

Thought for the Day in Lent, focusing on tricky words in the Bible

Monday 15 – Sunday 21 February by Rev. Alan Stewart

Monday 15th

Tricky Word No. 1 – Breath



'Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.' (Genesis 2. 7)

In the second chapter of Genesis, that beautiful story of beginnings, we discover the extraordinary claim that humanity is a combination of dust (stardust, we know now!) and the breath of the divine. In scripture, God's Breath, in Hebrew 'Ruach', and in Greek 'Pneuma', is shorthand for the Holy Spirit; the life-force of God, the energy within all life. The ancient name for God (translated 'Yahweh' and usually considered too precious to speak aloud) is, in fact, the sound of breathing; in and out; Yah... Weh...

Often, we think of God as being somewhere 'out there', needing to be found. The truth is that God is and always has been within. Before our first breath and beyond our last, God is and always will be closer than our next breath.

Prayer can be as simple of breathing.

Breathe in peace, breathe out stress

Breathe in love, breathe our apathy

Breathe in all that is life, breathe out all that is not.

*Breathe in me, breath of God:
fill me with life anew,
that I may love as you have loved
and do as you would do.*

Tuesday 16th

Tricky Word No. 2 – Alleluia/Hallelujah



*'Alleluia! Sing to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.'*
(Psalm 106. 1)

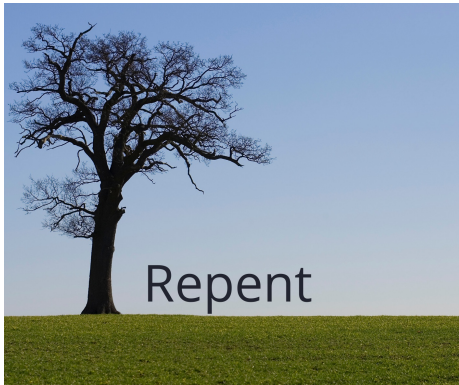
Found 24 times in Israel's songbook the Psalms, 'Hallelujah' or 'Alleluia' (a Greek translation from the Hebrew) simply means 'Praise the Lord' or 'Praise Yah' (a shortened name for God). Many of us will be familiar with Handel's great oratorio 'The Hallelujah Chorus' which, although often performed at Christmas, was actually intended to be a Lenten piece.

Today is Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent. The word Shrove is taken from the old English word 'Shrive' meaning 'repent' (tomorrow's tricky word). Traditionally it's a day to use up the butter and eggs in baking and pancake-making before we begin our Lenten fast. It's also the last official day when we say or sing our alleluias. During Lent, that word is traditionally not spoken until finally it shakes the stone free on Easter morning.

'Alleluia' is a wonderful proclamation of praise. Often in the Psalms the writer forces himself to utter those words in spite of how they're feeling, because God is and always will be worthy of our praise, regardless of how easy or how difficult life may be. So, whether it be a joyful outburst or 'a cold and very broken hallelujah', let's praise God by punctuating today with that beautiful word, silently or aloud. And then, through these next days of Lent, hold and treasure it within, until finally in that first light of resurrection, with all creation, we proclaim aloud; 'Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!'

Wednesday 17th

Tricky Word No. 3 – Repent



'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'
(Matthew 3. 2)

On a more usual Ash Wednesday we would receive a cross of the ash of last year's Palms upon our foreheads, and listen to those sobering words: 'Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ'.

Today is a day when we own the shadows of our lives; all that prevents us from becoming who we were created to be. Today, we are called to repent; literally to change direction; to turn away from all that limits and belittles us. And we are called to turn to Christ, the forgiver and giver of fresh starts and new life. As Jesus began his ministry, his message was one of repentance where, in order to claim that new life, he understood that first we must accept the truth of our shadow side or sin. In the early church, those seeking baptism would mark this change of direction by physically making a U turn of 180 degrees towards the sun's rising.

Repentance is a life's work; a daily turning. Perhaps today we could trace that cross on our foreheads with our finger, remembering the dustiness of our lives, and then physically turn our bodies from West to East, enacting our own choice to turn towards the true Light that gives life to the world.

Thursday 18th

Tricky Word No. 4 - Grace



*'And from his fullness
you have all received grace upon grace'
(John 1. 16)*

If there's one word that sums up the life and message of Jesus, it's 'grace'; God's unearned favour; the truth that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make him love us less.

