 01339 880873.

For every copy sold, we will add to the order – COMPLETELY FREE – a copy of John MacPherson's epic story of the Free Church school in Lima! 'One hundred years ago this year – on June 15<sup>th</sup> 1921 – the Rev. John Calvin Mackay of Kingussie left Lima for the mountains of the north...'

#### THE FREE CHURCH IN THE ANDES: Scottish Missionaries in the Mountains of 20th-Century Peru

Edited and introduced by Iain Fraser Grigor.

'The book deserves to be read not only by all Free Church of Scotland members, but also by all interested in the Scottish contribution to Latin American history.'

Rev. John MacPherson

'This book is for all who have a missionary interest. At £12.99 it is a bargain. I hope all who read this will buy a copy and enjoy it as much as I am enjoying it now.'

Professor Emeritus Donald Meek

'The Monthly Record was the main source for this compelling book. Its contemporary reports "snatch from the jaws of oblivion" these Highland voices in the Andes. We are the better off for hearing them.' David Ross, author of Highland Herald

'Fhhuair mise mo thogail anns an Eaglais Shaor agus tha cuimhn' agam air mòran dhe na h-ainmean - ainmean dhaoine agus aitichean [grave on the first a] – a tha a' nochdadh anns an leabhar. Ach ged nach biodh ceangal agad ris an eaglais sin neo ri eaglais sam bith eile se leabhar a tha seo is fhiach a leughadh.'

Roddy John MacLeod, Lord Minginish

# THY ROD AND STAFF

**CIARÁN KELLEHER** reflects on a decade of Christian faith

N 9<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2011, I WALKED INTO QUEEN STREET CHRISTIAN CENTRE IN CHESTER FOR THE FIRST TIME. Ten years later, I am now living in Broughty Ferry having slowly made my way north through Edinburgh and St Andrews. In that time, I bought my first Bible, finished one degree and nearly completed another, married my wife and had a son. Ten years ago, I was a lapsed Irish Catholic and now I'm an elder in the Free Church of Scotland. Here are ten reflections from ten years of following Jesus.

When I first became a Christian, I was looking for the knockout argument that would convince my family and friends. I deeply desired them to know this transforming message I now cherished. Yet it never worked. More likely it led to exasperation on both sides. Over time, both Paul and Peter convinced me that holiness is God's primary concern for me and his people. When we reflect his holiness, it is radiant and attractive. That has led to much more fruitful conversations.

**Early on, I mistakenly thought my sin would just disappear.** My mindset was that I only needed to change a few external things and I'd be grand. But sin could not just be pushed to the side. It needed to be killed stone dead.

I realised the only way to do that was through union with Christ. Romans 5-6 has become a passage that has profoundly framed my Christian life. I have a new status and identity. I am righteous in God's sight, therefore I am to live righteously. I am enabled to mortify sin because I have been ennobled to rule over sin.

The Gospel was and is a major challenge to my selfishness. In looking back, I assessed other people in how they would benefit me and fulfil my needs. But Jesus establishes a totally different pattern for our relationships. With my wife, my primary concern is to serve and love her, laying down my desires, just as Jesus laid down his life for us. The cross-shaped life moves my eyes off myself and onto my neighbours.

**Jesus is the key to the Bible.** Because it is all about him. This might sound so obvious but this was a major paradigm shift for me. It made the Old Testament more intelligible and inviting. And it challenged my individualistic bent to see myself as the centre of the story.

I got caught up chasing the dragon, pursuing spiritual highs. During my university years, I was engaged in more Charismatic circles. I am thankful for much of it. But it was exhausting. The rhythms of God's grace tend to be more prosaic than I imagined. The Spirit is as much active in the ordinary as he is in the extraordinary. There might be big radical moments where I might have to step out in faith for Christ. But life is mainly thousands and thousands of moments of ordinary faithfulness to Jesus.

**God's self-revelation is the beginning of everything.** For most of my Christian life, I have been studying theology. The most basic truth I've learned is: We cannot reason our way up to God. He must stoop down to us in compassion and grace. And he has, speaking to us through his word and Word. I just need to humbly listen.

Jesus as my Shepherd has been a key picture for me. This was sparked as I read Douglas MacMillan's wonderful The Lord Our Shepherd. I have dug deeper into that theme in the years since and it has given me considerable comfort. Our Shepherd is tough and tender. He protects us from harm by laying down his life for us and he feeds and leads us by his word. He knows us intimately and calls us to follow him to life and peace.

**Up-close contact with mature saints has been the richest source of discipleship for me.** I have lived with two Christian families, the Robertsons and the MacDougalls, for an extended period of time. Both were pictures of persevering joy, sacrificial love and generous hospitality. Each shaped the way I wanted my home to be when I got married. And there were, and are, so many others I could mention who have helped me grasp what a graceshaped life looks like.

The future is clear and the future is unknown. Multiple times in the last decade, I have ended up moving somewhere new with a few weeks' notice. I have very little control of the future. We don't know our immediate destiny. But we know our ultimate destiny. Jesus will certainly return. The more time

I have spent reading and dwelling in the New Testament, the more I saw how immediate the horizon of Christ's return was in the writer's vision. And it shapes how we live right now.

Ciarán Kelleher serves as an elder in Broughty Ferry Presbyterian Church, a congregation formed in 2014 which joined the Free Church at the General Assembly of 2016.



#### CHILDSOLDIER'S PHOTOSOLDIER'S PHOTOS

## Warning: this article contains descriptions of warfare which some readers may find distressing.

At the age of nine, when most children are at school, Julius Okello was wearing a military uniform and carrying a sub-machine gun. He'd learnt to urinate on the barrel when it overheated and jammed during fighting and ambushes. And he'd learnt to stay close to his 'godfather', fellow rebel soldier John Patrick Amodoi.

Abducted in 1986 at the age of nine and recruited as a child soldier for rebels in the Ugandan Bush War, Okello was one of an estimated 3,000 children taken by the National Resistance Army (NRA), who were fighting to depose President Tito Lutwa Okello.

Julius Okello shot and killed a man for the first time that year. In the carnage of the civil war, there may have been others, but he didn't see them die. He was too small to see much above the tall grass of north-eastern Uganda.

#### ABDUCTED RECRUITS

They came in January that year while a group of village children were playing a game of soccer. They habitually raided villages to 'recruit' civilians, especially children, to fill their ranks. Okello didn't know his mother was running from the village to warn them that the rebels were coming.

She was too late.

The rebels — members of the NRA, the military wing of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) — rounded up the children. Okello was taken with his 19-year-old sister, but they were separated. He never saw her again and got word of her only much later.

'They had used her and killed her.'

He doesn't know where she is buried, or his mother, who was also raped and killed.

He recalls the events of that day: 'They took us back to their barracks and told us we could not go back [home]. They were going to train us: how to handle a gun, how to dismantle and reassemble it. After three days we were given uniforms. They said, "Now we are going to liberate your community.""

Child soldiers were widely used by the NRA, first as small, mobile units of guerrillas, and later as soldiers when the NRM seized power in 1986.

#### **'KEEP MOVING'**

The recoil of a sub-machine gun was enough to floor a *kadogo* (little one). But Okello soon learnt how to hold steady, guided by his 'godfather', Amodoi.

In their first camp at Malera in the Kumi District, their unit came under heavy attack by the government forces. Okello had to learn fast. And in the dense bush, Amodoi was his teacher and guardian. 'He was there for me; he guided me; he protected me, telling me "sleep here", "take cover", "shoot", "don't shoot". I was always with him. But inside I was terrified.'

Thirty years later he still weeps when he remembers, and the nightmares still plague him.

Besides Amodoi, Okello had two friends, also little more than boys. Fifteen-year-old Bosco Awic was gunned down during an ambush, his blood spattering Okello, who was just behind. But there was no stopping to tend the wounded.

'Our commander instructed us to keep moving. I said: "Please, what about my friend?" Bosco was lying in a pool of blood. But we kept moving.'

#### SIZE ON HIS SIDE

Slight for his age, Okello was overwhelmed by the load he carried: gun, food, water, bedding roll and ammunition. But being small sometimes helped. Once, separated from his unit and under heavy fire, Okello became isolated in the bush. He could hear Amodoi calling him.

Under cover of the long grass, Okello crept between two groups of ambushers and fired on both sides to confuse them. They returned fire, hitting one another, fooled by a boy unable to fill his boots, now awash with blood from a bullet he didn't feel. Wounded in the leg, Okello escaped by crawling through the grass to safety where Amodoi found him.

With the hindsight of the faithful he says, 'I'm 100 per cent sure it was God's grace.'

That battle raged for three days. They ran out of food and were drinking water off the top of mud that was putrid with their dead. The flies sounded like swarming bees.

'We didn't have gloves and we had to carry the corpses. The smell was terrible, terrible, terrible...'

His best friend, Paddy Mukasa, was fatally shot in that onslaught – and then Amodoi was struck down. Okello did the only thing he could.

'I held him until they [the medics] came and took him to Lira Hospital. It took seven months for him to recover.'

#### **GUIDING LIGHTS**

He wasn't to know it then, but other events were to play a lasting role in his life. At a mission hospital in Acholi near Kalongo, Okello was given a book of cartoons — a graphic novel of the Bible. He was struck by the 'God who could calm the waters' and by the penetrating insights of three words: 'Do not kill.'

The book became a companion and comfort in the displacement and upheaval of the bush war. ►►

And, somehow, he never lost it.

'I still have it.'

