

Anglican Diocese of Ballarat
with the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

- JUNE 2025 -

BIBLE READING

Challenge



This year based on
Women of the Bible

Introduction

Bible Reading Challenge 2025

The aim of the Bible Reading Challenge is to encourage every person in the dioceses of Ballarat and Gippsland to read their Bible every day during the month of June. We hope that you enjoy this so much that you continue reading your Bible every day of the year!

Using these notes

This year, rather than choosing to read from a single Biblical book, we are focussing on stories of some Biblical women, both from the Old Testament and from the New Testament. It is lovely that Gippsland Diocese will again share with those of us in the Ballarat Diocese. Our authors come from both places and are a mix of ordained and lay people.

There is a reading for each day of June, along with a short discussion and some questions to think about. Find a quiet, comfortable spot. Try taking a few deep breaths and ask God to open your mind to hear him. We suggest you then begin by reading the scripture passage, and notice what interests you, makes you wonder or challenges you. You may like to jot down some ideas or questions. Then read the passage again, then the discussion notes. Notice what stands out for you in the notes. Then look at the questions for the day. These are meant to make you think and help you to relate the story to your own life. If they do not do this, write some questions of your own and think about them. You may like to jot down your answers. Finish with the prayer provided or write your own prayer.

As you read stories of these faithful women, try to imagine yourself in their situation. Notice what they are doing and how they are feeling. Think about your own life. Have you ever experienced similar events or similar feelings? What is God doing in the lives of these women? What can we learn from them? What is God doing in your life today?

There are also some general questions at the end of each week's notes that can be used with a group of people who have all been using the study notes during the week.

Ruth

Canon Robyn Shackell

The writer of this week's notes is Canon Robyn Shackell. She is an honorary assistant priest in Warrnambool and Chair of the Ministry Development Committee of the Ballarat Diocese. She enjoys her family, (husband Denis, daughters Mel and Tara and their partners Toby and Gus, and grandsons Tom and Lachie), reading, croquet, Tai Chi and working in her garden.

The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is the story of a Moabite woman whose love and devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi, leads her to leave her own country and eventually become the great-grandmother of David by marriage to Boaz of Bethlehem, thus Ruth is also an ancestor of Jesus (Mt 1:5). The tragic deaths of Naomi's husband and sons provides the backdrop for this story of selfless love and shows God bringing blessing to his people through a foreigner (Ruth, the Moabite).

The Book of Ruth gives us knowledge of village life in rural Judah, with tales of planting and harvesting, gleaning and threshing and also describes how the city elders gathered at the village gate to govern and issue decisions about village life and laws. The latter included laws of property, gleaning, and levirate marriage. According to Deut.25 if a married man died childless, his brother should marry the widow, and the first child would become the heir of the deceased. This relative was called the goel, the "kinsman-redeemer". As Boaz was not Elimelech's brother, nor Ruth his widow, scholars refer to the arrangement here as "Levirate-like".

Ruth's story is set in the time of the Judges, but was probably written after King David. The book of Ruth tries to correct suspicion of foreigners, particularly enemies like the Moabites. This leads some scholars to believe the book was written about the 5th century BCE when intermarriage between nations was controversial. Some scholars see the story as historical fiction, others as a story that has been retold with a purpose.

Sunday June 1

Ruth 1.1-14

Our story starts with a famine that results in Naomi's family moving to Moab. Her sons married local girls, but tragedy struck and the three men of the family all died. It is not surprising that Naomi decided to return to her homeland when she heard that the famine there was over. She encouraged her daughters-in-law to return to their own families, in the hope that they will find new husbands. There was obviously a strong bond between the three women, who initially planned to travel with Naomi, but she strongly urged them to return to their families. She assures them that she is too old to be able to supply them with more sons to be their husbands. This suggestion seems quaint to us but reflected the culture of the time. This section of our story ends with Orpah reluctantly returning home but Ruth clinging to her mother-in-law - not what we might think of as a typical mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship.

Most of us will have experienced tough times in our lives. Perhaps circumstances have forced us to move homes. Some of us will have lost close family members and good friends. Naomi found comfort from the love of her daughters-in-law, and especially the faithfulness of Ruth.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Ruth's name means "something worth seeing" or "a female friend." How do these meanings work in the story?
2. If you have had to move house, what and who helped you settle into your new home? Does your church support people new to your area?
3. Think about the people who have supported you in difficult times. Thank God for them, and if appropriate perhaps contact them.

Prayer

Thank you, loving God, for sending caring people into my life. Help me to also care for others, especially in their tough times. AMEN

Monday 2 June

Ruth 1.14-22

This passage contains the very moving words of Ruth to Naomi, after Naomi urged Ruth to follow Orpah's example and return home. Imagine how Naomi would have felt as she heard Ruth's pledge of loyalty and love. Ruth's words provide a strong contrast to Naomi's sad words on her homecoming to Bethlehem and her old friends there. As our story unfolds, we will discover that although Naomi feels that God has brought "calamity" on her, eventually she feels blessed.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Have you ever felt like Naomi, feeling deserted by God? What happened? What did you do? When you look back, how does that experience seem now? The Bible tells us that all things work together for good for those who love God (Rom 8.28). Can you think of an experience that you have had where this is true?

