

NEWCASTLE READER

ISSUE 26 Autumn/Winter 2025

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE

Seeking.
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In this issue...

PRISON CHAPLAINCY

Christine Stevenson describes her call to prison chaplaincy and her work at HMP Northumberland

ALSO

THE WARDEN'S ADDRESS | JUST A SEC | A NEW
EDITOR | COMINGS AND GOINGS | BECOMING A
ROCHA GOLD ECO CHURCH | THIRTY YEARS AS A
READER | WISDOM | LAST WRITES

Newcastle Reader: a magazine produced by Readers in the Diocese of Newcastle with the valued support of others, in prayer, partnership and peace.

DESIGN: Jon Alsancak

Cover page Photograph, from left to right: The Very Reverend Lee Batson, Dean of Newcastle Cathedral, The Right Reverend Mark Wroe, Bishop of Berwick and Warden of Readers, newly-licensed Readers Izzy MacDonald-Booth, Bec Scane, Jo McEvedy, The Right Reverend Helen-Ann Hartley, Bishop of Newcastle, Canon Dr Ce Pacitti, Deputy Warden of Readers

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EDITORIAL

Greetings from the communications group.

We are Gloria Bryant; Olwyn Black; Gwyn Mckenzie; Louisa Fox; Joseph Lawrie; Annie Newlands; Frances Stride (ex officio).



**Gloria
Bryant**



**Olwyn
Black**



**Gwyn
McKenzie**



**Louisa
Fox**



**Annie
Newlands**



**Joseph
Lawrie**



**Frances
Stride**

The communications group has met on three occasions via Zoom to prepare this edition. We hope you will enjoy it. We rely on so many people to produce a twice-yearly magazine. Our designer, Jon Alsancak, and printer, Print North East, continue to provide us with excellent service. The staff at Church House offer helpful administrative assistance, and we are grateful to Bishop Helen-Ann and Bishop Mark for their continuing support.

Currently all Readers, that is, those in training, licensed and PTO, receive two copies of Newcastle Reader. Sending you two copies means that you can, with your incumbent's approval, place one in your parish church where others can read it. We have found over the years that the magazine has been an important tool in promoting Reader Ministry. Usually, spare copies are available if requested.

Newcastle Reader is a team effort, and it has been a joy and a privilege to lead the communications group and edit the magazine for many years. The time has come, however, for me to stand down, a decision I made at the beginning of the year, so this will be the last editorial I shall write. The good news is that Louisa Fox, who has been a member of the group for

some time and looks after our online presence, has agreed to take over as editor and to chair the group. Louisa has shadowed me during the production of this edition, and introduces herself on page 6. I wish her and the team every success as they go forward. I look forward to receiving edition 27 next spring free from the pressure of having had a part in producing it! In conclusion, I owe a debt of gratitude to successive bishops, wardens, secretaries and members past and present of the communications group whose support and encouragement has sustained me. Many thanks.

Gloria Bryant, Editor



THE DATES OF FUTURE ANNUAL MEETINGS AND LICENSING ARE:

2026 10TH OCTOBER

2027 9TH OCTOBER

WARDEN'S ADDRESS: EVANGELISTS AND PHYSICIANS

THE RIGHT REVEREND MARK WROE
IS THE BISHOP OF BERWICK AND
WARDEN OF READERS



The Readers' Annual Meeting before the admission and licensing of new Readers is time to celebrate and give thanks for our shared ministry. It is also time to reflect and look ahead. This year we met on the Feast of St Luke the Evangelist: who in the words of his Collect was called to be 'an evangelist and physician of the soul'. It is not a bad description of Reader ministry in many ways.

This year my focus as Warden has largely felt to be that of a physician. There are plenty of stories characterised by a need for healing. Some are your experiences in your parishes and many are the experiences of those to whom you and I minister. But even these are far outstripped by the needs of the world around us.

Returning to the idea of the physician, or may be the physio, there are three key areas I hope we are strengthening in Reader ministry at this time:

- 1) Fostering Vocation
- 2) Supporting Ministry
- 3) Good Governance

1) Fostering Vocation

We are always responding to the call of God, and some of you will be used to hearing me quoting the liturgy of the Church which reminds us, 'The Church is the Body of Christ, the people of God and the dwelling place

of the Holy Spirit. In baptism the whole Church is summoned to witness to God's love and work for the coming of his kingdom.'

I never want to just talk about Reader vocation, just as I never want to only talk about ordained vocation. All are called. It is heartening that most of the people starting Reader training this year discerned that call after Authorised Lay Ministry (ALM) training. All are called. But not all can hear that call and we have a responsibility to help them.

Fostering vocation is not just one person's job – it belongs to all of us. There will be various ways in which you and I need to take responsibility to nurture others in their ability to listen to God and hear his call.

2) Supporting Ministry

It has been clear to me in the last two years as Warden that there are many ways in which we have not been able to offer the support to Reader Ministry that we aspire to in this diocese, partly due to our capacity. However, it has been a desire of mine to build a small ministry team to help support Reader ministry.

I am delighted that the Bishop of Newcastle has appointed Canon Dr Ce Pacitti as Deputy Warden of Readers. And I am grateful to Ce for being willing to take on this role which will have a particular focus on discernment and selection of Readers as well as more general

support which she and I will offer in collaboration.

We are also looking for Reader Chaplains. Ideally three Readers (licensed or with PTO) and two clergy (who are strong advocates of lay ministry and of sharing ministry) across both archdeacons – ideally a pair in each – and then one Reader chaplain who would have a special focus on Readers with PTO, particularly those who are retiring from ministry and moving to emeritus status. Thank you to those who are thinking and praying about who might be invited to consider these roles.

3) Good Governance

You may know that the Church of England nationally is revising the Bishops' Regulations which govern Reader Ministry. They have not been reviewed since 2000. The first draft of these has undergone the first round of scrutiny by the House of Bishops and the final version will hopefully be approved in 2026.

There are various questions being discussed as we try to offer a greater consistency to this ministry nationally. We expect there to be updates to the regulations and recommendations around things like Ministerial Development Reviews, Annual Returns, length and scope of licences or PTO and their renewal, safeguarding, and transferring ministry between dioceses and parishes. There is much I am keen to move on with now, but it seems prudent to wait for the final regulations which I hope will be finalised in the new year.

In the meantime, I am deeply grateful for all of you and for your ministry in your parishes and our diocese as evangelists and physicians of the soul. And I pray that each of us will continue to be 'restored through the wholesome medicine of the gospel.'

JUST A SEC

FRANCES STRIDE IS A READER AT HEXHAM ABBEY AND HONORARY SECRETARY TO THE READERS' BOARD



Touch of Faith, by Yongsung Kim, 2010 © Courtesy Havenlight and Yongsung Kim

Jesus' miracles, driven by his deep compassion, have resonated much with me this year, especially in my work as your Honorary Secretary. Each miracle story is unique, but they all share a common thread: Jesus' love for people. His compassion affects us profoundly today and challenges us to live it out in our own lives.