He also remembers the cross on the mountain top at Kalongo. At night it would light up, spilling hope into the valley below.

It was while recuperating in Kalongo that Okello got to know a family of American missionaries. There was a woman he remembers only as Helen. She became a mother to him.

'She loved me so much,' he says quietly. 'She took care of me. She used to invite me for breakfast and send her children to bring food and clean drinking water. She tried to get me back to school; I was nine years and eight months old. She told me, "Julius, stay with us," and she told my commander, "I want that child."'

When he was transferred to Lira, she ran after the vehicle, pleading for his release. From the back of the truck he heard her crying and calling: 'Julius, come back!' He could do no more than watch her recede into the distance in tears.

#### LIFE FOUND

By the end of 1986 the NRA had defeated the last government resistance and Museveni came to power. Some of the Uganda People's Army (UPA) soldiers had already surrendered and had been integrated into the NRA. Okello was given an army number and the rank of lance corporal and was made a section commander in the 29th Battalion, 304 Brigade. He was a month shy of his tenth birthday and drawing a salary.

But then a new threat had risen in the north: Alice Auma's Holy Spirit Movement with its sinister military wing. Auma was defeated in 1987, but in her wake came Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army.

Okello was transferred to Gulu military barracks where he and Amodoi were reunited. They were dispatched to the border of western Uganda where Amodoi was at Okello's side for the last time.

He struggles with the memory of their last battle together.

'That's where I lost him. He told me, "Julius, I don't think I'm going to make it. Be a strong person."'

Okello was refused permission to escort Amodoi's body back to his hometown in Katakwi District.

'I didn't see how he was buried.'

Okello was transferred back to Acholi and was 12 when his rehabilitation began, first at the military barracks under the careful mentorship of Stephen Bakanoba, an army district liaison education officer. Bakanoba convinced the adolescent Okello to return to school, and in 1992 he started at primary level with the rudiments of English. Bakanoba later introduced Okello to Stephen Birija, the proprietor and head teacher of Masindi Academy.

There Okello excelled academically and was exposed to sports, eventually representing his high school at national level in athletics by qualifying for the international 100m, 200m and relay events.

But his progress was slow in other spheres. His memories of Amodoi plagued him and he had terrible nightmares. He worked hard, remaining at the school or in the barracks during school holidays ('There was nowhere else to go'). He gave his army pay to the community's widows and orphans.

'I didn't know the importance of money. I had little use for it.'

#### SERENDIPITY

After completing high school in 1999, Okello was accepted at Makerere University and graduated in 2004 with an MSc in economics. Because of social issues he struggled with, it had also taken a year longer than anticipated.

And then serendipity struck.

A chance meeting at Makerere reunited him with members of his family. Recognising something in Okello's face, a man stopped him in a university corridor one day and asked: 'Are you not Okello Julius? What is your father's name? Do you know your village?'

'I told him my name and I told him I knew only the name of my village, Pingire, in the Soroti District, but I'd forgotten the place.'

The man said: 'You are one of our sons. We have been looking for you for the past 21 years. I am the brother of your father. We even buried a banana stem to symbolise your death.'

He was reunited with his father, uncle and family at his masters graduation.

During all this time, Okello had been asking the army to retire him, eventually persuading them that 22 years of his life – including his childhood – had been service enough. He needed to think about his future.

#### DEDICATING A PHD

Unsure, with few resources and coping with recurrent post-traumatic stress, Okello contemplated suicide. But in 2005 he secured a German Academic Exchange Service scholarship. He was intent on studying conflict studies at Makerere, but his background in economics led him instead to the University of Cape Town. Here he accepted an offer (one of two at UCT) for doctoral studies in the Department of Social Development, supervised by Professor Viviene Taylor and Dr Khosi Kubeka.

Okello's research concerns social protection services for vulnerable groups in post-conflict

societies. His PhD fieldwork takes him back to the war-torn fields of Uganda where he lost many of his family members – and his boyhood. He conducts his fieldwork in two regions that suffered heavily in the civil war. One of these is Katakwi, Amodoi's home district.

'My thesis will be dedicated to God, my creator, my mother and sister, and to the memory of my 'godfather', Amodoi.'

Okello knows well the vulnerability of women and children in the path and aftermath of civil war. His PhD will answer a question that has preoccupied him more and more: How can we best help women and children in African countries where there is war and conflict?

Using social policy development, econometrics analysis and modelling, he hopes to design a conceptual framework that can be used by various organisations: the United Nations, African governments, the African Union, the East African Community, the International Labour Office, the World Food Programme, UNICEF, Save the Children, Oxfam, Saferworld and the UK's Department for International Development to secure the vulnerable, particularly child labourers. 'I am asking God to give me the opportunity to

serve his people,' he says.

The next step will be a job that will give him an opportunity to help vulnerable communities to access social protection services such as education, health, food, water and work that improves the quality of life for poor households.

'But God will take care of the future.'

#### FROM HURT TO HOPE

Thirty years after he was taken from his family, Okello also carries physical scars: bullet wounds to his legs and arms and shrapnel in his skull. It still hurts.

But he believes that telling his story will help children who have lost hope.

It is also his way of paying tribute to two women who graced his life for a short time: Joyce Mary Apulet, the mother who never lived to see what her son achieved, and his second mother, Helen, the American missionary.

'I pray God will reunite me with her [Helen]. I am still looking for her.'

He is desperate for her to know how far he's come since they met in Kalongo so long ago.

'I'm sure if she knew I'm alive and doing a PhD, she'd be mad [jubilant]!'

Hope is still Okello's companion and comfort. •

This article was first published by the University of Cape Town News (www.news.uct.ac.za).

Dr Julius Okello was awarded his PhD in 2020. Last month, he told This is Africa that, on receiving the news, 'I jumped up and I danced in my house. I praised God, just like David did in the Bible. I was so excited!

'In my clan, I am the first to achieve this level of education.

'I can't believe that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, made way for me through the wilderness where there seemed to be no way for me.'



Photo of Dr. Julius Okello by Michael Hammond

# ETS NEWS by rev. thomas davis



# **ONLINE LEARNING**

HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC MEANS THAT STUDYING AT ETS HAS BEEN VERY DIFFERENT. Classes have been moved from the classroom to entirely online. This month we have caught up with four current students to find out more. Our sincere thanks to Geoff Murray, Lauren Capstick, Gordon Macleod and Ken Dawson for their willingness to share their experiences

#### Where are you based and what course are you studying?

**Geoff:** I am based in Bruntsfield in Edinburgh, worshipping at Cornerstone and studying at ETS. I'm in my third year of four doing the BTh degree.

**Lauren:** I am currently based in a little village called Burton in Lonsdale on the border of North Yorkshire. I'm blessed to have both the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales on my doorstep. The courses I am studying this year are Practical Theology 2, New Testament 1 and Hebrew. I only have three courses this year due to studying my BTh degree over four years rather than three.

**Gordon:** I live with my family in Tarbert, Isle of Harris and I am currently undertaking an Individual Study Programme (ISP), studying Systematic Theology 1 and Practical Theology 1.

**Ken:** I am based in Port Macquarie, Australia, which is on the New South Wales coast about halfway between Sydney and Brisbane. I was in Edinburgh through the academic year 2019/20. But having come home to Australia over the northern summer, I am now a COVID refugee, and am studying second-year BTh by distance.

#### How have you found online learning?

**Geoff:** I have found the experience of online learning quite tricky. The lack of community is a big miss, the truncated daily worship is tough – no singing!! And engaging with lectures over a screen requires a lot more effort than being in the same room as the lecturer! However, I am really thankful for the opportunity to continue my studies despite all the difficulties we experience. The lecturers have played a blinder as they've had to adjust to delivering the course material online, and the fellow students are only a text message away. So although it is harder, there are still many reasons to be thankful for what we do have.

**Lauren:** I have found online learning a lot easier than I first expected. Rather than just listening to lectures over a computer screen, we are given more time for discussion and for personal reading on various topics. Although online learning has worked well so far, I do miss face-to-face teaching and I look forward to being back in the ETS building.

**Gordon:** The experience of online learning has, for me personally, been really positive. The lectures are well delivered, with each of the lecturers making best use of Zoom to ensure it is as positive and, where practical, interactive for students as possible. Accessing the course from home, enabling me to be with my family and continue to work in my role as Youth and Discipleship Support Worker for the Western Isles Presbytery, has been another significant benefit.

**Ken:** I have been genuinely impressed with the Seminary's almost seamless transition from face-to-face to online teaching. All in all, the teaching has continued to be excellent, with the faculty extending themselves to overcome the difficulties. Of course, not being there with both teachers and fellow students in the flesh is disappointing, but these are unusual times. I try to keep in touch with friends, both faculty and students, through Zoom, WhatsApp and email. I do look forward to seeing everyone again this coming summer.

#### What aspects of studying are more difficult online? Are any aspects easier?

**Geoff:** When studying online you lose the interaction with both lecturer and students, so lectures can feel a bit disconnected at times. Also, I can't just turn up to the library to collect a book. I need to be a lot more organised than before as I need to book a slot, sometimes days in advance, in order to collect books safely without lots of students turning up at the same time.

However, it is easier in some senses; the morning commute is a lot shorter, for a start! It is also easier to have more study time. Whereas before it could be 2:30pm before I was home, now I can start studying straightaway, which is helpful when deadlines loom large!