2. Ruth's loving declaration must have brought some comfort to Naomi. Who do you provide comfort for? How do you express your care for those you love?

Prayer

Loving Father sometimes we feel empty like Naomi, and we lose sight of your care. Help us to be open to recognising your care for us when we feel bitter or harshly done by. AMEN

Tuesday 3 June

Ruth 2.1-15

Perhaps going to glean in the fields was Ruth's equivalent of the modern way of looking for a new partner on social media. Ruth is not afraid to work hard, and this was noticed by the reapers. Boaz was impressed by both Ruth's loyalty to and care for Naomi and her willingness to work hard. He asks God to reward Naomi, and then personally begins to be God's agent in that reward.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Notice Boaz's greeting to his workers. What does this suggest about the sort of person/boss he was? How is this shown in the rest of this passage?
2. Boaz prays and then begins to "help God" to answer that prayer. Think about the people you pray for – can you help God answer your prayers?

Prayer

O God who answers prayer, help me to recognise when you are calling me to be a part of your answers. AMEN

Wednesday 4 June

Ruth 2.15 - 3.1-5

Ruth returns home after an eventful time in the fields. Naomi realises the significance of the fact that Ruth has met a close relation of hers. Naomi's immediate response is a prayer of thanks to God. She then hatches a plan, hoping that Boaz might be the man that can become a new husband for Ruth. In the culture of the day, a close kinsman/redeemer was expected to carry on the family name for his deceased relative, by marrying the childless widow and having children for him.

Once again Ruth shows her love and respect for Naomi, saying, "All that you tell me I will do." Just as Boaz was shown to be a man of prayer in yesterday's reading, Naomi shows a similar trait, praising God when she hears what had happened to Ruth.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. What type of home does Naomi want for her friend?
2. When we get good news, is our first response to praise God?
3. Are we people who give wise advice and support to those we love?

Prayer

Loving God, help me to be someone who listens to your voice and replies, "All that you tell me I will do." AMEN

Thursday 5 June

Ruth 3.6-18

Ruth obeys Naomi, and uncovers Boaz's feet and lies down beside him. This seems strange to us, even sexually provocative, but in Naomi's culture this was an act of submission. Servants would lie at their master's feet, ready to do their bidding at any time of the night. So, Ruth did not come demanding her rights, but humbly asking for Boaz's protection. Boaz continues to act honourably, not forcing himself on Ruth, but respecting her, noting she had not "gone after young men." He enables Ruth to leave quietly in the morning, giving himself time to check whether a closer relative wanted to redeem her. He generously gives her a supply of food to take home to Naomi, who again gives her beloved daughter-in-law good advice.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. How would you describe Ruth's and Boaz's actions in this part of the story?
2. Notice how important the Lord is, in guiding Boaz's actions. Think about how often you have considered God in your actions or asked God to bless those with whom you have come into contact.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord that you are by my side always. Let me reflect your love to each person I meet this week. AMEN

Friday 6 June

Ruth 4.1-12

Boaz negotiates for Naomi's husband, Elimelech's property. The kinsman is keen to acquire the property until he discovered that it will also mean that he has the responsibility for continuing Elimelech's line by marrying Ruth and having children by her. We then read about the quaint custom of sealing the deal by taking off and giving a sandal in front of witnesses. This public act was binding and obviously pleased the local people who had been impressed by Ruth's love for their friend Naomi. They offer a blessing for the future of the couple.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. What are some quaint customs followed by your family? Your Church? Why are these important?
2. God was obviously important to each person in the story. At each significant event, his name is mentioned. Do I talk regularly to God and ask his blessing on events and people?

Prayer

Father God, we thank you for faithful communities who show your love to those around them. May my parish be a light to my community, showing God's love clearly. AMEN

Saturday 7 June

Ruth 4. 13- 21

Our story has a happy ending. The couple marry and Ruth has a son. The town's people rejoice and offer a blessing to Naomi, whose grief is turned to joy in caring for the new child, Obed. Obed became the grandfather of David, and so an ancestor of Jesus. Again the townswomen praise Ruth, the impressive foreigner. Matthew 1.5 mentions this impressive foreigner, Ruth, by name in the family tree of Jesus.

This lovely story tells of love and loyalty and reminds us that "outsiders" are regularly used by God to achieve his purposes.

Questions for reflection / discussion

Can you think of other bible stories where God uses foreigners and/or women to bring blessing to others?

Look at Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1. Note the women listed there. What can you find out about them?