John's gospel tells the story of a royal official desperate to save his son's life. Despite not being a Jew, Jesus showed him compassion and healing, transcending cultural, religious, and social boundaries. When Jesus meets Nicodemus, he explains the Kingdom of God to him through compassion, patiently guiding him to the truth. It was not just about knowledge transfer; it was about compassionate guidance.

In Luke's gospel, we meet a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Despite doctors' failures, she touched Jesus' garment, and he healed her. Jesus could have ignored her touch, but his compassion compelled him to address her directly. His compassion is not limited to the healthy; it extends to the broken and those in need. In Luke's gospel, Jesus encounters a tormented man living among tombs, isolated and in anguish. Jesus commands the demons to leave and tells him to return to his family and share God's love. Jesus not only delivers the man but also restores him to his community, showing



profound compassion. His deliverance was not just about casting out demons; it was about restoring his dignity and identity.

Matthew's gospel reveals Jesus' compassion even in his death. He gave his life to save us from our broken hearts and sinful nature, breaking the eternal separation between us and God. In Greek, there is a word for this self-sacrificial, unconditional love - agape. The cross is where compassion meets action in its most powerful form.

Jesus' sacrifice was for each of us. His compassion calls us to live lives reflecting that same love and sacrifice. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was moved by compassion to heal, teach, deliver, and ultimately sacrifice himself for us. His miracles were acts of pure love. Let's be inspired to live lives filled with compassion, as Jesus calls us to love others as he loves us. He wants us to be His hands and feet in this world, reaching out to those in need. As Readers, we can show Christ's compassion by having open hearts for opportunities to love, even in the midst of life's brokenness and tragedies. Elizabeth Tarbox's 'Evening Tide Meditations' beautifully explains this: 'Where the light catches the tears in another's eyes, where hands are held, and there are moments without words, let us be present then, and alive to the possibility of transformation.' Let's prioritise others' well-being. It is not just about offering comfort and support; it is about being fully present and listening. It is about celebrating joys and sorrows, allowing others' stories to change our own. Luke's gospel teaches us to be present to others' pain, heal their wounds, hear their sadness, celebrate their success, and let their stories shape our own.

Is this the essence of true friendship? Not about perfection or having all the answers; it is about being there for those who need us.

A NEW EDITOR FOR NEWCASTLE READER

LOUISA FOX IS A READER AT ST MARY MAGDALENE LONGBENTON

Greetings! My name is Louisa Fox and I will be Editor of Newcastle Readers Magazine from edition 27 which comes out next year. Taking over from Gloria will be a hard act to follow. I am grateful for the chance to learn from her as I shadow her for edition 26 which will be out for Christmas.

Having already seen a list of all the tasks that go into producing the magazine - from chairing the communications group, gathering articles, communicating with the designer, proofreading, liaising with the printer, collecting the finished magazines and putting them into envelopes with the right label - I am both excited and a little daunted. Gloria tells me that before Covid, a team would gather to put the magazines into envelopes, but this hasn't restarted since the pandemic. Perhaps this is something we can revive together in the future.

Thank you to Gloria

At this point I want to pay tribute to and thank Gloria for all her work over so many years and especially for keeping the magazine going through Covid. I would also like to thank Richard her husband for all the work he has done. Over the years, Gloria has written many interesting and informative articles and I hope she will continue to contribute occasionally. I am grateful that she will still be just a phone call or email away!

A little about me

Gloria has kindly asked me to introduce myself. I grew up in Belmont near Durham and lived there until I went to university. My calling to ministry has been

with me for many years. In the early 1980s I attended an ACCM selection conference to become a Deaconess but like many at that time I was advised to gain more life experience.

In 1984 after marrying Rob, we moved to Stalybridge near Manchester. A few years later my husband trained and was ordained as a Non-Stipendiary Minister. I became involved in Church life in Ashton-under-Lyne where he was sent following ordination. Like so many of you, I have served in many roles; Junior Church Leader, Church Warden, PCC Secretary, intercessor, lesson reader and more. My Father became a Reader at our Church in Belmont and I suppose it was always at the back of my mind that this might be a good fit for me.

An unexpected career change in 2012 gave me the time to train as a Reader. Following prayer, discernment and selection, I began my training in 2013 in Manchester Diocese which involved 2 years of study before I was licensed in 2015, followed by 4 post-licensing modules.

Moving to the North East

Looking back, I am surprised at how soon after my licensing we moved to Newcastle. I had trained with the idea of supporting our parish, particularly with services of the word. Our parish at that time had 5 churches and only 2 stipendiary ministers. In 2015 our lives changed with the birth of our first grandson. Our son and his family lived in the North East and after a visit in April 2016, I found myself wishing we lived closer. My husband, who worked for HMRC, asked, "Shall I see if



I can get a transfer with work?" When he asked the answer was yes, there's a job available now. He applied, got it and by August we were living in a rented house in Heaton and attending St Francis where I first met Gloria. It was very much a case of knocking on the door and finding that it flew open! I'm not sure we would have done it, if we'd had time to think about it.

Later, we bought a house in Longbenton and started to worship at St Mary Magdalene. After waiting the customary six months, I was welcomed and licensed to Newcastle Diocese in 2017. When my husband retired, we moved to Seaton Sluice but continued to worship and serve at St Mary Magdalene which was in vacancy. This has just come to an end, so we are all moving on to a new chapter together and to see where God leads us.

Looking Ahead

I am excited to begin this new role and to build on Gloria's wonderful work. This is very much your magazine, so I look forward to offers of articles and ideas. Together we can continue to make the Newcastle Reader Magazine a source of inspiration and connection for everyone.

My email address is **louisa.fox84@gmail.com**

COMINGS AND GOINGS

CONGRATULATIONS AND A WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW READERS

ISABELLA (IZZY) MACDONALD-BOOTH
to serve at Newcastle St George and St Hilda

JOHANNA (JO) THERESE McEVEDY
to serve at Earsdon and Backworth

REBECCA (BEC) LOUISE SCANE
to serve at Newcastle Holy Cross

From left to right: Izzy, Bec and Jo



HERE THEY INTRODUCE THEMSELVES

Izzy Macdonald-Booth

I was delighted to be one of three newly-minted Readers licensed on 19 October. As a cradle Anglican I was taken to church as a child and grew up experiencing life in a rural parish. As my mother lost her faith when I was a teenager, I had a choice to make and was asked "do you want to continue going to church on your own?" to which the answer was yes! My faith grew and was nurtured like a lot of people, by lay and ordained members of the church looking out for me and supporting me.

After a move to Newcastle to study, I attended sporadically while distracted by life and eventually joined the parish at St George's, Jesmond. A previous vicar encouraged me to do a Diocesan course called Faith and Life, which many people will remember. This course really was the catalyst for my faith to grow into something more solid and fully fledged, and I became more involved in the church as a result of this. I had been considering Reader ministry for a while, watching with interest



the Reader in my parish (Joan Grenfell, a Reader who celebrates a 40-year ministry this year!) and the encouragement and opportunities for ministry she gave me. This gave me the confidence to consider it more seriously. Never underestimate the power of your presence in the parish – many, many people notice and are impacted. After a big push by Bishop Christine Hardman, who pinned me down one day and asked me why I was putting it off and in no uncertain terms told me to get on with it, I applied.