**Lauren:** I have found it much harder finding books for completing essays or for extra studying. The ETS building contains hundreds of books that are readily available to us, but being in the North of England I can't access these. So, this year I have had to buy a lot of books or find people who would have the books required and be willing to lend them to me. Thankfully, I have two ministers who have been hugely supportive and have lent me a variety of books.

One aspect which is easier is that, if you so wish, you could roll out of bed and start lectures and nobody would be any the wiser!

**Gordon:** Due to the current restrictions, there is reduced class lecture time, and therefore an increase in self-directed learning. This is one aspect of studying I have found difficult and have to be more disciplined with. The restrictions also mean that there is not the same opportunity to get to know other students in the class and build peer support networks, which can be beneficial in any learning environment. There are some downsides to the courses being delivered completely online, but my learning experience has in many ways been made easier as I am able to be at home and continue to work, whilst at the same time worship with and support the congregation in North Harris.

Ken: There are a couple of things that make online studying somewhat more challenging. It might come as a surprise, but reference materials for Scottish church history are not all that plentiful here. COVID interference with air travel, including freight, has resulted in problems having books sent by retailers. Fortunately Christ College, the Presbyterian Church of Australia training school in Sydney, and John Forbes, my local Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (aka 'Free Church') minister (and late of Lairg and Bonar Bridge), have been singularly helpful. The other challenge has been the time difference. The term began with lectures from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm, but with changes to daylight savings in both the UK and Australia, that has become 8:00 pm to midnight. The Presbyterian Church Module and the Preaching seminars begin about 1:00 am and finish sometime around 3:00 am.

#### What lessons have you learned from this experience?

**Geoff:** I have learned from this experience just how precious community is. When it's all you are used to, it can be easy to take it for granted, but when it's taken away, you so long for it to come back. During our time of national lockdown in the spring last year, I unsurprisingly had much more time on my hands and was able to do more reading than normal. So I was able to learn more of the person of Jesus, especially in reading Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortlund. That book is a real gem which has warmed my heart towards Jesus more and more, and I think going forward is one of those books I will return to time and time again.

**Lauren:** I've learnt from this experience the importance of having fellowship with other students and lecturers. It's a real blessing being able to meet people for coffee or have a chat in the dining room over lunch. I've really missed being able to do that! Also, it has made me more thankful for technology. Without the technology available, we would not have been able to meet so easily and continue our learning.

**Gordon:** Returning to studying after over thirty years away from it, I have had many lessons to learn and relearn, whether it is how to read theological books, be disciplined with my time, or write an essay (the Writing Lab is a great resource! I will be back, again and again!). These lessons can be and are challenging, but to be able to learn in the environment created within ETS, where the lecturers and staff are committed to teaching, supporting and encouraging students every step of the way, has made the learning experience a positive one. Studying the Doctrine of Scripture, the Attributes of God, unpacking the Great Commission and learning what Christian Maturity and Leadership should be (and that is just the first semester) has been time well spent. The biggest lesson for me, from this experience, is that I wish I had learned and given more time to studying these subjects far earlier in my Christian life.

Ken: It has re-enforced the maxim of my army life — the only thing more important than planning is flexibility. Certainly, the unexpected events of COVID have disrupted my plans, but I was in Edinburgh to start with because an eye injury had disrupted other plans. Doors close and others open — we humans plan, but we should never delude ourselves that we are in control. Some might consider this 'luck' or 'fortune' or 'fate', but for the Christian it is the expression of Divine Providence: the Lord teaching us that we wait on him and not he on us. ●





Geoff Murray



Gordon Macleoo

Lauren Capstick



Ken Dawson

#### CHRISTIAN CORRECTION C

In May we will elect representatives to the Scottish Parliament. Regardless of who forms the next government, with almost a quarter of MSPs stepping down there will be big changes at Holyrood. How will we vote? Before we let political preferences decide, we should pause and think about our worldview.

A worldview is a collection of attitudes, values, stories and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. As disciples of Jesus, we want our worldview to be constantly reshaped by the Bible. In this four-part series we examine the big Biblical narrative — Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation — to help us work out priorities for how we think about the big issues facing us in the next four years.

There is a place for firmly stated views. But our goal in interacting with people around us should be to mimic Jesus' patterns. Learning to ask the right questions, to challenge the worldview and assumptions of others, is important. In this series we will look at some key ideas, but we will also look for strategies to engage with candidates around these issues.

# PART 01: CREATION

HE CREATION NARRATIVES OF GENESIS 1 & 2 ARE FOUNDATIONAL TO HOW WE THINK ABOUT THE WORLD AND OUR PLACE IN IT. The world was created with a purpose. Certainly, it reveals some aspects of God's nature and character (e.g. Psalm 19, Romans 1). But within the creation story itself there is a clue to God's purpose. Uniquely, in all of creation, humankind is created 'in our image' (Genesis 1:26), and is then given a series of particular mandates – the creation ordinances. The Image of God is difficult to express fully and concisely – it encompasses so many aspects of our being! A helpful way to understand it is to identify structural and functional ways in which humanity bears God's image.

Humankind is structurally like God in that we are: self-aware; rational; moral; creative; relational; emotional; unique; and complex beings.

Humankind is functionally like God in that: we have a role or purpose in existence; we exercise dominion in God's place over his creation; we establish society in order to 'fill the earth'; by working within it, we creatively improve upon the world God called 'very good'; and we worship, engaged in the same ultimate objective of God himself – to be known and glorified.

This special status is the key to so many issues around human dignity, identity, rights and responsibilities.

#### DIGNITY

After the Flood, God established a covenant with Noah where he stipulated the death penalty for murder. The rationale was that an attack on the image-bearer is an attack on the divine image itself (Genesis 9:5-6). This act underscores the significance of the image of God in fallen humans – and presents us with a clear reason to assert human dignity.

Euthanasia, for example, will very likely come to the next Parliament via a Member's Bill. It will not be a manifesto commitment from most parties, thus any candidate's individual views matter - they will have a free vote. Euthanasia campaigners have sought to present dignity in terms of individual autonomy – a so-called 'right to die'. But the belief that humankind are God's image-bearers makes euthanasia abhorrent to us. An effective strategy when engaging with candidates is not just to state this, but to ask questions about how they think about palliative care, counselling, and even doctors' consciences to the issue of euthanasia. Where palliative care is excellent, desire for euthanasia plummets. Where counselling is prioritised, younger people see life with far more hope. While a growing number of doctors are sympathetic to euthanasia, few are prepared to personally end a life. The cause of dignity does not just lie with the simplistic argument that euthanasia offers a way out of suffering.

There are too many examples of diminished dignity in our society, especially highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has taken a disproportionate toll on care home residents. It has been twice as lethal in the most deprived communities compared to the most affluent. Food bank dependence has grown throughout the pandemic. Our approach to tackling poverty has to be rooted in human dignity. U.S. Founding Father Benjamin Franklin remarked, 'Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what they are going to have for lunch.' Our approach to May's election cannot be mere self-interest. Belief in a special image-bearing status should challenge us to vote for dignity.

#### IDENTITY

The creation narrative speaks clearly into the current confusion over identity politics. Not only did God resolve to create us in his image, we know how he did so: 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27). The place of 'male and female' within image-bearing is, again, difficult to concisely state. Maleness does not, alone, define the image of God (e.g. the 'birthing' imagery of Deuteronomy 32:18). Yet, in the Bible God consistently uses he/him pronouns. Nothing about God, or his self-revelation, is arbitrary. Thus, his use of the male pronoun cannot be an arbitrary social construct. We should not therefore think of binary sexes as an arbitrary feature, nor a mere human social construct. This is a deliberate creative act connected to the image of God.

Human sexes are complex, particularly in how we relate and interact. This reflects the complexity of God himself in his Triune nature. It is that complexity which means we err when we root our self-identity in just one characteristic – be that sexuality, sex, or 'gender'.

The Scottish Parliament has been at the forefront of a liberalising agenda around sexual identity politics. That seems unlikely to change much, because Scottish society is still being influenced towards this by academics and other media influencers. (Politics isn't the only sphere where we need to pray and seek to act if this will ever change!) That said, we should still seek to articulate a positive case – not just react to liberalising moves. For example, humans flourish when male and female sexes are honoured as God-given characteristics. In sport, and other areas of human endeavour, is it honouring fairness, and indeed safety, to diminish sexual differences?

We should also be challenged to selfexamination. Sexual violence, predatory behaviour, misogyny, human trafficking (which all disproportionately affect women) are areas

#### Humankind is functionally like God in that we have a role or purpose in existence; we exercise dominion in God's place over his creation

where God-given characteristics are abused. As Christians we have a rationale for why these are such egregious examples of abuse – again, challenging us to think about the worldview implications of the Bible.

#### RIGHTS

Public policy hinges on how we apply human rights. Part of what we elect MSPs to do is draft legislation that complies with already-agreed definitions of these rights, like the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Christians have taken a range of approaches to this, seeking a key in natural law, or in God's gracious character. It is in the big, worldview questions of existence that we find a rationale for rights.

The creation narrative helps us get to that fundamental level: 'Why did God make us?' The answer is rooted in the big story itself – we're made to be redeemed: to discover and delight in the lavish love of God in Christ Jesus. For the Christian, the most important right we can therefore assert – for ourselves, but more importantly for everyone else! – is the right to fulfil that ultimate purpose. That is, freedom of religion – the freedom to think about, speak of, persuade others of, and live according to our God's self-revelation.