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for the story of Ruth, for her love and loyalty. Thank you too for the faithful women in my life who have encouraged me on my Christian journey. AMEN

Some Questions for group discussion and / or further individual reflection

1. What was the thing that stood out for you in the story of Ruth?
Why?
2. Were there any words or verses that particularly caught your attention?
3. God was significant for each person in the story. Whose faith impressed you most?
4. Who are the women whose life and faith have inspired you?
How?
5. What lessons might your parish learn from the story of Ruth?

Esther

Bishop Richard Treloar

The Right Reverend Dr Richard Treloar is the thirteenth Bishop of Gippsland.

His PhD in Hebrew biblical narrative, focusing on the Book of Esther and the experience of suffering, was awarded by Monash University and published in 2008.

Dr Leanne Habeeb, an Organisational Psychologist, and Richard have a daughter, Rachel, and a son, Nicholas, who share Richard's penitential allegiance to the Carlton Football Club.

A brief introduction to the Book of Esther*

** this study guide relates to the Hebrew text of the Book of Esther as found in the Old Testament, and not the version in the Apocrypha with the (Greek) additions to the text*

Friedrich Nietzsche once remarked, 'I know of no other way of coping with great tasks than play.' Esther is certainly playful: a 'tall story' – a fantastic tale which relates how a Jewish orphan became Queen of the Persian Empire, at a time when many of her people were living in exile in its provinces, and when Judah itself was under Persian control.

Esther manages to avert the threatened extinction of her people at the whim of the arch villain, Haman. Haman has cast lots – *purim* – in order to determine the date on which this genocide was to take place, hence the name of the Jewish festival with which the story is so closely associated.

In the process of avoiding disaster, the excesses and incompetence of the Persian court are mercilessly parodied, and the Jewish people enjoy a victory (of equally absurd proportions) over their enemies. Esther's kinsman, Mordecai, replaces Haman as second in the kingdom, and he and Esther institute *Purim* as a celebration of this turning-of-the-tables in perpetuity.

All good stories are true; some of them actually happened! Although light-hearted, the well told story of Esther also attempts a great task: to enable Jews to come to grips with exile.

The narrative is 'history-like', but it is not an historical work as we might understand historiography today. Esther and *Purim* are poignant and cathartic responses to Israel's historical experience of exile and persecution.

Set in the early fifth-century BCE, in modern-day Iran, Esther was probably written some time later – perhaps the third century BCE after the fall of the Persian Empire it lampoons, once it was relatively safe to poke fun at figures such as King Ahasuerus.

To read Esther in our own generation – especially in the wake of the Holocaust and the current rise of antisemitism – is to sense the utter seriousness that is carried by its burlesque flavour and comedic charms. The comic aspects of the book are thus not incidental to the effect of the story on its hearers – not for the sake of light relief only. They are central to Esther's rhetorical impact. One of the ways a story like Esther meets the needs of its readers is by satirising, ridiculing, the power structures which oppress them.

Esther's particular form of satire has been described as 'carnavalesque.' Victorians tend to think of *Moomba* when people speak of carnivals. At *Moomba* – at least as it once was – a popular king and queen (usually celebrities or sporting heroes) are crowned and paraded through the city streets. Carnivals are celebrations of the reversal of the status quo, and are characterised by symbols of change and the upheaval of the usual order of things.

Carnival is the world of release, where official culture is subverted, and alternative visions of reality (including chaos) can be explored in relative safety. Carnivals are to do with the wearing of masks – the blurring or crossing-over of identity markers: male/female; king/clown; Jew/Persian and so on – as anyone who has ever attended a *purimspeil* will attest. It allows participants to imagine: what if the world were like that, instead of the way we experience it, day in, day out?

Like a number of stories, including Tobit and Daniel – Esther explores the problem of Jewish identity once the crisis of exile has settled into the reality of Diaspora; once Israel realizes that exile is 'permanent'. How do we meet the threats to our existence now that we have no state, no king, no army, no Temple, no priests?

Esther's response is to promote qualities of self-reliance and assimilation as the means of survival. Thus the whole story of Esther – whose name is a form of the Hebrew verb 'to hide' – hinges around the secrecy of her identity as a Jew. She survives – and ensures the survival of her people – by successfully becoming her 'other': the Persian Queen.

Whereas in the Book of Tobit, for example, prayer and piety represent the only defense against danger, for they ensure God's intervention, in Esther, not miracles but inner resources and human agency are to be relied on in a crisis.

These stories – Tobit, Esther, Daniel, Ruth, Judith – with their recurring themes and motifs are a bit like individual voices in a conversation or a debate about how to be authentically Jewish in such circumstances. Despite some overlap with these other texts, Esther's most distinctive – and, in many ways problematic – contribution to this biblical conversation is its stubborn silence with respect to God's presence to or involvement in Israel's plight, and its distance from Israel's religious traditions.