The training has been a wonderful experience, like anyone returning to study after a long gap it was daunting, but the tutors are very supportive and want everyone to succeed. In many ways it made me question why training for ministry is so academic in the Church of England, but it has given me so much confidence in talking about faith, spirituality and theology and I know it will help me into the future. With a full-time job, my ministry is a little limited at the moment but my parish certainly keeps me busy and out of mischief!

Jo McEvedy

When I retired in 2022 from teaching English it had not really been part of my plan to embark on Reader training! I was looking forward to spending time with my dogs, playing tennis, joining a band with my sax, and fulfilling a lifelong ambition to join the People's Theatre. I had also decided to apply to do a degree in Ancient History at Newcastle University.



I had been getting increasingly involved in my church, however, since lockdown, when belonging to a church community had been a real support. I was already in the choir, a Eucharistic minister and intercessor; however, when Tim Mayfield suggested I might consider training for Readership, I was initially very surprised. But Tim was very reassuring and explained that Reader ministry can be highly flexible. He thought I might have a gift for preaching and indeed he had me doing my first sermon a few months later, before I'd even started the course! It was on Luke 12 49-56 - I was extremely worried about what I could say to our congregation that would be of any use to them, and found myself talking about fire imagery in Lord of the Flies: one lady went away and read the book...well, it was a result of some sort!

Throughout the subsequent three years of the training (and some increase in the amount of theology I was able to bring to my sermons), the congregations of St Alban's and St John's have been such a great support: encouraging, appreciative and putting up with my occasional experiments. Lindisfarne College of Theology's course is enormously varied, both theoretically and practically, and gave me the opportunity to get involved in projects such as our Children's Church and design my own Morning Worship service. Another highlight of the course was when I was sent away to a long placement at Church of the Good Shepherd, under the care of Julie Mooney, I was made immensely welcome and felt I flourished there with a range of new experiences and learning.

So, I have a long list of people to thank for accompanying me on this exciting and unexpected journey: the people of Earsdon, Backworth and Battle Hill; wonderful supervisors Tim and Julie who have always expected much of me but given me the space and opportunities to learn; the staff at Lindisfarne for their brilliant programme, excellent teaching and wrap-round support; all the other students but especially my

particular peers Izzy and Bec, who are going to go on to make such a difference in their roles. I am still slightly surprised to find myself here, but can only assume that it was meant to be.

Bec Scane

My name is Bec Scane. I was born here in Newcastle and have been on a wonderful and exciting journey with God to find myself here as a Reader. We moved to Australia when I was about 12 and after finishing university I lived and worked in Japan for about five years. I ended up back here in the UK in 2014 and moved back up north with my husband in 2016. After 20 plus years away, there was a wonderful feeling of connection and of coming a full circle when I returned to the church I had once attended as a child.



I had often felt a pull towards ministry, but the answer had always seemed to be 'not here', or 'not now' or 'not this'. As I settled back in as part of the congregation at Holy Cross Fenham, I felt that all those previous 'not yet's' had led me here, right around the world and back to where I began. I was where God wanted me to be, but (like many of us) I needed a little nudge. These nudges came from a couple of different places. One of those was seeing our then Reader (now Reader Emeritus) Barbara Bailes, and seeing what Reader ministry could look like in action. Another was the arrival of our interim vicar, Reverend Dan McCarthy. When I initially voiced the feeling that I was being called to Reader ministry, their support, and the wholehearted encouragement from everyone at Holy Cross helped me to see clearly that this was God's call of 'yes, this, now, here'.

With excitement (and a little trepidation), I started my training and I can hardly believe that three years have already gone by and I am now about to be licensed. While there are always challenges, and always will be, I have loved every minute of this next part of my journey with God, learning, sharing, celebrating, excited to be part of God's ministry. I have learnt so much and met so many wonderful people along the way.

I am excited to continue my journey with God, serving as a Reader at Holy Cross Fenham. We are currently in vacancy, and I am looking forward with hope to see where God will lead us and how we can continue to be part of his ministry, growing together in faith and love, looking out to see where best our gifts can be used.

OTHER NEWS

At the Annual Meeting, held on 18th October 2025, the following announcements were made:

Canon Dr Ce Pacitti is to be Deputy Warden of Readers.

Bishop Helen-Ann has granted Barry Stewart the title of Emeritus.

Bishop Helen-Ann has granted Permission to Officiate to Jane Algar, John Cooke and Anne Laing.

Jane Algar has changed parish.

Ann Wager-Bradley has changed parish.

Fiona Boyd, Remley Mann, Sharon Williams and Sal Howard are discerning ordination via the Elizabeth Pathway.

Andy Morsman has been ordained as a Deacon.

Alison Edwards has moved to Scotland.

Several anniversaries were noted:

Margaret Evans, Louisa Fox, Yvonne Knibbs, Anne Morris, Ce Pacitti, Annette Playle and Paulette Thompson **10 years**.

Gloria Bryant and John Oscroft **20 years**.

Janice Robinson **30 years**.

Nina Lloyd-Hirst **35 years**.

Joan Grenfell **40 years**.

MANY CONGRATULATIONS TO THEM ALL.

Special mention was made of Christina Malvern **47 years**.

IN MEMORIAM:

Since the 2024 Annual Meeting three of our Readers have died:

Alfred Groome (Emeritus), Simon Embleton (Licensed Reader) and Anne Bartlett (Emeritus). Obituaries for Alfred and Simon appeared in the previous edition. Anne, who served at St Peter's Church Monkseaton for many years, died

on 25th August 2025. Her funeral service was held at the church on 15th September 2025.

May Alfred, Simon and Anne rest in peace and rise in glory. AMEN.

BECOMING A ROCHA GOLD ECO CHURCH: BERWICK PARISH CHURCH

ANNE HORNE IS A READER WITH PTO AT
BERWICK PARISH CHURCH



Berwick Eco Group: Anne Horne is third from left, front row

Berwick Parish Church is a Cromwellian Grade 1 listed building in a conservation area, so any structural environmental project is beset with problems from inception. Add the construction material - ancient stone from Berwick Castle, and 21st century innovations seem like an impossible dream whenever carbon footprint is mentioned.

In 2021 however, an enthusiastic group assembled to discuss possibilities. The Reader, Anne Horne, who was already Deanery Eco Champion, was asked to take on the role of Parish Eco Champion. At this point, they registered with A Rocha as an eco-church and the Eco Group began to meet in earnest. Since 2022, it has been co-ordinated by Mrs Susan Phillips who was the principal architect of a 'Five-Year Plan' and the A Rocha Gold Award bid.

