

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

Monday 22 – Sunday 28 February by Geoff Oates

Monday 22nd

Tricky word No. 8 - Awe



*'Let all the inhabitants of the world
stand in awe of Him.'*

(Psalm 33. 8)

Awe is one of those things that is hard to define, we just know what it is when it happens to us. Awe is what we feel when we encounter something that is overwhelmingly greater than we are. The experience need not wholly be positive. We may respond with awe to the beauty of a vast snow-capped mountain range, to a vivid sunrise, or to the violence of a stormy sea. We may respond with awe to physical beauty, to the eloquence of a great speaker, to a bold and powerful leader.

Awe stops us in our tracks, takes our breath away. It is so much more than mere surprise. 'Awe' is not just 'Wow'. Awe changes us. Awe may well include a frisson of fear, but it is blended in with humility and reverence. It is the right response to an encounter with God, in any shape or form.

Awe may bring home to us our own smallness and frailty, but awe does not crush us. Note that the Psalmist does not demand that we kneel or lie prostrate before God, instead he challenges us to stand up. Awe allows us to recognise that we can take our own place in a universe that is greater and more wonderful than we had realised before.

Tuesday 23rd

Tricky word No. 9 – Blessing



'Abraham, by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing.'
(Genesis 22. 18)

'Bless' is a wonderful word. When we are struggling to find words for our prayers for others, when we really don't know what it is right to ask God for, we have a safe fall-back. 'Father, bless him'. 'Father, bless her'.

In the earliest times of the Biblical story, there was nothing vague or spiritual about blessings. When God showered his blessings on Abraham, or Isaac, or Esau or Jacob, they could be readily measured in herds of sheep, goats, camels, and wives and children! Prosperity was not a sign of God's blessing, it was the very stuff of His blessing.

When God blessed the patriarchs, He gave them good things, abundantly.

'Lord, bless them,' is a powerful prayer. Lord, give them good things, abundantly. 'Lord, bless me,' give me good things, abundantly. We need not be ashamed to ask God for good things.

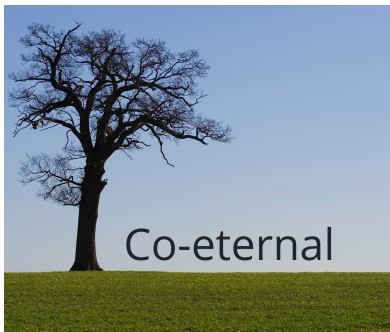
But God also promised to Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the rest of the world, through their faith and witness, and when the time was right, through Jesus, God's ultimate blessing on humanity.

In the same way, we should also pray that we may be a blessing. When we ask God to bless another of his children, we should be ready to offer, through our friendship, our patience, our generosity, our empathy or our wisdom, to be that blessing ourselves.

Lord, bless me. Lord, make me a Blessing to others

Wednesday 24th

Tricky word No. 10 - Co-eternal



*'Consubstantial, co-eternal,
while unending ages run'*
(Thomas a Kempis,
from 'Light's abode, celestial Salem')

Was there a time when God the Father existed but God the Son didn't? First of all, let me say that you can live a full and rewarding Christian life without ever either asking or answering this question. But early Christian theologians got terribly hot under the collar about this one, and were often quite uncharitable with each other, until the argument was rather begrudgingly resolved in the 4th Century, and set out in the Nicene creed.

God is not constrained by the limits of time as we are in our mortal lives, so he probably wonders what on earth we are talking about. We should also remember that 'eternal' means 'unlimited' or 'boundless' in every sense, not just unlimited in hours and years. 'Eternal life' in the Bible can often be better translated as 'boundless life' or 'fulness of life' rather than everlasting life.

So, I find it hard to imagine either a time when God the Father was all on His own, or any space in the universe where the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit were not together, joyfully expressing their fellowship of divine love in collective acts of creation, restoration and empowerment.

Restoration, or redemption, is hard-coded into creation right from the beginning. It isn't an afterthought.

My God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may I share in your gift of boundless life.

Thursday 25th



**Tricky word No. 11 - First Fruits
(of those that are risen from
the dead) or something OT?**

Harvest hymn

In the Old Testament teachings, the people of Israel are repeatedly exhorted to give the First Fruits of the harvest in offering to God. As well as the first of the grain and fruit harvests, the first-born lamb or calf of every ewe or cow is offered to the Lord.