Because our culture views secularism as neutral (which it isn't!) there is pressure to limit Freedom of Religion. We should, for example, be wary of replacing Freedom of Religion with Freedom of Worship. Religious liberty is a whole-life liberty, not a little box of liberty for Sunday mornings. The perpetual creation of idols means we abuse this crowning human right. We replace God in our religious affections. But the abuse of Freedom of Religion doesn't mean we should restrict it, nor the other rights that are necessary to enable it. Western democracies owe their very existence to this!

The big challenge is where rights push against one another. Whatever approach we take to prioritising rights, it comes down to worldview. It's relatively commonplace for a Christian worldview to be ridiculed – 'Christians base too much on unprovable claims!' But the truth is that everyone's worldview has a set of unprovable claims or assumptions. Getting down to this level in discussions with election candidates is hard. But when it comes to human rights, these big, worldview questions really matter. It might seem childish, but we must keep asking, 'Why?'

#### RESPONSIBILITIES

One of the biggest problems with the legal framework for human rights is that law-making stresses what people should have done to them, rather than what they should do. The powers of the state to compel good behaviour can lead to tyranny! The creation narrative, however, balances humankind's many privileges against some significant God-given responsibilities. Applying these responsibilities to contemporary situations is deeply challenging, but vitally important.

For example, part of the creation mandate given to humankind was to 'fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28). This is not just an encouragement to biological reproduction! It is a mandate to create society – to fashion institutions and structures that will lead to human flourishing. Family is, of course, the first building block towards that. But regulation of big businesses, healthcare and medical ethics, and education policy are all part of that evolving story of how we fill the earth. The Bible provides us with plenty of wisdom for tackling these big questions, allowing us to be confident about involvement in the process of coming to answers.

Because of the fall, we do abuse God-given mandates. Humankind was to 'have dominion' over the created world (Genesis 1:28). This wasn't meant to be a free charter to exploit natural resources for individual gain. It is a mandate given in the context of that collective task of filling the earth. So, Christians should be strong advocates for the exercise of good stewardship – whether that's thinking about fishing quotas, land ownership, or cutting fossil fuel emissions.

Another responsibility lies in idea that we are gardeners (Genesis 2:8, 15). God looked upon what he had made and called it 'very good'. But then he placed humankind to tend to its needs – to beautify the space he gave us, and pass that on to future generations. It is tempting to think about redeeming the arts as a particular goal in itself. But actually, this is part of the worship we are all made to engage in. As we survey the whole world we should see opportunities to express, by our actions, glory to God. That is the artistic pursuit of all people! May's election gives us a small opportunity to influence how we tend to our corner of the world in Scotland. We could do worse than vote with a gardener mentality!

The Rev. Gordon Matheson is the minister of Sleat & Strath Free Church on the Isle of Skye.

# Come Away with Me

#### DAYSPRING MACLEOD goes on holiday - sort of

**RIENDS, FOR THREE DAYS THE YOUNGEST HAS BEEN WAKING UP AT 5AM, GIVE OR TAKE FIFTEEN MINUTES.** Before that I was in the hospital for four nights with another child. I'm still working out a hundred holiday details, finishing my next book, shopping for a new car — and, frankly, I'm too tired to write this article. It may yet turn out to be a 'write your own ending' article if my caffeine buzz wears off before I reach 1000 words!

As I was lying down for a few minutes of quiet — too tired to sleep, or to think about anything other than tiredness — I wondered how on earth I was going to write an article and whether I had anything to say. Sometimes I wonder if my 'honesty' in talking about the ordinary struggles of life is useful. I've joked that I should call my column *Psalms of Complaint*! Ought I instead to be constantly praising, treating my small trials as if they really are 'not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us'?

Yet honest worship so often takes the form of honest suffering. The Psalmist who cries out for deliverance; Job who questions but refuses to recant; Hezekiah who spreads his distressing letter before the Lord and simply waits.

There is no point pretending last year was easy. Yes, we are grateful for our homes, for our loved ones, for food and for God's plentiful provision. But we are all so tired. We are worn out by anxiety and instability and political nipping and isolation. And toddlers with a fascination for toilet brushes.

In St Columba's, our most recent women's mini-conference was on the theme of 'Come Away with Me,' from the Song of Solomon. It comes, of course, from the beautiful passage in chapter 2 (and if there was ever a place to show off the King James Version, this is it).

My beloved spoke, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

Is there anything we long for more right now, and feels more unattainable, than to *come away*? The interlude in Song of Solomon sounds like a honeymoon. I always picture it as a walk in the mountains, with flowers growing along the path — maybe somewhere in Italy. I imagine it will look different to everyone. But as on any holiday, the scenery isn't important; it's the company that counts. We may not be able to take an isolated walk with the Lord up the slopes of Portofino, but by his grace we can come away from our strain and exhaustion.

I have come away with Jesus in an Edinburgh park beside a busy road, drinking a McDonalds coffee and awed by the Creator's hand in the sunlight streaming through the changing leaves.

I have come away with him lying down in the middle of the night in between bouts of tending children, knowing his presence as a pure gift.

I have come away with him in just a couple moments' snatched Bible reading, where all my frantic worries melted away just for the space it took me to find him in his love letter to us.

In a neighbourhood festooned with Christmas trees, reminding me of humanity's unspoken longing for a Light to pierce the great darkness.

In just a line or two of a hymn that won't leave me all day.

In an act of totally unmerited generosity when God's people showed up at our home with a hot meal in a difficult week.

In fasting, where a hunger pang reminded me that all I need is found in Christ, and he nurtures me moment by moment.

In a sip of a Costa Christmas drink that made me tingle down to my toes with pure gratitude for God's common-grace gifts.

Over this winter, my 'coming away' has often been the daily Bible study that my parents' Messianic rabbi holds online every day. It's morning in Arizona, but the perfect time for me to make dinner — so while I cook, I listen to Rabbi Cosmo expound the Psalms from the original Hebrew, and show me more and more new things about life with 'Y'shua'.

On 14 December we studied Psalm 74 (you can search for House of New Beginnings on YouTube if you'd like to hear it). This psalm has an unusual structure. It starts out with a desperate plea for help: the wicked seem to be winning! Then, in verse 12-17, the Psalmist reminds himself of what God has done — his acts of creation and maintaining the earth, reigning over all things. Then, from verse 18 to the end, it returns to pleading for aid and justice. There is no resolution in the sense that the deliverance takes place, or even that the writer achieves some kind of peace of mind. The resolution is in the *middle*. In the eye of the hurricane, David remembers who his God is, what he has done, and what he is still capable of. He settles himself on God's faithfulness and power. It is a snatched moment of coming away, even though the circumstances are still hard.

There have been many jokes — I say jokes, but they are generally heartfelt — about this New Year having been more a celebration of the old year ending than the new year beginning. I myself was not sorry to see 2020 end. Yet, it was my year of greatest spiritual growth. And the one thing he impressed upon me last year, if nothing else, is that he can do what I cannot. It sounds like such a simple truth. 'We are weak but he is strong': we lisp this truth in *Jesus Loves Me* from infancy. Yet, last year, I learned it.

2020 was hard, but my Lord eased the hardship in so many big and small ways. He was faithful in the midst of the trial. He will continue to be faithful no matter what happens in 2021. We can have that resolution now — not a resolution that we have to perform throughout the year, but a rock-hard resolution that our Saviour has made to us, that he will never change, he will never forsake us, and nothing can ever take us out of his hand. All that, and he is wonderful company too.

How will you come away with him? •

**HE RESURRECTION IS SOMETIMES DESCRIBED AS JESUS' 'REWARD'.** Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* says, 'Christ met the demands of the law, and was therefore entitled to His reward.' For most of us the word 'reward' prompts notions of a wage, or a prize for exceptional behaviour, which unfortunately can lead us into error. The word needs careful handling.

In Philippians 2, in Paul's poem about Christ's humiliation and subsequent exaltation, it is stated that as a consequence of Christ emptying himself to the point of death God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name. Jesus' efficacious death is followed by a number of consequences which form his exaltation. Jesus' exaltation is sometimes referred to as his 'reward'.

In Hebrews 12:3 we read: '...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'. The words suggest that Christ was motivated to get through the awfulness of the cross by 'the joy set before him'. What was the 'joy set before him'; what do the words mean? F. F. Bruce, in *Peake's* commentary, says, 'The joy comprises the completion of his work, his exaltation at the Father's right hand, and the consequent blessing of his people.' A. M. Stibbs, in IVF's *New Bible Commentary*, says: '... He had regard for the joy of the heavenly reward which He now permanently enjoys as One who is enthroned at God's right hand. Also the manner and pursuit of His achievement not only make possible our pursuit of the same pathway of faith, but also guarantee that He will enable us to complete what He enables us to begin. In this way, therefore, He is both the initiator (*author*) and the consummator (*finisher*) of our faith.'

Christ's reward, the 'joy set before him', thus consists of (1) the successful completion of his work, a work planned with the Father in eternity, and in particular his sacrificial death; and (2) his reaching a point where he can actively pursue the aims of the great plan of salvation.

John Calvin discusses relevant issues and is scathing about the notion of Jesus' exaltation adding any new merit to himself. Donald Macleod, while deliberately avoiding the word 'merit', carefully uses the word 'reward' in connection with Philippians 2: '...it is reward in these terms, that if He finishes the work then certain consequences will follow.... There is a twofold motivation: in order "that the Son also may glorify Thee" (John 17:1) in His exalted condition and secondly, "that He may give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him" (John 17:2).... In his human nature he was extravagantly exalted...'