In the Hebrew version of Esther there is no mention of *kashrut* (dietary regulations) as in Judith; no prayer, such as on the lips of Tobit, or appeal to divine blessing as in Ruth; no religiously-motivated defiance of authority as in Daniel – despite there being every opportunity in the tale for the inclusion of such practices. Indeed a number of places where we would expect them and where commentators – both ancient and modern – feel obliged to assume or even supply them.

It has been said that God is not a character in Esther in the same way that Godot is not a character in Beckett's famous play *Waiting for Godot* and, as such, God's absence hangs over the whole drama: we wait and wait but God never shows up. There is, of course, a later Greek version of Esther, included in the Apocrypha, which goes to great lengths to write God back into the story, and to make its heroes models of conventional piety.

Although at one level the events recounted in Esther pretty clearly never happened, at another level its plot is profoundly, tragically true. Not only can we think of attempted genocide with respect to Jews in our own epoch, but the phenomenon of 'ethnic cleansing' more generally has been enacted with shocking regularity in living memory.

Sunday 8 June

Esther 1.1-5, 10-12, 16-19 (or the whole chapter if you have time)

The story opens with king Ahasuerus (Xerxes) sitting on his royal throne, showing off his honour and glory to all the nobility of his empire in an opulent feast lasting a mere 180 days! After this, he gives his subjects in the capital, Shushan (Susa) a turn. For a whole week they get to hang out in the royal precinct, eating and drinking, and taking in the lavish décor. Straight away we get the impression that 'honour' in this story is a commodity: the king displays it, the villain – Haman – desperately wants it, but Mordecai ends up getting it. Honour is also a zero-sum commodity: as one person's stocks rise, another's fall.

Part of the king's stock-pile of honour consist of his very beautiful queen, Vashti, who – in his merry state – he decides to show off to his guests as well. Vashti doesn't much go for this idea, and refuses to come. A farcical scene follows, which immediately undermines all the opening images of the king's great authority. Furious at having his honour challenged, Ahasuerus summons all his wise men and – like the powerful autocrat he is – asks them what to do next!

These 'wise men' decide that if women across the empire catch wind of Vashti's insubordination there might be no end to what they would have to put up with at home!

Their advice is that Vashti should never be allowed to come before the king again, and that her position be given to another, more worthy than she. Furthermore, in order to prevent her defiance becoming widely known and to minimise its impact, this decision should become law – unchangeable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians supposedly were – to be proclaimed throughout the provinces by the king's own very efficient postal service.

It's also hard to see Vashti getting too upset about being ordered not to do the very thing she's just refused to do! However, this ruler seems incapable of saying 'no' to any hair-brained scheme presented to him – be it Haman's genocidal urge, or Esther's drastic approach to 'self-defence' – all of which he delights to turn into law, and this is no exception. Whoever has the king's ear in this story, and utters the magic words 'if it pleases the king' usually discovers that pretty much everything does!

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. What are the 'clues' in the opening verses of this text that this might be a 'tall story' rather than 'history'?
2. In the ancient Near East, as in some parts of the world today, honour and shame are very important culturally; can you think of some examples in places you have travelled, or in in your current cultural context?
3. Does Chapter 1 of Esther remind you of the BBC TV series 'Yes Minister'? Why? / Why not?
4. How does 'comedy' (as distinct from 'tragedy') help us to deal with some of life's hard realities? Are our ears attuned to hearing comedy in the Bible?

Prayer

God of the least and the greatest,
in whose kingdom such categories are reversed,
help us not to take ourselves too seriously,
nor to be obsessed with how others may think of us.
Amen.

Monday 9 June

Esther 2.1-10, 17-18 (or the whole chapter if you have time)

The search for a new queen begins, with the reader having noted that it is in this ridiculous political system that Esther will have to negotiate her way. And not only Esther, of course, but – if rulers like Ahasuerus are a fact of life in the Diaspora – then the same is true for all Jews who read and celebrate this story after exile. Cousin Mordecai and Esther, and perhaps the reader, will need to manipulate such unstable and unreliable power structures to their own ends.

In seeking a worthy (i.e. more compliant) replacement for Vashti, Ahasuerus embarks on an exhaustive process. Young girls – literally ‘good of form’ – are gathered, given a one-year cosmetic treatment at the hands of the king’s eunuchs, and – one by one – sent to the royal bedchamber for an ‘interview.’

Just prior to this, Esther has been introduced to the reader by her Jewish name, ‘Hadassah,’ the orphaned cousin of Mordecai, an exile. Hadassah is immediately renamed in the story as ‘Esther,’ as if to hide her ethnic identity. Being herself ‘good of form,’ she is conscripted for the beauty pageant, but Mordecai instructs her not to let on that she’s Jewish. Her identity is emblematic: elect of God but orphaned, of the noble tribe of Benjamin, but exiled – a personification of Israel’s historical experience. And, with two different names, her identity is also ambiguous and problematic from the outset of the story.