By far the most ambitious project has been installation of solar panels on the church roof. They were fortunate in a number of ways. A low parapet around the lower south roof means the 26 panels are hidden from view, even from the nearby town walls. A modern steel alloy roof covering ensured no impact on the centuries' old beams underneath. Cabling from the panels was brought down through the bell tower emerging through grouting, not the ancient stones, into a convenient side room that now houses the fire safe cupboard and storage batteries.

The group is also fortunate in having a large churchyard (closed since the 1850s) with overgrown areas of brambles, a haven for wildlife, especially hedgehogs. In March the parish came to the end of nearly two years of interregnum. The work of the Eco group carried on regardless however, and since 2022 projects have included:

- Bee hives, wildflower meadow and wilding.
- Recycled owl box, bird boxes, bat boxes, hedgehog homes and feeding station - made by local school children and the Children Northeast charity.
- Bird feeding and watering station. (Water supplied

by a water butt - as all the church pipes are cast iron and cannot be cut, the water butt is fed from the roof of the bee shed).

- Extensive planting of saplings, whips and shrubs for church foliage; Help Yourself Herb Garden.
- Seating and cycle rack made from storm damage salvaged wood by HMP Northumberland's Oswin project
- Supportship for African projects: Beehive twinning through Bees Abroad, toilet twinning and Solar Aid sponsorship.
- Participating in the 'Count on Nature' species count for the last 4 years which has shown a steady increase in biodiversity within the churchyard.

Other highlights include an annual plant sale which this year initiated a joint seed swap event to be held later in the year. Members of the group host themed walks. In the past these have included a tranquillity walk, a bat walk led by an expert and Heritage Week walks, one incorporating eco work.



The Rooftop Meeting

These and many other initiatives led to the A Rocha Gold Eco Church Award in July. At the same time, their efforts were highly commended at the Love Northumberland Awards Ceremony, in the Community Response to Climate Change Emergency Project category. In her closing remarks, the Duchess of Northumberland began by noting that she had been presenting the awards for 15 years and it was the first ceremony at which a church had been represented. The church plans to share the prize money between the 2 church schools for their biodiversity projects.

The parish welcomed Revd. Lee Taylor in March, who came from a bronze award eco church, so has already offered support, including much needed pastoral care prior to the gold assessment review meeting. He has commented "This award is the recognition of a lot of hard work and actual life-changing behaviour not just from our wonderful eco-group but from all our congregation and beyond. As a recognition of what we have achieved so far it is also an impetus to carry on and go further as we live well as part of God's good creation."

BECOMING A ROCHA GOLD ECO CHURCH: NEWCASTLE ST FRANCIS

THE REVEREND ROBERT LAWRENCE IS VICAR AT NEWCASTLE ST FRANCIS



The members of St Francis' Eco Group

St Francis' Church, High Heaton, became the 100th gold awarded Eco Church in England and Wales and the first in the diocese of Newcastle to achieve this prestigious award. Inspired by the preaching of Canon Peter Dodd in a Vacancy during 2015, and encouraged in the early years by Reader Mary Lillie, they registered as an Eco Church in 2016 and were awarded bronze just a year later in 2017. Three years on in 2020, they reached their silver award, and after five years, they are now celebrating reaching gold.

An A Rocha UK volunteer assessor who visited the church said, "St Francis' have been pursuing the environmental agenda for many years and demonstrate a passion for campaigning on environmental issues locally and nationally, and have embedded creation care in every aspect of church life."

The award was assessed in five categories, Worship and Teaching, Buildings and Energy, Land and Nature, Community and Global Engagement, and Lifestyle.

As well as celebrating harvest, they hold an annual Green Eucharist before Lent starts and mark the Season of Creation from 1st September to St Francis Day on 4th October, using appropriate prayers and liturgies. The weekly bulletin has a prayer for the environment from Canon Rob Kelsey's beautiful book *Praying for the Earth*.

As well as replacing all the lighting with low-energy bulbs, they have completed an ambitious programme to improve insulation by replacing all the windows in the hall and church with double glazed aluminium-framed units, which has reduced the amount of gas used for heating.

They manage the grounds for wildlife, including hedgerows, maintaining a pollinator friendly oasis in their tranquil and thoughtfully planted sanctuary garden on

a once-neglected patch of land (pictured left).

They are active in recycling, including hosting a Salvation Army clothing bank, and some of the congregation have trained as beekeepers and the parish now has a bee hive project which has been fascinating! They also organise a monthly community

litter-pick along the nearby waggon-ways with support from local councillors and residents who join in, and have also hosted Eco-Fests as a way of encouraging the local community to share in the vision.

As part of their commitment to the global community they offset their carbon consumption by supporting a tree-planting project in Ghana, as well as regular support for Christian Aid, and Water Aid's Toilet-Twinning

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"We are thrilled to receive the A Rocha UK gold Eco Church award, which will boost us in our goal to achieve net zero carbon by 2030, and so much more

”

The Reverend Robert Lawrence, Vicar at St Francis' Church, said: "We are thrilled to receive the A Rocha UK gold Eco Church award, which will boost us in our goal to achieve net zero carbon by 2030, and so much more. We believe that caring for the environment is a key part of our mission, and we are keen to continue on our Green journey. With teamwork and a bit of effort, anyone can get started with Eco Church."

The Right Reverend Dr Helen-Ann Hartley, the Bishop of Newcastle said: "It's a wonderful achievement by St Francis' Church in reaching gold Eco Church status and I congratulate all involved in this remarkable accolade. I have no doubt that this will inspire our other churches – many of whom are already on their own impressive eco journeys. It underlines a strong determination across our diocese to strive for net carbon zero and an unwavering commitment to look after God's wonderful creation."

THIRTY YEARS A READER

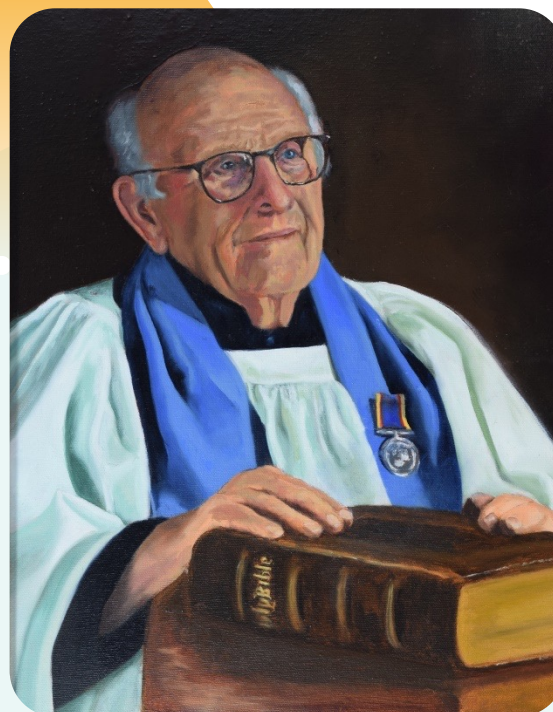
BILL DEVONSHIRE IS A READER WITH PTO IN THE BENEFICE OF EMBLETON WITH RENNINGTON AND ROCK

Having returned to regular attendance after a break of several years due to working hours. I was sitting in Holy Trinity Church, Walton, Aylesbury, waiting for most of the congregation to arrive, it was all peaceful and quiet, when a voice said "BE OF USE" which was repeated, I looked all around and there was nobody anywhere near to me, for some minutes I felt very confused, during the service my mind kept returning to the message.