Jesus did not rise in order to acquire greater glory for himself. Jesus rose from the dead to further the divine plan to save his people and ultimately to glorify God. Jesus rose for your salvation. ●

PART 13 WAS THE RESURRECTION JESUS' REWARD?

# LICE CONTRACTOR

1

BY IAIN GILL A series of short articles about Jesus' resurrection

# Azariah: What's in a name?

In the **This is my story** devotional series, **REV. DAVID J RANDALL** imagines how some of the Bible's characters might tell us their story. Some are not headline characters, but they all had a part to play in the great drama of God's plan, given to us in Scripture. Hebrews 11:4 says of one character, 'though he died, he still speaks'. May the stories of these Bible characters from yesterday help us today to trust, follow, love and serve *the* Character of the Bible.

HE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY — THAT'S WHAT THEY SAID TO US; WE NEEDED TO FORGET ABOUT OUR OUTMODED BELIEF IN THE ONE WE JEWS KNEW AS YAHWEH, THE LIVING GOD, AND GET ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY. According to the Babylonians, belief in Yahweh was a primitive stage we had come through and now we just had to realise that the future belonged to Babylon and we needed to get with the programme.

They would even change our names. The name by which most people know me isn't my actual name at all. My real name is Azariah, which means 'The Lord is my helper', but the Babylonians decided to give me my best-known name, Abednego (servant of Nebo).

Our little land of Judah had been conquered by Babylon. Prophets had warned us for a long time that our nation's neglect and even defiance of God would have consequences, and when the axe fell, we simply had no chance against the military might of Babylon.

Hordes of us were carted off to Babylon as prisoners of war. I guess anybody would be upset about losing their land, but it was especially terrible for us Jews because we believed that the land had been given us by God generations before; to be uprooted from that land was devastating. Some people found that their faith was shattered by it all (how could they sing the Lord's song by the waters of Babylon?).

Well, I was one of the exiles and I too was devastated. I was young, and it looked as if years of hardship lay ahead.

But then an unexpected event changed everything. Nebuchadnezzar issued an order that a few of us should be selected for the Babylonian civil service, and I was among the ones selected. I didn't really have any particular qualifications, except that I was young, apparently reckoned handsome and intelligent, and I came from one of the 'better' families.

Before long, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and I were being royally entertained in the palace. It was an amazing turn-around in our fortunes.

But right away we had a choice to make. We learned that the food we were given had been blessed in the name of Babylonian idols before it was served, and so we refused to eat it. Daniel persuaded one of the officials to serve us vegetarian meals for ten days as a test. They didn't believe we would thrive, but we did, and eventually, to cut a long story short, we ended up as respected and valued advisers of the king.

But the food wasn't the only problem. It was one of Nebuchadnezzar's officials who changed my name to Abednego, which is a Babylonian name. The 'iah' part at the end of my real name, Azariah, stands for the Lord (Yah or Yahweh) and the change of name wasn't an insignificant thing; cutting God out of my name was meant to be a symbol of cutting him out of my life.

They did the same with the others, including Daniel. The 'el' part of his name stands for God, but the king gave him the name Belteshazzar, after the chief of the Babylonian gods, Bel. He wanted to eliminate the very name of God and turn us into little Babylonians who worshipped Bel, not El. So we had a fine line to tread and a showdown was bound to come.

Nebuchadnezzar had this huge statue constructed. Believe it or not, it was ninety feet high and made of gold. I don't know if it was simple egotism, or perhaps the idol was meant to be a unifying force in the kingdom. But everybody was commanded to bow before the image and worship it when his band played.

Well, we Jews had always believed that there is only one God, and he alone is to be worshipped. So we refused to bow before this stupid statue. Some people thought us extreme – suggested we should maybe just go along with it, go through the motions while holding to our own beliefs inwardly. But we believed that when God calls us to love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, that's what we should do.

The king's order was that people who refused to

worship the image would be burned alive in the fiery furnace. What a terrifying prospect! No sane person would say otherwise, but I suppose you could say that there was something that terrified us even more and that was denying our God. They had taken him out of our names but they couldn't take him out of our hearts, and we were determined not to simply fit in with this crazy request.

We had our enemies, of course. Notably, some who had been passed over when we were promoted. They went to the king to remind him that everyone, without exception, was supposed to worship the image. And they pointed out that there were certain officials who were refusing to do so. So we were summoned and asked if it was true.

At first Nebuchadnezzar seemed reluctant to follow through on his threat. Maybe he expected us to 'see sense' and just comply. But we stood our ground, and eventually he gave the order to his guards to seize us and take us to the furnace.

Obviously it was a terrible prospect, but somehow the three of us (Hananiah, Mishael and I) had a strong inner conviction that God was able to bring us through this fiery trial. That's what we said to the king. We told him that the God we serve is able to deliver us, but of course we also knew that God doesn't always rescue people from trials. Many people have had to endure torture and death without God stepping in to rescue them. But we insisted that even if he didn't rescue us, we would still trust that he is real and that he always has a purpose in whatever comes to pass.

Then the miracle happened. It was amazing. It was unexplainable. I mean, even the Babylonian guards were completely overcome by the flames, but the three of us were unharmed. *And* we became aware that there weren't just three of us. We hadn't been sure what was going to happen, but never in a month of Sabbaths would we have expected that God would actually send his Servant to be beside us in the fire. We were never sure whether it was the Lord's angel or the Lord himself in the flesh, but it was an amazing gift.



When we emerged unharmed, the king's officials couldn't believe their eyes. And the king himself - he was astonished too! He issued a new order: anyone who spoke against our God - the God whose name he had tried to blot out — would be torn limb from limb. Was he converted? He was certainly impressed. But there wasn't really any change of heart. A year later he was still bragging about the mighty Babylon that was such a testament to his greatness and glory. Soon after that his mind became deranged and he had a time of insanity, before recovering and even acknowledging the Lord as the Most High God. Maybe it was just a token recognition of a higher power, as if the Lord could rank alongside his own gods, but I'd like to think he had really come to believe in the living God. Is that over-optimistic? Maybe, and in the end only the Lord knows those that are his. But for my part well, Azariah, not Abednego, is my name — and I am on the right side of history.

Rev. David J. Randall spent forty years in pastoral ministry before retiring. He has served as Chair of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity. He is the author of several books, including Come and Behold Him: Christmas Through Different Eyes (Christian Focus).



## PAGES FROM ADAM'S DIARY PART 6: The Cinderella Story of a 65-year-old Refugee

A brother, known to some of us as Dr Adam, has served the Lord among his suffering church for many years. Dr Adam has also ministered in various parts of the world among refugees. We have asked his permission to print some of the stories of his life and service for the encouragement of readers of *The Record*. For well understood reasons, the names of people and places have usually been changed or omitted.



## When we are where God wants us, that is the happiest place to be.

OT LONG AGO, I RECEIVED AN INVITATION TO THE WEDDING OF A LADY WHOM I HAD MET AS A REFUGEE TWENTY YEARS AGO ON ONE OF MY TRIPS TO EASTERN EUROPE IN THE COUNTRY OF BULGARIA. She was being wed to a member of European royalty. When we first met, she, her husband and her two children were in desperate straits. Her husband was suffering from heart disease, needing immediate attention, and their two children were a nine-year-old boy and an eleven-year-old girl. The husband had run afoul of the government in Central Asia and, consequently, he and his family were forced to flee.

Although the couple were well educated, they had fallen upon hard times in this inhospitable eastern European country. The husband, because of his heart ailment, was unable to work. But in Bulgaria, there was not much for him to do anyway. The full burden of the support of the family was upon this dear woman. To earn some money, she was forced to sweep the streets. This was intended to humiliate the refugees and discourage them from coming. She also cleaned and cooked in a restaurant where the owner frequently cheated her out of her wages.

The first time I went to their home, there were knife punctures on their door made by neighbours who wanted this family to know they were not welcome. The small bathroom and kitchen were covered in mould, and the government municipality which owned the building refused to attend to it. Their situation was heartbreaking to see. With the husband's condition, and having small children, they were caught between a rock and a hard place. Although she was young, as a result of the hardship and stress, she had lost her teeth and was dreadfully self-conscious and embarrassed. As though all these adversities were not enough, she had developed a large tumour in her abdomen and urgently needed a hysterectomy. When, in God's gracious providence, I arrived in Bulgaria and our Lord led me to this family, she began to attend the Bible study meetings.

In those days, in the small, two-bedroom apartment in Sofia where I stayed, there lived sometimes as many as 30 refugees. At night, like a can of sardines, the men lined up on the floor to sleep in the hall, one of the rooms, and even the closet. The small number of ladies slept in the other room. However, those were some of the happiest days of my ministry life. The presence of the Lord was so evident in our midst. I was happier there with those refugees than in a king's palace. In these years of walking with our beloved Lord and serving him, he has taught me that when we are where God wants us, that is the happiest place to be. The Lord is all that matters — where he is there is heaven and to be with him is life! It is not the place which brings us happiness, it is the Lord. Paradise is paradise not because of streets of gold but because the Lord is there. If he were to come to hell, it would become heaven because he is there. He was in our midst in that cold, damp and dilapidated apartment.

I bought the food and paid the rent and she and a couple of other ladies did all the cooking while listening as they were introduced to our Saviour. She and her two children came to faith in Christ on my first trip. Her husband, as far I know, never made a profession of faith although he was always courteous and gracefully accepted his wife's conversion. In subsequent visits, by the hand of God, I was led to a surgeon and a dentist. For \$500 the surgeon operated on her and she had a successful hysterectomy; and for \$200, the dentist provided her with a set of dentures.