It comes as no surprise to learn that, when her turn comes, Esther pleases the king, and is made queen in place of Vashti. At this point in the story she is a model of passivity. Wearing her mask of secrecy, she is literally “made over” from Hadassah, orphaned cousin of Mordecai, to Esther, Queen of Persia – human putty in the various sets of hands through which she passes. Her first actions are to please the chief eunuch and to raise up his favour.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. French novelist, Honoré de Balzac, once counselled: ‘Mes enfants, you mustn’t go at things head-on, you are too weak; take it from me and take it from an angle . . . Play dead, play the sleeping dog.’ In what ways does the character of Esther model this advice, and why might she do so?
2. What light does Esther’s circumstances shed on the experience of refugees and asylum seekers who are forced to find their way in strange new cultures?
3. Why might Mordecai have instructed his niece not to divulge her identity / ethnicity?
4. Mindful that the name ‘Esther’ is a noun form of the Hebrew verb ‘to hide’, how does her introduction to the narrative in Chapter 2 shape our reading of the rest of the story?

Prayer

Father of the fatherless, the afflicted, and the exiled,
give us hearts of compassion for refugees and asylum seekers
who must adapt to new and often dangerous or frightening
situations, and who feel it is not safe to be themselves. Amen.

Tuesday 10 June

Esther 2.21-23 and 3:1-11, 15 (or the whole of chapter 3 if you have time)

Esther's careful, deferential playing out of her public, 'queenly', Persian role unfolds alongside a hidden (although not to the reader) and far more subversive plot: one of Jewish self-preservation in direct conflict with the authority of Ahasuerus and Haman, his right-hand man.

This tension between her public and private identities that Esther must manage, not only makes for great drama; it is also the stuff of profound reflection for the Jewish community. How many European Jews in the 1930s – or centuries earlier during the Spanish Inquisition – could relate to Esther's dilemma: when is it safe to come out of the closet?

Meanwhile, Mordecai has been pacing anxiously up and down outside at the king's gate which, apparently, is a place for loose talk. Overhearing a plot against the king, Mordecai tells Esther, who informs Ahasuerus 'in the name of Mordecai.' The plot averted, and conspirators executed, the reader expects Mordecai to be rewarded. But instead, chapter three begins with the promotion of . . . Haman.

Like Vashti before him, Mordecai refuses a direct command of the king by failing to bow down to Haman who has become a sort of extension of the royal honour. Upon asking around at the gossip gate and learning of Mordecai's Jewishness, Haman – hopping mad – decides to apply a generic 'solution' to this particular 'problem' by destroying all Jews in the Empire. It is a dangerous and uncertain world indeed, when the fate of individuals and peoples hangs in the balance – or, rather, the imbalance of such frail egos.

Esther chapter 3 verses 8-9 are amongst the most chilling verses in the Bible for the modern reader – Jew or Gentile: “Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, ‘There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not for the king’s profit to tolerate them. If it pleases the king (which, as we know by now it will) let it be decreed that they be destroyed.’”

Haman dresses up his personal insecurity in terms of the offence of ‘difference,’ of ‘otherness.’ And, as the great French-Jewish 20th-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas points out, we tend to do one of two things when we encounter difference: we either try and assimilate the other – make it ‘same,’ like us; or we obliterate it. Chapter 3 ends with Haman and the king sitting down to drink to their scheme, while the whole city is thrown into confusion.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. How do you feel when you read Esth 3:8-9?
2. Can you think of other examples (not necessarily relating to ethnicity) where ‘difference’ is met with suspicion, contempt, or violence?
3. How might Levinas’ reading of the ways in which we tend to ‘deal with’ difference inform our understanding of Australia’s colonial history?
4. Are there any parallels between the ‘fragile male egos’ of the king and Haman and our current geopolitics? Who are the most vulnerable in the face of capricious leaders?

Prayer

God whose creation shines in and through its diversity,
help us to honour each and all in the unique yet common dignity
you bestow on all that you have lovingly made. Amen.

Wednesday 11 June

Esther 4.1-5, 9-17 (or the whole chapter if you have time)

The Jews of Susa engage in some ritual (although not specifically Jewish or religious) mourning, which, with Mordecai's prompting, precipitates a sort of identity crisis in Esther.

At this point in the narrative where one would most expect it, the text's silence with respect to divine activity or supplication is most audible. One commentator puts it well: "God is most present and most absent in [chapter 4]. Religious practice and the mention of God's name come closest to the surface here, and are most obviously repressed."

By the end of this chapter, far from being putty in the hands of others, Esther has assumed the initiative, and it is Mordecai who 'does everything as Esther had ordered him.' But not before he has issued her with a pretty stern, and somewhat paradoxical challenge: "Don't imagine that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at such a time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter."