It's quite a challenge. What if a late storm ruins the last few acres of the wheatfield, or the grapes turn out to be mildewed?

Isn't it better to wait until all the corn is gathered in, until all the fruit is picked, when all the winter's lambs have made it safely through the first risky weeks, and then see if there's enough left over to offer to God?

The giving of the First Fruits is a sign of gratitude to God, but it is also a sign of faith. The people are challenged to trust that their God will continue to show his generosity, and that the later stages of the harvest will be as bountiful as the first.

St Paul describes Jesus as the First Fruits of those that had risen from the dead. Of course, we can't give Jesus to our Father, because it is the Father who gave Jesus to us. But we can rejoice that the continuing harvest of those who share Christ's resurrection will be a bountiful one.

Lord, wherever we may harvest, give us the faith and strength to offer our First Fruits to you.

Friday 26th

Tricky word No. 12 - Hell



Regrettably, in English we use the one word 'Hell' to translate three different words in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, Hebrew 'Sheol' and its Greek equivalent 'Hades' are simply the place where the dead go. Whilst it is presented as a rather cheerless place, it has no real associations with reward and punishment. It certainly isn't the everlasting subterranean torture chamber of mediaeval imagination. The Old Testament really doesn't concern itself very much with what happens when we die.

When Jesus speaks of 'Hell', the original word he uses is usually 'Gehenna'. This is not some hidden spiritual dystopia. In fact, you can find it on Google Maps if you look. It is now known as the Hinnom Valley and it is a pleasant suburb of Jerusalem, tucked away outside the old city walls. But many scholars believe that for centuries Gehenna was the site of the city's rubbish dump. Like any place where organic waste is dumped in large quantities, it caught fire easily and the rubbish smouldered constantly. Is that where the everlasting flames of hell come from?

When Jesus tells his parables of judgment, I don't think he is thinking much about what happens when we die either. He is thinking about the direction of our lives. Do we want to live safely inside the City, or do we want to end up on the wrong side of the wall, on the rubbish tip? Come with me, he bids us, I will lead you to the better place.

Saturday 27th

Tricky word No. 13 - Predestination



'For he chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ.'
(Ephesians 1. 4)

Predestination is the belief that God decided, before the beginning of time, who would receive His gift of salvation and who would not. John Calvin, the great Swiss Reformation theologian, is most closely associated with this doctrine.

It challenges the more common Protestant idea that we are saved by faith, that salvation is offered to all of us and that we accept or reject it by our own, God-given free will.

The idea of Predestination has its roots in the bewilderment that the early Church felt when so many people ignored or rejected the Good News of Jesus. How could anyone turn down such a wonderful message, such an amazing promise? Surely only because God, in his wisdom, had decided that some would listen and some would not.

I will take sides here, and share inspiration from my Methodist heritage. In the words of John Wesley: 'All people need to be saved; all people can be saved; all people can know themselves saved; all people can be saved to the uttermost'.

Nobody can be a whole person without God's grace, nobody is beyond the reach of God's grace, God's grace can bring everyone to true fulfilment of life. He has chosen us from before the Creation – all of us.

Sunday 28th

Tricky Word No. 14 – Righteousness



'For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.'
(Galatians 5. 5)

Like blessing, 'Righteousness' is a word that is very familiar from the Bible, but is rather hard to define. It is far more than 'goodness' or 'virtue'. When attributed to God, it generally refers to His justice.

In many places in the Bible it clearly does mean 'right living' or obedience to the Law of God. But St Paul, the Pharisee who came to recognise on the Damascus Road that his fanatical observance of the old Jewish Law had not brought him near to God, offered a radically new understanding of Righteousness.

With his lawyer's mind, he still thinks in terms of courts and judgments. But Righteousness is no longer a question of what we do, but of our status in the eyes of the law. Faced with God's immeasurable justice, Paul knows that he cannot plead 'Innocent' and that God cannot find him 'Not Guilty'. But God can grant him an Unconditional Discharge. The power of the Law is suspended, and the accused is free to leave the court and begin a new life.

Lord, see me as I am, and declare me righteous in your sight, not by my deserving, but by your boundless and everlasting love.

(with grateful acknowledgment to Tom Wright)