It continued for the next two weeks, when again I was waiting for the service to start when the voice spoke again this time "SPEAK TO DON," Don being the Team Rector, this came as a big relief. The Revd Don Brewin was a great guide and mentor.

Three months later I joined The Chiltern Christian Training Scheme, I felt it would give me a base from which I could continue studies, when I knew what future direction, I would be going in. This was not an easy step as I have never been academically clever. The tutors soon put me at ease. My sermons have never been deep theology, but many times I had positive feedback, not "we liked your sermon" but they gave connections to themselves or events, which I found very encouraging. During my three years on the training scheme, I met many interesting people; we were soon a happy group, some very intelligent people and quite a few who were new to studying and essay writing like me. Our tutors knew just how to look after us.

After a while Don Brewin pointed out, I was a countryman in a town church; also, he had several Readers and suggested that I find a country parish. After visiting several churches on a Sunday Morning, on my second visit to Whitchurch, (Bucks) The Revd Tom Thorpe, said "nice to see you Bill, what are you doing here?" My reply was "I am looking at village churches, with a view to becoming a Reader." Tom's reply was "room for you here." During all this time I was seeing the Diocesan Director of Ordinands who thought I was



A portrait of Bill Devonshire, painted by Philip Hull

more suitable to Reader Ministry. I was extremely disappointed but with hindsight I have had a wonderful and rewarding time as a Reader.

However, things were moving back home. Tom, was getting me busy taking part in services and preaching my first sermons. Then the odd service or two, he would say "the best training was to do it." One item had been missed with visits to the Diocesan Director of Ordinands; I had not been to Reader selection. A fortnight later I joined over twenty people for a selection Saturday. I was referred and was soon called by the Warden of Readers for a further interview. Two months later I was Admitted and Licensed at the Annual Service. Tom was Team Rector with two Team Vicars; I was the second Reader. Eight churches in the team several would have three services on a Sunday. The five of us were kept very busy; all would circulate the churches. More often than not, I would take two services on a Sunday: BCP Morning and Evening Prayer. Occasionally I would start a Eucharist Service with the knowledge a Priest would turn up in time to take over.

Life away from church crashed suddenly, I was made redundant at 57, four very difficult years followed. One of our former Team Vicars, gave me some very sound advice, which I took. The result, my move to Rock in Northumberland and The Embleton Benefice. Several people thought that I would be putting my cassock away for good, Oh no! I was Licensed at the Annual Service which was in St Michael's Alnwick. I was welcomed into The Embleton Benefice, slightly more formal than I had been used to. Rock was also in need of a general dogsbody, mowing the churchyard, and

many other things, The Revd Michael Mountney taught me so much more. When he retired, I just carried on at Rock almost as vicar without the paper work and responsibilities. Michael held a very formal Easter vigil; the year after he retired, I took the service, I felt very honoured and privileged. I did add one item at the end of the service, each of the pastoral candles from the five churches would have been blessed by a Priest but in my case I started with the words "We ask for the Blessing" a member of the four visiting churches within the benefice came to the altar rail to collect their lighted candles, I used the words the Light of Christ to the appropriate church, all four then proceeded down the church to the door with all candles alight.

Life away from church crashed suddenly, I was made redundant at 57, four very difficult years followed.

My normal life, when we had a Priest, was second Sunday of the month assist at the Eucharist at Rock, third Sunday morning prayer at Craster and fourth Sunday of the month Sunday Service at Rock. Following a long interregnum, we welcomed the Revd Philip Harret as Vicar of the Embleton Benefice with Rennington and Rock. I was pleased to have an incumbent again, but my time as a "mini vicar" came to a slight end, even the Area Dean had treated me almost like a vicar. Philip turned out, like all the Priests I worked with, to be very helpful and supportive. Philip is a very good musician often playing the organ as well as leading a service, on one occasion I could not find an organist for a funeral at Rock, his reply was I will play the organ and you can take the service, he stepped forward to give the committal, followed with the interment. I always felt I was the Vicar's ears and eyes in Rock: I was asked if we did weddings in the church, I said yes and explained what was involved and who to see, I was also asked about Baptisms and several other things.

When Philip returned to Shropshire, another long interregnum which kept me very busy but it was very rewarding. During these interregnums I was



Bill receiving Maundy Money from King Charles III at York Minster

able to compile special services such as Harvest, Mothering Sunday, Carols and other main festivals. This was a special pleasure creating these services, I even did services on YouTube during Covid. One Sunday the Revd Bob Burston, had taken the Eucharist Service, afterwards he was asked about home Holy Communion for the sick, Bob looked at me and replied "yes Bill can do that". My ministry changed, the people I took Holy Communion to were so appreciative. On one occasion, I was asked if I would take a Holy Communion Service by Extension, I was very nervous as I started the service, as I stood and invited the congregation to come forward, I experienced one of the most wonderful moments in my life, which I shall never forget.

After the interregnum we were delighted to welcome the Revd Alison Hardy, now Canon Alison Hardy who has been highly supportive to myself and the rest of the Benefice. I have a host of memories, one was in the Opera House in Blackpool, where 2000 Young Farmers were there for the Annual Conference, I was robed sitting down by the orchestral pit, when HRH The Princess Royal came in to chair the conference, her first task was to ask me to say the prayers. This was my largest congregation. I was also privileged to receive The Royal Maundy from the King in York Minster. I was able to celebrate twenty-five years of Reader Ministry when the two Readings were read from each of my grandfather's Bibles. Reaching 85 and thirty years of ministry I eventually felt it was time to slow down. Little was I aware of the very generous plaudits I would receive; I only tried to 'be of use.' I have been very fortunate to have worked with wonderful, supportive clergy - they made it possible. I still have P.T.O. I am looking forward to a very busy Remembrance Sunday and, perhaps at some point fill in a spot, to help someone out. My Ministry has been wonderful.

PRISON CHAPLAINCY



CHRISTINE STEVENSON IS A READER SUPPORTED BY THE BENEFICE OF ACKLINGTON, SHILBOTTLE AND WARKWORTH AND IS LICENSED AS A CHAPLAIN AT HMP NORTHUMBERLAND

‘Blessed is the person who has found their vocation, let them ask for nothing more’ (John Ruskin)

As I joined my Lindisfarne community at the last residential, I would attend at ‘Emmaus village.’ I heard myself saying as my parting advice: “Be sure you are prepared for the God of surprises.” Two years later I have fulfilled the task God had for me all along to work in prison ministry.

Every day is a blessing to partner with God as I meet him in each prisoner; look into their eyes and am reminded that they are loved by God. But first; introductions for those who do not know me. I was brought up in the town of Morpeth in a loving Church going family: both parents joyfully giving their time to Morpeth Parish as choir members, PCC members, Church yard maintenance, Parish breakfast providers the list goes on. I naturally fell into ‘service’ in the Parish as a Sunday school teacher, ‘server, chalice bearer, prayer ministry team member.’