Having instructed Esther to 'keep Mum' earlier, Mordecai now appeals to her to disclose her ethnicity. In the process, he reveals a certain faith – not explicitly in God, as such, but in the indestructibility of the Jewish people.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Does the lack of any reference to God in the Hebrew text of Esther trouble you? Why? / Why not?
2. What might the author's reasons be for 'repressing' the divine name in this story?
3. Is there something going on here that highlights the difference between 'male power' and 'female authority' in the ancient Near East in the shift of protagonist between Mordecai and Esther?
4. Have you ever wondered in a time of discomfort, where courage was called for, whether you were in that place 'for such a time as this'? (Esth 4:14)

Prayer

God of the voiceless,
give us courage to speak up in those moments
when it would be easier to remain silent. Amen.

Thursday 12 June

Esther 5.1-5, 9-14 (or the whole chapter if you have time)

Risking her life by appearing before the king unbidden, Esther, like Ruth in their respective stories, puts on her best tiara, and hopes to raise up royal sceptre – as a sign that her life will be spared.

Remember she approaches Ahasuerus now not only as his queen, but – unbeknown to him – as one of those whose destruction he has just ordered and toasted to with Haman.

Granted a hearing, Esther doesn't come straight out with her problem, but continues to 'play it slant,' buttering up the king and Haman by inviting them to consecutive banquets – literally, 'drinking parties.'

His ego massaged, the only thing that spoils Haman's good spirits on his way home from the first banquet is the sight of that recalcitrant Mordecai, unyielding at the king's gate.

Again furious, and egged on by his wife and friends, he builds a set of gallows, 50 cubits high (taller than Solomon's Temple!) on which to hang Mordecai, and rushes round to ask the king's permission to do so.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. How does the narrator build the dramatic tension in this chapter?
2. Why wouldn't Esther just come out and say who she is and what she wants from the king?
3. As we become more aware of domestic and family violence in our culture, and in our churches, how does Esther's need to 'play it slant' and pander to powerful men help us to reflect on this issue?
4. If you were writing this story (and didn't know the ending) what would happen next?

Prayer

God of wisdom,
give us discernment to know when to speak directly,
and when to keep our counsel,
and grace to say things in such a way that they can be heard.
Amen.

Friday 13 June

Esther 6.1-10 (or the whole chapter if you have time)

Back at the palace, the king – in a desperate bid to get to sleep – has asked that the royal chronicles be read to him. Haman arrives just at the moment when Mordecai's good deed in revealing the plot against the king has been read out.

The king is troubled to learn that no reward has yet been bestowed on Mordecai, and asks Haman as he enters the court, 'What shall be done for the man the king wishes to honour?'

Glutton for honour that he is, and assuming that the king is referring to him, Haman indulges himself in a fantasy of being led through the city in the king's robes, on the king's horse, touted by a leading official. The king obliges, 'Make haste, and do so to . . . Mordecai.'

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Can you see the symmetry between the start of Chapter 3 (when we are expecting Mordecai to be rewarded) and Esth 6:10, where Haman's expectations of being rewarded are thwarted? And not only thwarted – how must he have felt when the king speaks Mordecai's name, rubbing salt in the wound by adding 'the Jew'?
2. Can you think of a time when hubris or pride blinded you?
3. Does the plot line seem familiar to you? Have you read books or seen movies that hinge on the same sort of reversal of fortunes?
4. Be honest, did you experience a teeny bit of pleasure – schadenfreude – at Haman's embarrassment? How might this response be therapeutic for this text's first readers?

Prayer

God of our stories,
teach us in all of life's ups and downs to stay in the moment,
and not get ahead of ourselves.
Amen.

Saturday 14 June

Esther 7.1-10 and 8.1-2, 11 and 9:1-10 (or the whole of chapter 9 if you have time)

The events of chapter 7 signal the start of a whole series of narrative reversals which end with Haman being – if not hoist on his own petard – hung on his own gallows. Things come to a head at the second banquet where Esther times her disclosure – her ‘coming-out’ – to perfection, revealing herself as one of those marked and sold for destruction. But, cleverly diverting responsibility for this away from the king, Esther adopts Haman’s very own tactics in this scene, painting her people as loyal subjects, and Haman as the common ‘other,’ over against whom she and the king now identify themselves – also in the act of drinking.

The supposedly irreversible laws of the Persians are soon countermanded, such that on the very day when the Jews were to have been exterminated according to Haman’s plan, they wreak havoc on their would-be enemies. This violent, highly retributive ending of Esther has troubled many readers – Jewish and Christian alike. But one can’t read chapters one to eight as comedy, and then chapter nine as straight history. Just as the plot to this point has unfolded according to the laws of high farce, so this finale is carnivalesque, with Mordecai and Esther crowned as the king and queen of Moomba, as it were, and the people basically doing whatever they like!