Grace is counter-cultural; it goes against our instincts. We're taught there's no such thing as a free lunch. There must be a catch.

What makes God's grace so amazing, however, is that there isn't a catch. Everyone receives the same welcome, the same unconditional acceptance, the same kindness and care, the same love. It's not just for certain people; the good ones or the kind ones. It's not just for one religion or one kind of Christian. It's for everyone. Anne Lamott describes grace beautifully: 'It's a force that infuses our lives and lets us off the hook. It is unearned love - the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charms have failed you. Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.'

In the U2 song 'Grace', Bono sings, 'Grace; it's the name of a girl; it's also a thought that can change the world... grace finds beauty in everything'.

Today, may we surrender to and harness that power called grace. Today, may we each have eyes to see the beauty in everything, including ourselves, and may we allow that light, that electricity we call grace, to flow through us; to change the world, beginning with us.

Friday 19th

Tricky Word No. 5 - Heaven



'But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"'

(1 Corinthians 2. 9)

Famously, Led Zeppelin sang of a stairway to heaven, while Belinda Carlisle insisted that heaven actually is 'a place on earth'.

Harps and fluffy clouds aside, what's your idea of heaven? Frustratingly, the Bible doesn't offer many clues. The religion of Jesus' day, in fact, was undecided about the existence of any form of afterlife. Jesus himself spoke of the Kingdom of God not in the here-after, but in the here and now.

Throughout history, however, in near-death experiences many people have spoken of a kindly light or a sense of their soul leaving their body. In the final analysis, we can only guess at what happens after we die. A little child once said that heaven is the place where broken things go to get fixed and I love that. Whatever and wherever heaven is, for me, it's a home-coming and a healing. I hold on to the promise that whatever God has prepared for us, it will be beyond our imagining.

The charity Christian Aid powerfully stress their belief in 'life before death'. This Lent, how can we help to bring a taste of heaven to those currently living in their own personal hell? What one thing could we do today to bring a glimmer of hope to someone in need?

Saturday 20th

Tricky Word No. 6 - Exile



'By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion' (Psalm 137)

Contrary to popular belief, those words weren't penned by Boney M!

It's thought they were composed during the time of Babylonian exile, where many of the Jews of the Northern Kingdom of Judah were forcefully detained in Babylonia, the greatest super-power of its time. For the Jewish nation this was a time of crisis. Not only did it seem that their God had forsaken them, they were afraid that their identity and culture would be lost in this 'strange land'. In order to preserve their religious and national identity, they began to write down the stories of the forefathers and mothers which before were mainly passed on by word of mouth. It was in this crisis that the Jewish scriptures were forged.

You'll have heard, perhaps, the popular misconception that the Chinese character for 'crisis' is a combination of 'danger' and 'opportunity'. Regardless of its inaccuracy, there is a profound truth in that saying. When we are faced with any crisis in our lives, we may not be able to fix it, but we can always choose how we respond. Always, it will be an opportunity to grow in wisdom or compassion.

Perhaps these times we're living through can feel a little like exile. We're denied many of the people and places we call 'home'. We can choose, however, to use these times wisely; to see them as an opportunity to reflect on the importance of our relationships and to find new ways of investing in them. There are few things more meaningful than the written word. Is there a letter or a card or even a text you can send today to remind someone that they are regarded, that they are remembered by you?

Sunday 21st

Tricky Word No. 7 - Tongues



'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.'

(Acts 2. 4)

Speaking in tongues (or Glossolalia, to give it its fancy name) is the practice of speaking in an unknown language, usually within the context of public worship or private prayer. On the day of Pentecost, we're told that the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in the tongues or languages of other nationalities. Elsewhere in scripture, 'tongues' seem to refer more to 'heavenly' languages gifted by the Holy Spirit. In the church at Corinth this gift seems to be particularly divisive, the cause of unruly competition, and Paul has to step in to set some boundaries in place.

When first encountered, the speaking in tongues can be disconcerting for some. I remember the first time I heard people singing in tongue in a church service and it was actually one of most beautiful things I'd ever heard. The most helpful thing I think I can say about tongues is that, for me, it's a language of prayer which kicks in when I run out of words. Sometimes we just don't know how or what to pray, and it's in those moments that 'tongues' can speak the unspeakable. If that's something you feel compelled to explore, then ask the Holy Spirit to gift you with this beautiful language of prayer. If not, then take time today to sit with that other beautiful gift called silence; a language too deep for words.