For several years, I visited these refugees three, sometimes four, times a year. In each visit, most of the refugees I had met before were gone only to be replaced by incoming refugees who were making their way across Europe. During those years, many of them came to faith. Every time, when I was about to leave them, a crowd of refugees came to the airport. It was like a funeral procession as they cried all

# When a person, a people or a society forget the Lord, light goes and darkness becomes their portion.

the way to the airport, until I went to the departure gate and could not see them. These visits were a glimmer of hope in their otherwise dismal lives. I took medicine, clothing, gifts, money, whatever they needed and I could take to encourage them; and above all, I took the Gospel. So, I kept going back. The vast majority of the refugees were young single men who, after a few months in Bulgaria, would flee on foot to surrounding countries because of the unkindness of the Bulgarians.

This particular family, however, with a sick husband and two young children, could not leave that easily. Again, the Lord intervened. After two years, by the sovereign hand of God, I met a diplomat who was a devoted Christian. He held a high office in a European embassy. I appealed to him for help for this family. Through his relentless efforts, going out on a limb, they were granted asylum in a western European country. The government of that country went beyond the call of duty and provided this family with everything they needed. They even paid for their tickets to leave Bulgaria. Their dark night was over! They were given a beautiful home. I used to tease them that they lived better than people in Beverly Hills. The children were put into excellent schools and her husband received medical attention, although the delay in Bulgaria had damaged his heart beyond repair and, a year after their arrival in their new home, he died. To make a very, very long story short, that young eleven-year-old girl has now become a surgeon engaged also in humanitarian medical relief work. The nine-year-old boy has become a human rights lawyer. But here is the marvel of all marvels: God crossed the path of that destitute, dear woman with that of a European nobleman who fell in love with her, and they were married. I will require an appointment to see her now!

I have learned in this journey with our Saviour that when God looks upon a person with the favour of his grace, a barren Hannah gives birth to Samuel; an elderly Sarah gives birth to Isaac, out of whom comes a nation; an insignificant shepherd boy becomes King David; a young boy named Daniel, raised in captivity, becomes companion and counsellor to kings ruling over empires. When God looks upon a person with his favour, if that person puts his hands into ashes, they turn to gold. If he stands in the Sahara Desert, fountains will burst open before his feet. The greatest of all favours is our beloved Lord himself and the knowledge of the Holy One. He is the greatest gift to any human being, to any society, and to any nation (John 4:10, Matthew 13:44-46). How blessed is that person who finds favour with the Lord! How blessed are those who know the Lord! How blessed are those upon whom the Lord's name is inscribed and whose hearts are the temples of the Holy Spirit!

On the other hand, when a person, a people or a society forget the Lord, presume upon his grace, and worse, turn their backs upon him, light goes and darkness becomes their portion. Gold in their hands turns into ashes, joy gives place to despondency, and peace to turmoil; wisdom and discernment flee and absurdity and insanity become their counsellors and companions. When a nation turns its back upon the source of all blessings thieves, crooks, clowns and conmen become their leaders. Fame and fortune become their snare. The blessing departs and confusion, calamity and chaos arrive. People born in the lap of luxury find life so futile and dark that they commit suicide. Modern history is marked by such people. At the apex of success and affluence, they so grope in darkness that life becomes intolerable. Surely, this is folly in its most grotesque manifestation! How blessed is that nation and society whose God is Jehovah and has Christ the Lord as their King! How blessed is that nation whose people live and walk in the light of the Lord! How blessed is a society in which the Word of God is the lamp unto their feet and the light unto their path and the name of Christ is honoured among them, precious in their sight and treasured by them! They shall indeed inherit life. •

#### MURDO MACKENZIE (1943-2019) BY **REV. PAUL MURRAY**

**URDO MACKENZIE, WIDELY KNOWN AS MURDAIDH SHEORDAIDH,** was born to George and Mary Mackenzie at 37 Laxay, Isle of Lewis, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1943, the second child in a family of three. He served his trade as a joiner with Jimmy Maclennan in Stornoway.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1963, he married Lena Macaulay of 5 Keose Glebe and they made their home in Croftfoot, Glasgow. In 1972, they returned home to a house, newly-built by Murdo, at 7 Laxay, a stone's throw from the family croft. They had two of a family, Ann and Colin, and, in later years, they were blessed with grandchildren and greatgrandchildren who loved to spend time over in Laxay. In 1975, Murdo set up his own business – Murdo Mackenzie & Son – working out of Laxay and, during his years in business, employed many men from all over the island.

Murdo grew up with close ties to the Free Church of Scotland. His uncle on his father's side was Rev. John Mackenzie, minister of Plockton & Kyle from 1934-1946 and of Leverburgh from 1946-1968. His aunty on his father's side was Christina Macrae, wife of Rev. Murdoch Macrae who ministered in Kinloch from 1927 until his death in 1961. Mr Macrae's successor in Kinloch was Rev. Alex Murdo Macleod, who ministered there from 1963 until his retirement in 1997. In 1964, Mr Macleod married Christine Mackenzie, Murdo's sister, thereby perpetuating the connection between Murdo and the Kinloch manse.

At the March communion of 1975, Murdo and Lena both professed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Murdo's Christianity was personal, serious and practical, in many ways characteristic of how the faith has long been practised in Lewis. His disposition was humble, born out of a keen awareness both of his own sin and unworthiness, and of the grace of God which took him 'from a fearful pit and from the miry clay' (Psalm 40). He was unassuming in character, strong in faith, tender in conscience, diligent in duty, and wise in counsel.

His attendance at the means of grace was exemplary. The dwelling place of the Lord of hosts was lovely to him and the fellowship of believers in Christ he counted as precious. When attendance at communion seasons was at its height in the 70s and 80s, Murdo and Lena's home was often filled to capacity.

Murdo was always responsive to the preached Word, meeting its rebukes and challenges with a bow of the head and its promises and assurances with a glowing countenance. He always prayed in Gaelic, and loved to hear the Word of God preached in his native tongue. He once told me that the reason for this was simple – he was converted in Gaelic.

Murdo became a deacon of Kinloch Free Church in 1985 and an elder in 2001. His contribution to the Kirk Session was measured and wise. He was a great friend of ministers, perhaps on account of his family connections. He had a good understanding of the hidden pressures that they face and sympathy for the burdens that they bear.

Murdo's building expertise was indispensable to the Deacons' Court up until his very last meeting. In the 1980s, his firm undertook a largescale renovation of the church building, so he knew its every nook and cranny. When the new manse was built in 2015-16, he was a key figure on the project team.

His last building project for the church was its refurbishment in 2018, when he helped design and manage the work, painstakingly completing the Planning Permission and Building Warrant drawings by hand. Had he not been involved in the project to the extent that he was, it never would have been completed in the timescale that it was. Murdo generally worked behind the scenes, but the congregation in Kinloch owes him a great debt of gratitude.

Having suffered from an undiagnosed illness for around a year, Murdo was taken into hospital at the beginning of December 2019 and was summarily diagnosed with cancer. While in the hospital, he received powerful assurance that he was a child of God. With the Apostle, he could say with confidence, 'for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day' (2 Timothy 1:12).

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, he told some of his visiting grandchildren that he was going home. Some short hours later, Murdo went to his eternal home of rest. On Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> December, a large congregation gathered at Kinloch Free Church for his funeral service, the number gathered bearing testimony to the esteem in which both Murdo was, and his family continue to be, held.

We continue to mourn the passing of a great friend, an elder in our congregation and an upstanding member of the community of Kinloch. We offer our sincere condolences to Lena, his widow, Ann and Colin, his daughter and son, Chrissie and Colin, his sister and brother, and all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We are poorer for his loss but we trust that Heaven is richer.

# BOOK REVIEWS



The four books featured here are our favourite non-seasonal offerings. They touch on timeless truths and would make perfect gifts or additions to your own bookshelf. All are available from Free Church Books https:// thefree.church/shop, unless otherwise stated.



#### THE MISSIONARY-THEOLOGIAN E.D. BURNS (2020)

This book is easily in my top five reads for 2020. I think all my ministry friends are sick to death of me recommending it to them. E.D Burns writes in a readable, encouraging and informative way, while also being challenging, revealing and critical of the past in the hope that we move forward theologically to a more robust missionary mindset. And I know this is not a church-planting book, but as a church planter, I couldn't help viewing the book through that lens, which I found helpful and impactful in my ministry. There is so much more I want to write on this book, but I will simply say buy it – well worth a read!

This book is available to purchase from Free Church Books. Chris Davidson, Merkinch Free Church

#### TRUTHS WE CONFESS R.C. SPROUL (2019)

This is a superb book from a world-renowned theologian that achieves its aim time and again - to make the Westminster Confession of Faith accessible to all. Sproul writes from the perspective of the WCF being 'the most precise and accurate summary of the content of biblical Christianity ever set forth in a creedal form.' His purpose of deepening our understanding of biblical doctrines marks each chapter as he unpacks the eloquence of the WCF with passion, application, and sheer joy. Sproul wants us to reckon with Christ on a personal level, and so he advocates for a deep understanding of the truth of the Gospel in every Christian. The WCF is not the preserve of the seminary or the professional theologian. It is for every Christian to grasp the deep things of God, a need that underlies Sproul's cause in this book, which is to sharpen our understanding of the truth by leading the reader to an ever clearer understanding of Scripture. It is accuracy in our understanding of God's Word that Sproul values in this commentary, an aim that stands out in his chapter on Justification: 'faith is not the grounds of our justification. The grounds of our justification is the righteousness of Christ, His merit.' All Christians are commanded to always be ready



to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15). Owning and reading this book will undoubtedly help us meet this responsibility. Sproul's commentary on the WCF will do you good. This is a 700-page gem that unpacks what Reformed theology is. It will feed your soul and nourish your mind. Highly recommended.