I have this theory about the tribalism of AFL: the footy field is the one place where we can wish the worst upon our enemies – our “others.” It’s only a game, of course ... isn’t it? In the same sort of way we might think of this story as something of a limit-case text: pushing the boundaries of possibility, asking how much the Diaspora community can bear, how far it must go in re-establishing its identity? Perhaps it served, and serves, to provide Israel with a safe –

even playful way – of imagining the unthinkable: what if God had abandoned us?

The great and terrible irony is, however, that the Jews in this story end up behaving like their Persian oppressors. After a century which has seen so much disproportionate violence whether we can condone such a form of therapy, however playful, is another question. Many modern commentators are of the ancient view that Esther's place in the canon is marginal, at best, and that we would do well to let sleeping dogs lie.

I, for one, am glad of its carefully crafted agnosticism. As Mordecai says to Esther: 'Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Yes indeed, the biblical book of Esther allows us to echo, who knows?

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. What does the ending of Esther evoke in you against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between the modern state of Israel and its neighbours?
2. Does its function as a story of the origins of *Purim* (see the end of chapter 9) soften the ending any for you?
3. How do we deal with violence in the biblical text? Do we tend to skip over it?
4. In what ways is the story of Esther holding up a mirror to the best and worst of human nature? And how might it also shine a lamp on a more hopeful future?

Prayer

God of all,
help us to love the unlovable – even ourselves – and to resist rebounding anger,
as your Son absorbed and transformed it, reconciling us to you and to each other. Amen.

Some Questions for group discussion and / or further individual reflection

1. 'All good stories are true; some of them actually happened.' How does this statement both challenge and expand our understanding of biblical literature?
2. Did the lack of reference to God in Esther trouble you? Why might such a story end up in the canon of Scripture?
3. In what ways is the story of Esther holding up a mirror to the best and worst of human nature? And how might it also shine a lamp on a more hopeful future?

Mary and Martha

Elaine Wright

The writer of these notes is Elaine Wright. I am a Lay Reader in the Parish of Yarram and have begun a Discernment Year to explore God's Call to maybe being a Distinctive Deacon. My passions are my family (husband, Fred, three married sons and their wives plus 6 grandchildren and two grandpuppies); walking (for Soldier On March On Challenge currently); my service to God in our Parish; my pastoral care and letting/showing people know that God LOVES them irrespective of what they feel. I enjoy reading, travelling, and being Secretary of the International Harvester Scout car club.

Sunday 15 June

Luke 10.38-40a

It is interesting to read that Martha was the one who opened their home to Jesus. Hospitality was an extremely important part of Jewish Life and obviously in her DNA. And yet, Mary appears to be ignoring this basic rule in the Jewish culture. But, is she? Hospitality can mean many things and create many anxieties depending on who you are and maybe how you were raised. For me, preparing a meal and making sure the house is "presentable" is a cause of anxiety for me. Once our guests are there, I relax and am content to just sit, converse and enjoy their company. My anxiety stems from what I think are the expectations on me as hostess. Was Martha like that?

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Where would I see myself in this story?
2. How do I think God is using this story of Mary and Martha?
3. In my time/s with our Lord, how can I forget about earthly "urgent" things?
4. What helps me to focus on the Lord?

Prayer

Lord God, there may be times when I become too preoccupied with earthly things.

Help me to keep my eyes on what is important to You.

In Jesus' Name, I pray. Amen.

Monday 16 June

Luke 10.40b-42

If Jesus was in front of you, would your first thought be to make everything perfect or to stop and spend time with Him? What would your mind's attention be on? The Bible says that "where our treasure is, there also is our heart". (Matt 6:21) This preoccupation with things being perfect has been part of my "church life" too. I have often caught myself at church looking at a wonky candle or a creased altar cloth or my uneven Lay Reader stole or the petals on the floor which could/did spoil my worship because I became preoccupied with it. Martha's preoccupation was spoiling her joy at having Jesus in her home. Mary was enjoying "the moment with her Lord."

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. What do you think Jesus was really saying to Martha?
2. What do you think Martha – and Mary – learned from this encounter? What can we?
3. What is stealing your attention away from Jesus today?

Prayer

Dear God,
Your attention is ALWAYS on me.
Help me to order my life
so that my attention is first and foremost on You
and Your Will for me.
In the Name of my Saviour. Amen.

Tuesday 17 June

John 11.1-6

It is implied here that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were very dear friends of Jesus. I remember that if anyone in my family or one of my friends is ill or has died, someone sends me word. I feel so thankful that they do because (i) I can pray for whatever is happening, (ii) they know that this person is someone I love and (iii) it shows me that they love me enough to keep me in the loop. When illness or death occurs, it is only natural that people share the news with family and friends. Mary and Martha did exactly that. In our modern times, we just ring or send an email. Mary and Martha would have had to find someone who was willing to travel to FIND Jesus to tell Him. We are not told how long the timeframe between sending the emissary and when he got to Jesus but, on receiving the news, Jesus stayed where He was for two more days.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Why do I think Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus?
2. Is Jesus the last one I call on when I need help? Why or why not?
3. How do I feel when God's response to my prayer may not be instantaneous?