My vocational background included 20 years as a PICU nurse working and training initially in Great Ormond Street Hospital and Newcastle city Hospitals. A vocation which demanded critical thinking skills and unwavering team spirit in the

minute-by-minute function of the paediatric intensive care unit. I married Trevor during this time and we were blessed with three children. Once a parent I took the opportunity to work part time in the hospital as I wanted to be the primary carer for my children; the love of a lioness, I often quoted, when describing my parental experience. During this time, I was approached by the local primary school to take a small contract which I accepted, allowing me yet further involvement in my children's school life. My parents came to live with us during this time which helped immensely.

It was then a great privilege to look after my parents in their elder years. I know my children honoured their grandparents because of the unique relationship living together afforded them. I cannot distinctly remember when I sensed my calling, other than a number of people encouraging me, advising me, suggesting to me, to consider ministry training. One suggestion came from an anonymous SMS message saying ‘I need to meet you for coffee’! I pondered on the book ‘The Shack’ by Paul Young then answered yes to coffee but who are you? She admitted it was hard not to answer ‘God’.

The rest is history I applied and was licensed as a Reader in October 2023. The chaplaincy placement in our second year, I believe, was



another God moment as I had requested to be placed within hospital chaplaincy looking forward to the familiar hospital surroundings. However, as we were coming out of Covid, hospitals were not open to volunteers which necessitated opting for my second choice which was prison chaplaincy. Within the first hour of my placement, I knew I was where God wanted me to be; it was that simple. The God of surprises had finally revealed his plan for me, strangely it did not feel like a surprise, more like coming home.

Prisoners and their beliefs

What religion are you? Is a question I ask every prisoner when they arrive at HMP Northumberland. The answers can be varied. Most respond Church of England, Roman Catholic or Muslim, though often no religion. Visiting 'Receptions' new prisoners is a chaplaincy statutory duty carried out daily ensuring each prisoner's religion has been registered correctly to ensure they are offered worship time, festival days off and religious items and foods. Quite often in the confusion and distress felt on entering prison the first thing that comes into their heads is uttered. Others are sure that 'my grandma was a Christian and she will be praying for me, so can I be registered as that?' New prisoners find themselves in an amorphous, no man's land, needing to find new ways to survive. Prayer is very important to many prisoners: candle services with prayer are held frequently in honour of anniversaries for relatives and friends who have died. Because of social conditioning the men manage pain and grief by appearing to function. Unused to receiving pastoral care, when given a listening ear the young, hurt, little boy appears; stories are recounted that may not have been told before. Meeting vulnerability with vulnerability involves risk to self but nothing else is authentic. In prison chaplaincy the model of Christ himself the epitome of vulnerability is needed, nothing less will do.

Grandparents play a pivotal role as a protective factor to these young men. Sadly, the justice system only recognises next of kin in granting attendance at funerals or being approved for a compassionate visit in situations of end-of-life care: hence the many candle-services chaplaincy hold. The death of Nana or Granda whilst in custody makes the grieving process even harder as the hope of putting things right with their relative is no longer possible. I am constantly moved by the depth of prisoners' prayers for their loved ones. 'Chapel,' as services are called, is rooted in discovering or rediscovering spirituality; often, having come from chaotic lives, they crave the beauty and peace of the services.

"Care for prisoners as if you were in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3). Part of my commitment to my role is to be outward looking. I am supported by the Cathedral staff and my parish: Acklington, Shilbottle and Warkworth. Each month a volunteer will celebrate a Eucharist service, which extends our team beyond the prison fence. All volunteers have remarked that it is not what they imagined and are keen to return. The men are refreshed by other viewpoints, styles and influences. Before Christmas I invited volunteers to come and sing carols in the old-fashioned way outside wrapped up; thirty lovely people volunteered; I went to security with my head in my hands! What an absolute blessing this was both for the prisoners and the volunteers. I still receive positive comments from both groups and a request that it is repeated this year. Recently we looked at the story of the baptism of Jesus in our service. A few men grasped this idea of dying with Jesus and beginning anew, requesting to be baptised, others to renew their baptism vows. Stories have the power to change lives, Jesus being the most powerful of all.

Before I end let me exorcise some myths;

- 1) Prisoners sit in cells with huge colour TVs and play on game consuls every day. A small TV is given if a prisoner's behaviour elevates him out of basic to standard.
- 2) Prisoners spend their days in the gym. Each prisoner is entitled to two hours weekly in the gym, if they have passed a risk and safety assessment and are not on basic.
- 3) Prisoners have mobiles and can access the internet. Each cell has an in-cell telephone, the prisoner has to submit numbers to security to be allowed to use them, some are approved and some declined.

I will end with a quotation from Oscar Wilde's poem: The Ballad of Reading Gaol:

This too I know-and wise it were
If each could know the same-
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

BIBLICAL WISDOM WRITINGS AND MINISTRY IN AND THROUGH WORK



ROB FOX IS A RETIRED MSE (MINISTER IN SECULAR EMPLOYMENT). ROB WORKED IN TAX FOR OVER 30 YEARS. HE WORSHIPS AT ST MARY MAGDALENE LONGBENTON.

Background to Wisdom writing

Scholars identify several types of Old Testament literature, including:

- Historical – 'how we got here'
- Priestly – regulation for right living
- Prophetic – the consequences of not living rightly
- Wisdom – how we can live rightly.

While we think of some works, such as Ecclesiastes, as 'Wisdom' writings, it is found in other types: Historical writing - 1 Kings, and Prophetic – Isaiah, Malachi.

The Wisdom literature genre is not only Judaic, but found also in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian and Chinese literature. In Judaism, Wisdom literature appears in mid-first millennium BC, and is associated with the Greek word for wisdom, sophia. In Hebrew, Wisdom is *hokmā* - a gift given by God and a skill learned or developed as a result. (The skill needed to build and furnish the tabernacle is called wisdom). Solomon asked God for wisdom to govern and to administer justice (1 Kgs 3:7–14; 4:29). Wisdom is not a pre-packed, fully fledged, gift from God; it begins with God's gift, through the Spirit, then growing and applied through experience and exercise of skill.

OT Wisdom literature is of two types:

- Conservative Positive Wisdom – pragmatic, real-world advice about proper behaviour and actions, attaining success in life, living a good and fulfilling life. Proverbs is the best example.
- Critical Negative Wisdom ("Vanity Literature" or "Wisdom in Protest") – a more pessimistic outlook, sceptical of human achievements, highlighting the inevitability of mortality, rejecting material gains, and advocating that, since nothing has intrinsic value (vanity theme) and all will come to an end (memento mori theme), one should just enjoy life to the fullest while we can (*carpe diem*). E.g. Ecclesiastes.

