

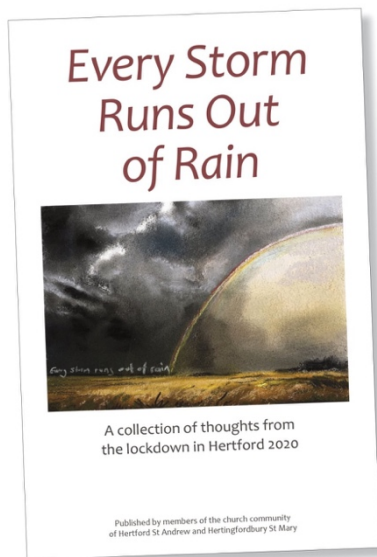
Thought for the Day: 31 May – 6 June 2021

by Rev. Bill Church

Monday 31st

This Thought for the Day is about *Thought for the Day*. The slot on the Radio 4 Today programme at 7.50am is about two and a half minutes – a bit more than the time it will take you to read this through.

Quality is variable. Some speakers use it to explain (=promote?) their own brand of religion. Others offer an unexceptionable comment on the big news of the day. Others introduce a new and interesting subject from a religious viewpoint.



Our Thought for the Day was started at the beginning of lockdown as a way of keeping the congregation in touch and as outreach. And it has reached out, with posts and the book '*Every storm runs out of rain*' reaching corners of the country and the globe not normally on our mailing list. Also, it has given a voice to many members of the congregation.

Not everybody is on the same wavelength as every TftD – hurrah! A little bit of what you don't like does you good!

This week's TftDs will be random – will not be on a theme, and you may spot a bit of recycling. Most preachers, they say, preach to themselves and this week will give me an opportunity to do a bit of that.

Tuesday 1 June

When Alison was studying history at Adelaide University, one of her teachers was George Rudé.

He was a pioneer of 'history from below' and his best-known work was '*The crowd in the French Revolution*', an attempt to analyse who were in the crowds that stormed the Bastille and deposed King Louis XVI.

Where did they come from? What was their status? What was their motivation?

The New Testament is full of crowds.

Some good – those who travelled out to be baptised by John, the Five Thousand who were fed, the pilgrims welcoming Jesus with "Hosanna", the multi-ethnic crowd at Pentecost.

Some bad – the mob who nearly lynched Paul and Silas in Ephesus, the group who stoned Stephen, the crowd who shouted "Crucify" at Pilate.

It would be wonderful to do a George Rudé analysis of those crowds, but we have no source of information beyond the text.

We know that people throughout the ages can be more brave, or more stupid, or more wicked, in a crowd than they would be on their own. And from the outside, a crowd can be very frightening. We tend to



see a crowd as an abstract entity, lumping together everyone in the crowd. But each of them is an individual with their own background and hopes and fears – and who will have their own pride or guilt or regrets later on.

Crowds now can be non-physical, for instance as we see a mass rush to instant judgment for or against somebody in the news. The same dynamic applies.

It would not be Rudé's point, but when we see a crowd from the outside, we must remember that everybody there is a separate child of God.

And when we are in a crowd, we must remember we have the same duty of charity and common sense as if we were alone.

Wednesday 2nd

I learnt a new word the other day – mycoheterotroph.

It is not easy to work into an everyday conversation; and it means a plant that is parasitic on fungi.

I learnt it from our daughter-in-law's book on fungi, extolling their variety and particularly their widespread and mutually beneficial relationships with tree roots.

The Bible does not say anything about mushrooms (let alone mycoheterotrophs), but it does deal with another fungus – yeast (or 'leaven' as most older translations have it). The rules for Passover required unleavened bread, and hence the ritual purge

on yeast as part of preparation. This lead to a negative metaphorical use – Jesus warned his disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees; Paul urged the Corinthians to discard the old leaven of malice and wickedness.

So, what is Jesus doing when in Matthew 13.33 he says that the Kingdom of God is like a woman putting yeast into a large amount of flour, the whole of which is then leavened?

Maybe he is just pointing to the well-known fact that yeast spreads exponentially. Paul quotes to the Corinthians the saying: “A little leaven leavens all the dough”.

Or maybe he is warning that the Kingdom is not only able to spread quietly and quickly out of all proportion to its small

beginning – but also that it can be upsetting and beyond accepted norms.



Incidentally, the amount of flour the woman works is 3 'sata', about 45 kilos. That is far more than a domestic exercise – she could feed a whole village on the resulting bread. The Kingdom is not a private project. It is destined to go much wider.

Thursday 3rd

Yes, this is about the vegetable patch.

This time of year involves a lot of work and not much produce. It is the 'Hungry Gap'. Overwintered crops are nearly over with only chard and rhubarb left; while, unless you have a greenhouse, the new season's crops are not yet ready; radish (almost), lettuce (not quite). There are stored crops like butternut squash and garlic; and there is the freezer (apple and tomato).