This book is available to purchase from Eden.co.uk.

Colin Macleod, Leith Free Church

#### PSALMS FOR MY DAY

#### CARINE MACKENZIE & ALEC MOTYER (2019)

Over the past few weeks I've begun many of my days by reading Psalms for my Day: A Child's Praise Devotional. The book contains a fresh translation of 31 of the Psalms found in the Old Testament. The translation is done by biblical scholar Alec Motyer. Accompanying the translation is a simple explanation of the rich truths of the psalm and a short prayer. The work is masterfully illustrated by Catherine Pape and includes a 'new words' index at the back of the book with succinct definitions for difficult words. In this respect, the translation might present a difficulty for kids learning to read. The book is intended for ages 4-11, but the psalms present something for every reader.

It is a charming introduction to the psalms for you and your little ones. The psalms place before the believer both the realism and idealism of the Christian life – despair and trial, defeat and suffering, but also repentance and confession,



growth and longing, praise and hope. I was glad to see Psalm 32 amongst those included. Motyer's commentary hints at the Christ-centred approach he takes on many of the Psalms. He writes, 'What a blessing when sin is "covered" – not by being out of sight but when Jesus covers it with his sinlessness. My sin is no longer something I have to pay for because Jesus Christ has taken the punishment for the sin of his people when he died on the cross. This is a great cause of rejoicing and makes us sing praise to God' (35).

Introducing the psalms to your children while they are young will help them to recognise the mystery and beauty of their God. Moreover, the book provides a palatable format for them to access the psalms as they mature in their young faith. I am very pleased to have this book to pull out of my library when visited by family and friends with children!

This book is available to purchase from Free Church Books.

Greg Parker Jr, St Columba's Free Church, Edinburgh

#### IF ONLY

#### **JENNIE POLLOCK (2020)**

This well-written, easily readable book draws the reader in from the outset. The main message, one that we all need to take hold of irrespective of our circumstances, is that true contentment in Jesus only is enough, not Jesus plus the things we long for. Paul's statement in Philippians 4:12-13 that he has 'learnt the secret of being content in any and every situation' is the theme of the book.

I found the testimonies which pepper the book to be sad yet challenging and encouraging. Most have no happy endings if judged by this world's standards. But the knowledge that God is sovereign and that Jesus himself can make up to us for any perceived loss is the anchor to which we cling. I admired the honesty with which each person shares the struggle for contentment, which may be ongoing.

I saw Esau's story in a new light as the author describes how he chose to prioritise a present, genuine and significant need over a future promise. Our present longings fade into insignificance as we ponder 'promised riches beyond compare, the intimate relationship we long for...' (p.78).

I do not hesitate to recommend this book and challenge anyone not to benefit from it.

This book is available to purchase from Free Church Books. Judith Lewis, Tabernacle Welsh Baptist, Llwynhendy



These books are only a small proportion of the ones we review.

You can find all our reviews online at https://books.freechurch.org or sign up to our monthly email to get them directly to your inbox: https://thefree.church/books-sign-up

## DEC/JAN 2021 PRAYER DIARY

#### Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.

#### 1 Psalm 115:1

#### Thurs 7th-Sat 9th

As we are warm and sheltered in our homes, pray for all those who do not have a place of refuge. Give thanks for organisations like Bethany Trust who aim to demonstrate the love of God practically, emotionally and spiritually to all they come in contact with on these cold winter nights.

#### Sun 10<sup>th</sup>

Pray for the vacant congregation of St Peter's in Dundee and their interim moderator, Rev. David Meredith, as they work and witness in that city.

#### Mon 11<sup>th</sup>–Wed 13<sup>th</sup>

As teachers and pupils settle back into another school term, pray for them and give thanks for our education system, praying that the Christian principles which were its foundation would not be eroded further. Pray for the 60 million children who have no access to education.

#### Thurs 14<sup>th</sup>–Sat 16<sup>th</sup>

Pray for the many aspects of Edinburgh Theological Seminary: for the students, the professors, the admin and support staff. Ask that all of them will know a close walk with the Lord, continually learning of him, that the students would learn well and patiently, and that the professors would have wisdom pastorally as well as academically.

#### Sun 17<sup>th</sup>

Pray for the congregation in Arran and their interim moderator, Rev. Duncan Peters, as they look for a pastor to lead them in their worship and witness on the island.

#### Mon 18<sup>th</sup>-Wed 20<sup>th</sup>

Pray for wisdom and discernment for those who are making difficult decisions about this summer's camps programme in the midst of so much uncertainty, and give thanks that in all of this, God has a plan. Pray for all our young folk who look forward to meeting up with friends from all over the country at camp each summer and were disappointed last year.

#### Thurs 21<sup>st</sup>–Sat 23<sup>rd</sup>

Scripture Union Scotland invite us to join them not only in celebrating what God has done over the past year and spending time in thanksgiving, but also in praying for their current needs and ongoing ministry. Pray for SU Holidays staff as they continue to provide support and guidance on how Day Camps can run safely.

#### Sun 24<sup>th</sup>

This morning pray for the vacant congregation of Ayr and Kilwinning and their interim moderator, Rev. Kenny Boyd, as they look for guidance for their future minister.

#### Mon 25<sup>th</sup>-Wed 27<sup>th</sup>

Pray with 20schemes as they work to provide opportunities for those who have come to faith to grow in their knowledge of God, and live out their faith to become men and women who work hard in serving their communities.

#### Thurs 28<sup>th</sup>–Sat 30<sup>th</sup>

We give thanks and praise God for all the opportunities we have to join virtual services from all over the world and hear his Word being explained by many eminent preachers. Let us remember the encouragement in Hebrews not to give up meeting together, so that we can spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

#### Sun 31st

Pray for the vacant congregation in Dumbarton as they and interim moderator Rev. Andy Longwe look to the Lord for a settled ministry in that town.

#### Mon 1st-Wed 3rd

We remember our Queen with all the responsibility she bears, and give thanks for her Christian witness. Pray for her family, that they would also seek her Saviour and would one day lead the country with wisdom and grace.

#### Thurs 4<sup>th</sup>–Sat 6<sup>th</sup>

Pray for all those in government both in London and Edinburgh. Pray that there would be respect, tolerance and trust between those in authority even though they hold opposing political opinions.

**Prayer requests to:** dayspring.macleod@icloud.com Please take time to send requests for your congregation or ministry to be included in forthcoming Records. These prayer notes are prepared 5 weeks in advance of publication.

# POETRY PAGE

#### GOD KNOWS (THE GATE OF THE YEAR) BY MINNIE LOUISE HOSKINS

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.' So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

So heart be still: What need our little life Our human life to know, If God hath comprehension? In all the dizzy strife Of things both high and low, God hideth His intention.

God knows. His will Is best. The stretch of years Which wind ahead, so dim To our imperfect vision, Are clear to God. Our fears Are premature; In Him, All time hath full provision.

#### Then rest: until

God moves to lift the veil From our impatient eyes, When, as the sweeter features Of Life's stern face we hail, Fair beyond all surmise God's thought around His creatures Our mind shall fill.

Minnie Louise Haskins (1875-1957) included her poem 'God Knows' in a volume called *The Desert*, published in 1912 to raise funds for her work with the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in India. Ill health necessitated her return to England in 1915, where her concern for the welfare of industrial workers led her to a post at the London School of Economics. She promoted 'a spirit of co-operation' between worker and employer in publications such as *Foundations of Industrial Welfare*.

Her poetry was obscure until the opening to 'God Knows' was quoted by King George VI during his Christmas radio broadcast in 1939. The verse struck a chord with a nation facing the turmoil of war. The poem is inscribed at the entrance to the George VI Memorial Chapel at Windsor Castle and was read at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 2002. ●

MISSION MATTERS A monthly take on some of the mission

work the Free Church is involved in by our Mission Director, **DAVID MEREDITH** 

#### OU DON'T HAVE TO BE AN EXPERT.

In his book, *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols makes the point that everyone has now set themselves up as experts in their selfselected subject. Everybody now knows everything so rigorous research, professional experience combined with peer review now counts for nothing. How many amateur epidemiologists have emerged during the COVID-19 crisis?

However, the opposite trend is emerging within the Church. Some give the impression that only experts and specialists can competently share their faith with others. This can be highly demotivating for the ordinary Christian who simply wants to share their faith with whoever happens to cross their path. As this discussion evolves, the scheme worker may, usually inadvertently, give the impression that the 'posh' person simply cannot relate to the person experiencing drug addiction. As our society continues in its fascinating journey into multi-culturalism we hesitate to speak to our Muslim neighbour because we are unfamiliar with the Qur'an and Haddith.

Have you read *What's up Doc? A surgeon's story*, the autobiography of Glasgow/Pakistani doctor, Riaz Mohmmed? He tells of leaving Pakistan when he was 6 to live in Glasgow, in Bridgeton. Raised in a strong Muslim family, he became a Christian in his early teens through the witness of a Scottish art student at a camp in Golspie. The student was not skilled in Islamic polemic, he simply loved people and spoke about Jesus.