Context of OT Wisdom writing

Israelite Wisdom is rooted in reverence and commitment to God. Its world view: God is Creator, both of his people and the physical world; everything else in wisdom arises from this conviction (cf. Proverbs 3:19).

Wisdom was God's first creation (Proverbs 8:22). As Creator, God has embedded truth in all of creation; all of creation reflects the wisdom, nature, and character

of its creator, therefore all of creation is a way to learn about God and his purposes for the world. Creation is truly a "cosmos" (Romans 1:10). Wisdom takes seriously the confession in Genesis that the created world is good (Genesis 1:31); there is no hint of an evil physical world found in Greek thinking.

Human response is in finding the truth of God as reflected in how the world operates according to the harmony of its creator, and then living within the harmony of God's order (1 Cor 3:9). Wisdom is to search for and maintain the order of God in the world, to live well as God has created humanity to live. A "fool" is one who does not recognize God as creator and does not seek to live according to the harmony of God's creation.

The "way of wisdom" is an ethical system in which humanity is responsible for searching, finding, and doing the things necessary to secure their well-being in God's world (Ecclesiastes 8:12). It constantly asks, "What is God doing here, and what - therefore - should I be doing?"

The scope of Wisdom writing

Old Testament and Apocrypha works Scholars identify as Wisdom writings are:

- Job
- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Ecclesiasticus
- Wisdom of Solomon
- some Psalms

Many other OT books contain elements of Wisdom writing. Wisdom writing is also found in the NT, for example:

- in Jesus' teaching (wisdom parables and proverbs)
- in the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude, and in Hebrews – cf. wisdom with Jesus as the subject

The characteristics of Wisdom writing

Wisdom is concerned with the issues facing humanity in general, the typical and recurring aspects of life we face daily. Much in other genres is concerned with unique events in history in which God reveals himself. Wisdom literature is little interested in history, politics, God who acts, miracles, sin, forgiveness, guilt. These are not discounted, but the focus is on daily living, the 'mundane' aspects of life, such as raising children, providing economic security, finding the appropriate spouse.

The world view of wisdom is not mythical or cyclical, but concerned with stability and order, the status quo, especially in the social arena; the goal is to live in harmonious relationship with God, others, and the world. How we live rightly in the here and now. The focus is on

interpersonal relationships, as well as reflective questions about the meaning of life and how to live it.

Wisdom does not address the human condition from the divine perspective, but from human needs and concerns, and in terms of what human beings can and should do to address these. It is practical, starting with the human, and works towards what the wise action is, in the light of our relationships to God and each other. It expresses the way things are, rather than what we'd like them to be; it is descriptive, not prescriptive, describing and defining the world and the existing social order as a means to live within both in productive ways.

Wisdom's claim to authority lies in tradition and observation; it is self-evident. There is no "thus says the Lord" grounding of authority, rather the truth of life is already there in God's creation awaiting discovery. Tradition finds expression through the wisdom of experience, both in individuals and the collective experiences of community. Preference is given to age and established, proven, ways of doing things. It is grounded in social structures: the family, the "schools" of the wise elders, or the king and royal court, businesses; what we now call civic society.

Wisdom does not demand radical change, for example in dealing with social problems. Evolution rather than revolution: how can we work with what is to make it better for all?

Wisdom grapples with understanding the world, especially the physical and social environment in which we live; it is reflective, rational, and concerned with knowledge; concerned with learning enough to be able to choose the proper course of action for well-being in life, often expressed as the "two ways" or the "two paths" (cf. Psalm 1).

Wisdom in the New Testament

Wisdom writing is prominent in the New Testament as well as the Old. The 'two ways' theme is found in the writings of Paul (no surprise, given his training) and John; Paul contrasts the ways of light and darkness (Ephesians 5:8-11), spirit and flesh (Galatians 3:3); John of light and darkness (1 John 5-7).

Wisdom is also distinct from knowledge. Simply knowing does not itself lead to wise actions; on its own it "puffs up", as Paul puts it (1 Cor. 8:1). Knowledge is neutral; how we use it is wisdom, or foolishness.

The NT teaches that wisdom is found in the crucified Christ, and that he is the ultimate arbiter of the wisdom of God. He reveals the ways of God to us in his humility and his submission to God, and teaches his followers what it means to obey and worship God "in Spirit and in truth." How believers respond to the mystery of Christ crucified and his demands on their lives reveals their growth in wisdom. See Paul's discussion of Wisdom in his first letter to the church at Corinth (which needed to learn wisdom!), how he contrasts wisdom from God with human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:17-2:7).

The relevance of Wisdom to our workplace

Our secular work context, be it paid or voluntary, is an important field of mission and ministry. Here we grapple with what 'is', the day-to-day, interpersonal relationships, understanding where we are and what is going on, and

seeking to make the 'right' decisions, expressed in word and action. What is the proper course for the well-being of our workplace as an organisation and a community?

The Old and New Testaments are full of examples applying Wisdom in work contexts:

- Honest dealing – Proverbs 16:11: "Honest balances and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work."
- Get priorities right! Proverbs 24:27: "Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house."
- Understand the blockers to acting rightly, and avoid them, Proverbs 31:1-9: the dangers of distractions, such as wine, women, and song
- Prudence in business – Proverbs 31:10-end. Here the prudent and successful businessperson is a woman.
- Expect ups and downs – Ecclesiastes 3:9-13. Sometimes all our efforts seem in vain, a chasing after wind, but perseverance is its own reward.
- Don't begrudge others in their success – Ecclesiastes 4:4: "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind."
- And in the New Testament:
 - The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16)
 - The Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32).
 - We are co-workers with God (1 Cor. 3:7-9)
 - Don't be a burden to others (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8)
 - Reward workers fairly and justly (1 Tim. 5:18; James 5:4)
 - Wisdom is proved right by her actions (Matt. 11:19)

Wisdom is something we and others will see – but not always from the start. Persevering in what is right will have its way and say. At times words are not necessary as we are able to speak more clearly and effectively by living out Wisdom.

To summarise:

1. In both Old and New Testaments, Wisdom begins with recognising God as source and creator.
2. Wisdom sees creation in this context and seeks to work with it.
3. Wisdom seeks first to understand, then to act based on understanding.
4. It starts with what is and seeks to do what is right in context.
5. Wisdom is practical in what it seeks to achieve.

As we minister in and through our daily lives, Wisdom is always needed. Its scope is constant and all-embracing. How do we live wisely?

LAST WRITES

GLORIA BRYANT IS A READER WITH PTO AT
NEWCASTLE ST FRANCIS

Psalm 137: A Reflection

1 By the waters of Babylon we sat down
and wept, when we remembered Zion.

2 As for our lyres, we hung them up
on the willows that grow in that land.

3 For there our captors asked for a song,
our tormentors called for mirth:
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

4 How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a strange land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand forget its skill.

6 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my
mouth if I do not remember you, if I see
not Jerusalem above my highest joy.'

7 Remember, O Lord, against the people
of Edom the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, 'Down with it, down with it,
even to the ground.'