Or, failing that, the market or a shop. Even if everything failed, I would not starve.

It was different for the people whose stories are told in the Bible. If crops failed through drought or pests or marauding armies, you risked starvation.

An early example of famine relief is in Genesis 41.55-57 and 47.13-21, where Joseph organised distribution of stored grain. But it was not free. The Egyptians had to pay, first with money and then cattle and then with their land and liberty.

In Acts 11, the Christians of Antioch, on hearing of a predicted famine, collected money to send to fellow Christians in Judaea as a free gift.

Some relief charities still focus on helping people within the same religious tradition, but less so. Christian Aid is aid from Christians, not necessarily to Christians.

Christian Aid Week was last month, hampered by Covid restrictions, but it is not too late to donate. See their website



(<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/appeals/key-appeals/christian-aid-week>).

However 'Hungry the Gap' in our vegetables, it is nothing to what some others have to face.

Friday 4th

One abiding benefit from trying to learn French at school was an introduction to the writing of Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), pictured, who was skilled at recording the foibles of provincial Normandy and bourgeois Paris.



He specialised in short stories, which are easier for beginners to handle than full novels, let alone poetry.

His first and perhaps most famous is 'Boule de suif'. In the war of 1870 the Prussians have occupied much of France including Rouen. A group of travellers is travelling by coach to Dieppe. They are from among the great and good of

Rouen, plus two nuns, plus Elisabeth Rousset, a local courtesan

who was so fat she had the nickname 'Boule de suif' (roughly, 'Lump of Lard').

The other passengers did not hide their disdain for her.

The coach is stopped at a military checkpoint and the Prussian officer in charge makes it clear they will not proceed unless he can enjoy the services of Boule de Suif, which she refuses. At first, the group rails at the beastliness of the Hun but, as time passes, they become impatient and they (including a nun) urge her, on various grounds, to comply with the officer's demand.

After three days, she complies and the coach moves on.

Are the other travellers grateful to her? Not for a moment. They all (including the nuns) ignore her and refuse to share their food, leaving her hungry and weeping.

Maupassant was not in the habit of quoting scripture but he could have cited Matthew 21.31: Jesus said to the Chief Priests and Elders, "The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you."

Saturday 5th

Another Maupassant short story is titled 'The necklace'.

Mathilde is a poor but beautiful and aspiring Parisian. When she and her husband get an unexpected invitation to a municipal ball, she determines to make an impression and she manages to borrow a diamond necklace from a richer school friend. She has a

great triumph at the ball but on the way home, the necklace is lost.

Rather than tell the friend what has happened, they use all they have and borrow more to find 36,000 francs to buy a replacement. They then have to scrimp and save and slave and take on any work available to repay the loan.

This takes ten years and Mathilde is worn out, prematurely aged and shorn of her former charm.

By chance, she meets the friend in the street and at last feels able to tell her the truth. The friend is shocked at Mathilde's appearance and says: "Oh, my poor Mathilde. Why, my necklace was only paste, worth at most only 500 francs."

I recall the French teacher saying that Maupassant was advocating insurance. How pedestrian – or was my irony detector not working?

Maupassant was certainly advocating honesty. If Mathilde had owned up at once, she would have been spared ten years' servitude.

Basil Fawlty made an excruciatingly funny art form out of deceit and more deceit to cover deceit. But deceit is not funny. It is corrosive and dangerous.



'If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

(1 St John 1.8)

Sunday 6th

One of the things-you-find-to-do-instead-of what-needs-doing is Sudoku, and even more so during Covid.



Some you can work out, some you have to make a guess at, but there is always only one right answer, and you know fairly soon if you are wrong.

Life is not like that. We regularly have to make choices where any choice would be about right; or where all choices are more or less

unsatisfactory. The former might seem easier, but beware of 'Restaurant choice syndrome'.

However good your meal, you can look at a dish on another table and wish you had ordered that instead. Don't do it! Much better to enjoy what you have.

The latter case is all too familiar to those in authority having to make decisions about the pandemic, who can be handicapped by a compulsion to defend their choices whatever the outcome but who also deserve our sympathy.

Similar choices regularly face us on a less grand scale. How to respond?

God gave us reason and we should use it.

God gave us conscience and we should use it.

God has given us help in scripture and church teaching and we should heed it.

Even so, we will not always (or often?) make the best choice.

And then we can say sorry, we can put things right if possible and we can learn for the future. But there is no merit in fretting or brooding. Part of repentance is to lay your burdens at the foot of the cross and then travel on lighter.

'Come unto me all those who travail and are heavy laden.'
(Matthew 11.28)