If you read the New Testament I think you will only find two 'professional' evangelists, Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5) and Philip (Acts 21:8). There is certainly the mission-obsessed work of the Apostles, but the bulk of the work was done by ordinary people. People who were part of a movement of 'unschooled and ordinary' people.

Just as mission is from everywhere to everywhere, so the gospel is spread from everyone to everyone.

What you need is confidence just as much as knowledge. This is not confidence in our own ability but the belief that even the most mundane opportunity has been planned from before the foundation of the earth and has the power to change a life. Do not wait until you know more, tomorrow is not promised and today is the day of opportunity.

ENGLISH

IRELAN

Limerick

Please, I am not saying that knowledge is a bad thing. If you find yourself among Muslims I recommend that you get to know what your neighbour really believes instead of what you think they believe. However, simply showing genuine love and outlining the gospel of grace will compensate for a lack of awareness of an Islamic world view. They may well be intrigued by your testimony of your relationship with God and the fact that you live a good life with a respect for the spiritual. What will not help is for them to hear your well-rehearsed arguments against the things they hold dearest in life. You also must be prepared to engage with a culture which holds friendship dear and sees it as more than a coffee twice a year and a few 'likes' on Facebook.

The people who made the most significant impression on me as a teenager were not the 'hip, happening and edgy' youth communicators of the day but often elderly people who had a genuine interest in my spiritual health. Love covers a multitude of cultural faux pas — even old men who wear socks with sandals can be used by God! Again, the culturally savvy have a place, but if it's not you then don't go there. The middle-aged man doing the hipster thing is often counter-productive.

What I'm saying is this; you don't have to be an expert to win souls. You just have to be reliant, humble and be able to explain the hope that is within you.

#### Solas dom cheum (A light to my path) LE JANET NICPHÀIL

**B LIADHNA MHATH ÙR DHUIBH UILE!** Tha sinn an dòchas gun tog an Cruthaidhear sàrachadh na bliadhn' a dh' fhalbh dhinn a dh'aithghearr. Is ann Aige-san a-mhàin a tha an comas seo a dhèanamh.

Nuair a bhios sinn a' dol gu rìoghachd eile, neo gu dreuchd ùr nar beatha, bidh sinn ag iarraidh beagan fiosrachaidh mu na th' air thoiseach oirnn' anns na h-àitean-sin.

A- rèist aig toiseach na bliadhna, ged nach eil fios againn dè a tha romhainn, nach biodh e feumail dhuinn gu lèir a bhith a' meòrachadh air na facail,

'Is lòchran d' Fhacal Fhèin dom chois

solas dom cheum gu beachd.'

Is e seo Facal a' Chruthaidheir a stiùireas sinn tro gach nì ùr a dh' fhaodadh a bhith air thoiseach oirnn'.

Tha gach nì air fholach oirnn', ach cuiridh Esan solas air gach ceum den t-slighe, agus bheir E neart airson freastal sàraicht' sam bith ris am feum sinn coinneachadh. Tha e gu mòr fheum a bhith a' cur ar dòchas Ann, oir iadsan a nì seo cha ghluaisear gu bràth iad.

Is e nì air leth prìseil a th' anns an t-solas. Nar beatha làitheil, faodaidh làithean a' gheamhraidh a bhith sàraicht' do chuid de dhaoine, nuair a tha an dorchadas a' tighinn cho tràth. Ged a tha a'chùis mar sin, abair gu faic sinn adhar àlainn soilleir aig an àm-sa den bhliadhna, agus e uaireanan gar gluasad gu ceòl.

Nach e seo, 'obair A mheuran Fhèin' agus e a'cur iongnadh oirnn' a bhith a' coimhead ris, agus cuid dhinn a' faireachdainn ar n-aineolas air, ach, ged a bhiodh sinn aineolach, chan eil sin a' ciallachadh nach dùisg e moladh nar spioradan agus nar cridheachan.

Ged a tha mòran air a lorg a-mach mun chruinnechè, 's ann a tha an fheadhainn as eòlaich', saoilidh sinn, glè mhothachail air an aineolas.

Tha an-còmhnaidh tuilleadh ann, agus chan eil an fheadhainn as fheàrr a' ruighinn ach air an iomall.

Mìorbhail a' Chruthachaidh, agus bidh gach linn a' lorg a-mach agus a' fòghlam, agus mar as motha a bhios an eòlas, is ann as mò a bhios iad mothachail air an aineolas.

Nach eil a-rèist Cruthaidhear mòr,

àrd againne, a tha a' gealltainn nach tuit aon ghealbhan gu làr gun A shùil-san air? Nach motha gu mòr a bhios A shùil air A mhuinntir Fhèin.

Le geallaidhean A chùraim dhinn agus le solas Fhacail, nach fhaod sinn ar dòchas a bhith cinnteach Annsan airson gun glèidh E sinn bliadhn' eile der beatha?

Solas bho Nèamh gus nach tuislich mo cheum Lòchran an Fhacail gum stiùireadh gu rèidh Geallaidhean prìseil an Athar nam chridh' gu bheil mi leis gràdhaicht' fad mo làithean an tìm.

Tro shàrachadh spioraid, bidh Esan rim thaobh a' toirt misneach is dòchas a thogas mo chridh' is mi aon rinn E a cheannach air Sliabh Chalbhari is dh' fhuiling E àmhghar thar tuigs'- tha seo fìor.

Nach glèidh E am-bliadhna gach aon a thig le deòir ag iarraidh A mhisneach 's gum bi E riu còir? Tha Fhacal-san againn- is e Facal beò is togaidh seo spiorad na dh' iarras A threòir.

Thàinig fear fòghlaimte, ann an dorchadas spioradail gu Criosd tron oidhche. Choinnich e ri Solas an t-saoghail, a mhìnich dha mar a ghràdhaich Dia an saoghal, a shaoradh sluagh a chreideadh na dhòigh-teàrnaidh.

Fhuair Nicodemus an teagaisg a b'fheàrr air slàinte shìorraidh bhon Fhear-teagaisg a b'fheàrr.

Nam faigheadh e fosgladh cridhe bhon Chruthaidhear, nach e an coinneachadh-sa a bheireadh solas d'a cheum san t-saoghal?

#### BY CATRIONA MURRAY

T THE BEGINNING OF A NEW YEAR, WE ARE IRRESISTIBLY DRAWN INTO LOOKING FORWARD AND SPECULATING UPON WHAT THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS MAY HOLD.

It is something of an understatement to say that our ability to intelligently predict such things took a battering in 2020. None of us could have foreseen the ways in which life changed, so quickly and comprehensively.

This desire to glimpse the future is nothing new. Man has always feared the unknown and tried to prepare himself against its uncertainties. Our ancestors practised the arts of augury and divination with some reported success. The turn of the year was traditionally a time for such business because the liminality lent itself to dalliance with the supernatural world.

It may well be in spring that a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love, but it was often at New Year a young woman would turn to contemplating matrimony. She needed, though, to establish what manner of man her sweetheart was and took to the use of omens to make him out. Augury of this kind took various forms. A girl might pop two hazelnuts into the fire, one representing herself, and the other for the young man. Their behaviour in the flames would predict the course of the relationship.

Testing in the fire is something with which every Christian is familiar to a greater or lesser extent. We are well acquainted with the concept of being refined through exposure to heat and pressure. Sometimes, it may feel that we experience this disproportionately, that our lot is harder than that of others. In times of self-pity (to which I for one am very susceptible), it is possible to feel that we are hard done by and that we are experiencing more heat and pressure than is necessary.

Every time I feel that, I know deep-down that I'm wrong. God does nothing, permits nothing that is not absolutely essential. Essential to what, though? To his own perfect purpose, which is always for the good of his people.

And here is where Christian hope should displace our fear of the unknown. This is a God who was willing to forsake his own glory, his own exalted status, to become the lowest of the low. He was prepared to be born in the humblest of circumstances, and to become a homeless wanderer, dependent upon the hospitality and kindness of the few who would receive him. This God met ignominy and shame with open arms so that he could save his people from death.

If I cannot put aside my light, momentary affliction in contemplation of all that he has done, then it is small wonder if I live a life of fear. A poem often quoted at the turn of the year exhorts us to put our hand into the hand of God for it is 'safer than a known way'.

Our desire to divine what lies ahead is closely related to our self-belief, our unconquerable arrogance that tells us there is something we can do against the vagaries of fate. If we only know what is to come, we can prepare our defences. It is why we concern ourselves with savings and insurance, and policies and procedures.

All but one, it seems.

The unbeliever protects himself, his family, his home, its contents, his car, his pets, his treasured possessions and even income he has yet to earn. In the last weeks of his life, my own husband concerned himself with writing a will, and ensuring that I would be well provided for. Materially, that is.

Who thinks to indemnify themselves and those they love against eternal damnation, though? All too few consider it worth discussing, far less making it the urgent priority that it should be.

And even those of us who entrust our eternal souls to God, aren't we still tempted to believe our own importance? We still want to know what may happen to us in 2021. Of course we do. It may even be tempting to tell our Lord what we need, as if he doesn't know that so much better than we do ourselves.

My challenge for 2021 is to stop putting myself between God and what is best for me. I have given my soul into his safekeeping, which means surrendering my life to him too. If he tests me with fire, as he has done in the past, I need only to tighten my grip on his hand and go forward in faith.

There is no need to see ahead, when the guide who built the path is at your shoulder.  $\bullet$