8 O daughter of Babylon, doomed to
destruction, Happy the one who repays
you for all you have done to us;

9 Who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock.

[© Common Worship Daily Prayer, page 137]

Psalm 137 is a lament. The writer evokes the grief and sorrow of the Judeans taken into exile by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. When it was written is unclear. Some commentators think it was written after the exile when the exiles had returned to Judah. Others, however, believe it was written in Babylon towards the end of the exile. Whatever the date of composition, Psalm 137 has a particularly important place in Jewish consciousness: observant Jewish families say the psalm before the Grace which ends a meal.



Upper class people seem to have been over-represented among the exiles, and we know that some of them did very well in Babylon, adopting Babylonian names and serving the king, though they would have found it difficult to observe their former religious practice and be faithful to their traditions. Regardless

of their status in exile, the people of Judah all found themselves enslaved and forced to live in a place that was much different geographically from what they knew. They found themselves in a land of many rivers, including the Euphrates and Tigris and their many tributaries. Though an abundant supply of water might seem a blessing to those used to more arid conditions, some commentators have supposed that certain slaves were set to work on draining the marshes, hard physical labour. That the psalm begins with a reference to the 'waters of Babylon' possibly suggests that the rivers and streams were a bitter memory in the minds of some exiles. On the other hand, the slaves at the end of their working day might simply have retreated willingly to the river banks to seek calm and peace, and there they sat down, not just to rest but to adopt what was the customary position of mourners and demonstrate their grief by weeping. The 'we' of the psalm may simply refer to a small group of friends who gathered for worship and called to mind what they had lost. Of importance among their losses would have been wealth and status and home but the greatest loss was the temple, the great temple of Solomon, lying in heaps of rubbish, no worship or sacrifices offered to God, no songs sung, solemn feasts unobserved. Verses 5 and 6 speak of their commitment to what made them who they were and wishing judgement on themselves if they forgot Jerusalem.

The destruction of the temple and Jerusalem was bad enough; however, to add insult to injury, the Babylonians wanted the exiles to sing their sacred songs, and appear happy to do so, while their conquerors tormented and mocked them, thus accentuating the Babylonian triumph over Judah. The only possible response was to avoid disrespecting the Lord and defiling their holy songs. They defied their tormentors, remaining silent, refusing to sing their songs or play their harps; instead, they hung their harps on the willows. Willows love river banks and the exiles would have seen many of them, their shape mirroring the despondency and weeping of the exiles. And yet, the exiles did not destroy their harps; their hope remained alive that one day their faithfulness would be rewarded, and that the Lord would return them to their homeland.

Return they did, after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and let the exiles return home in 539 B.C. Not everyone chose to return, and those who did returned in waves during the next 100 years or so. The history of the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple are recorded in the books of Ezra



and Nehemiah. The Babylonian exile is an abiding memory, and the return to Jerusalem is a defining moment for those we now know as the Jews. They did indeed remember who they were. Nehemiah's account suggests that the exiled Judeans experienced a significant awakening. They remembered they were a people with a special relationship with God through the Abrahamic covenant; they remembered they were members of the tribe of Israel (descended from Jacob to whom God had given that name); they remembered that they belonged on God-given land to which Moses had led them. Indeed, according to Nehemiah's genealogy, the returning exiles remembered the villages and districts with which their families had been associated. The public reading of the Mosaic Law (Nehemiah 8:1-10:39, possibly Deuteronomy or the whole Pentateuch) also reminded them of their distinctive religious identity, and there is evidence that many returning exiles, who had adopted Babylonian names, began to choose Judean theophoric names for their children. It is hardly surprising that Psalm 137 has such significance for Jews, recalling as it does a very difficult time in their history which God rescued them from.

The problem for Christians, who have adopted (some would say appropriated) the psalms is that sometimes we find passages in them we find disturbing, and this is so of the final three verses of Psalm 137. They are chilling. The verses call for vengeance on the Edomites and on the Babylonians, declaring that the one who 'takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock' will be happy: the translation above stops just short of using the word 'blessed.' The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, whose stories are told in Genesis. After the reconciliation of the brothers at Peniel, when Jacob declared that seeing Esau's face was 'like seeing the face of God,' the brothers went their separate ways in peace. However, a good relationship between the Israelites and the Edomites did not endure through succeeding generations. The Edomites, a tribe that eventually produced Herod the Great, would have a tumultuous history with Jacob's descendants, the Israelites. The Edomites rejected Yahweh, and, at the time of the Israelite exile in Babylon, they taunted the Israelites and looted Solomon's Temple (see verse 7 above). Verse 9 calls for an extreme form of revenge. Whilst the taking of revenge is very evident in the Hebrew scriptures, there is a requirement that it is proportionate (Exodus 21: 24).

In the Common Era the Jews have been on the receiving end of persecution rather than being vengeful persecutors. They have been a dispersed tribe, struggling to maintain their racial and religious identity. After the Jewish rebellion of 70 C.E., they were driven from their promised land and dispersed throughout the known world. That first diaspora led to others so that by modern times Jews were to be found in almost every nation of the world. Psalm 137 evokes their suffering not only during the Babylonian exile but throughout two millennia. In Europe, over the last 300 years alone, there have been periods of pogroms, genocide and murder on a vast scale, culminating in the Nazi death

camps. Approximately six million Jews were murdered in the holocaust, which will be forgotten unless younger generations learn about it. The persecution continues – Jew-hatred, antisemitism is on the rise, even in Britain which has been a safe-haven for Jews since Oliver Cromwell invited them to settle here in the 1650s. So, the attack on the Manchester synagogue on Yom Kippur this year was particularly alarming for them and for British society, as is, at the time of writing, the news that NHS staff need to be given mandatory training to stem antisemitism in our hospitals and surgeries.

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They hung
their harps
on the
willows.

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In the aftermath of the Nazi attempt to wipe out the Jewish race, one solution to guarantee their security was to fulfil the ambition of the Zionists and create a Jewish state – so Israel was born in 1948. Though good for Jews, the creation of Israel caused harm to the Palestinian people. There has never been true peace between Israel and her Arab neighbours, and, since 7th October 2023, the Israeli government has pursued a policy of extreme revenge against the Gazans, so that even those who are sympathetic to Israel and are not antisemites have reservations about what has taken place there. There are, no doubt, many Israeli Jews who would like to look at an Arab neighbour and see the face of God, as their ancestor Jacob saw in the face of a previously hated brother: it is almost certainly a shrinking number since 7th October 2023, especially since Hamas has not changed its *raison d'être*: to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. When Donald Trump proclaimed that his ceasefire in Gaza marked the end of 3000 years of violence in the Middle East, he was underestimating its length.

Whether Trump's peace plan will work is uncertain. Hatred and the desire for revenge are so embedded in the Middle East that peace seems elusive. Those who yearn for peace, be they Jew, Muslim or Christian can only pray for an end to the misery in a place of great importance to them all. History, stories and songs provide consolation for those who have been wronged; however, until those caught up in this, or any, conflict can see the face of God in the people who they find it hard to forgive or understand, there will never be justice and peace.