Prayer

Father God, I think of the times when I have prayed.
Sometimes Your answer does not come.
Is this how Mary and Martha would have felt?
I know that, even though time passes without an answer,
You have my best interests at heart.
Keep me trusting in You, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Wednesday 18 June

John 11.7-16

Jesus' answer here seems to be obscure and perplexing at first. Walking according to God's Will for us can be just like that. Look at Moses – put in a basket in the river and adopted by an Egyptian Princess; Abraham – sacrifice his only son; Joseph – sold into slavery in Egypt; Naaman – wash in a muddy creek, to name a few. And each of them eventually saw God's Glory revealed. This is walking in "the Light". In earth's daylight, the light of the sun will light our path, so we don't stumble.

Jesus is teaching his disciples one step at a time. It might well be dangerous going so close to Jerusalem where the Scribes and, to the disciples' earthly perspective it was, BUT they were going with Jesus and He was walking according to God's Will. Jesus even told them that Lazarus was dead and what a "good thing" it was that He wasn't there. Note Thomas' answer!

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Do I sometimes feel that I am stumbling in the dark? What do I do about it?
2. How do I feel when bad/sad things happen in spite of my prayers?
3. Are there times when I don't "see" God's plan? Can I trust His Heart in these times?

Prayer

Gracious God, there are times when I cannot see the way
and times when I feel threatened or afraid.

Help me to remember –

even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I WILL fear no evil for You are with me.

O my God, thank you. Amen.

Thursday 19th June

John 11.17-27

Note that the friends of Mary and Martha had gathered to comfort them as Lazarus had died. The ever-practical Martha, upon hearing that Jesus was on his way, hurried out to greet Him. Her greeting seems like an accusation, but her next words show that Martha was a deeply spiritual and knowledgeable woman of faith. See her answers to Jesus' conversation. "I know....." "I believe..." When we look at the world around us with the misery, war, hate, hurt that seems to abound and even in our churches where there may not be young ones or finances are wanting or those who are there are tired and burnt out, there are times when we need to say "I know..." "I believe..." Read again her affirmations of faith. Martha grieved with hope.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. Is it difficult for me to tell God how I really feel, like Martha did?
2. Have there been times in my life when I have had to just trust God when all has seemingly failed around me?
3. What helps me to trust?

Prayer

Lord, You know me through and through.
You know my weaknesses and circumstances but
I KNOW Your promise that You are always with me.
I BELIEVE that You love me and will protect and guide me.
Help my unbelief, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Friday 20th June

John 11.28-37

What do you think caused Jesus to weep? Was it because He saw Mary upset? Her statement? His Love for Lazarus? What He knew was in people's hearts? Grief is not always straightforward. It can have many facets. Mary was grieving Lazarus' death but she recognised WHO Jesus was. She fell at his feet. Regardless of Mary and Jesus standing there (maybe comforting each other), the crowd were divided in their opinions. Humans are still divided when it comes to grief. For some, it is a matter of chin up and get over it. For others, it is a deep abiding gnawing in their heart. For still others there are good days and bad days. Mary appears to be different in handling her grief – almost without hope. Is this what had Jesus deeply moved and troubled.

Questions for reflection / discussion

1. When I have been overcome with grief, what has given me some sort of comfort?
2. Do I grieve like Martha - with hope?
3. How can I care (in hope) for people who are grieving?

Prayer

Merciful God, You weep when we are weeping.

Show me how to do that for others; to be a listening ear and a comforting hand.

Show me how to pray for others in their grief.

Help me to trust You in hope when I am grieving.

O Lord, hear my prayer. Amen.

Saturday 21st June

John 11:38-45

Don't you just love the practicality of Martha? Lazarus would smell! Martha had already confessed that she knew Lazarus would rise again but she and Jesus were talking of different time frames. So, I wonder what Martha was doing after Jesus answered her in v.40. Has she now realised what Jesus was on about? Mary, who had been sitting at Jesus' feet in the Luke reading was most likely still weeping with her friends, we don't know. But Martha appears to have taken to heart and mind her knowledge of the Messiah. In verse 28, she said "The Teacher is here". Women were not as a rule taught in the synagogues only males. But for her to refer to Jesus as Teacher implies that she had received and absorbed what Jesus had taught her. And, interestingly in verse 45, only Mary's friends were mentioned. I wonder if Mary then believed. God used Martha and Mary to teach us that we should not be preoccupied with earthly things above heavenly things and that our faith is what we should stand on. God will use women to further His Kingdom. It may be overt as it was with Martha speaking out or it may be more modest as with Mary.

Questions

1. Have I read or experienced something that has changed the way I thought? What was it and why?
2. Who has made an impression on me or guided me in my walk? Thank God for them.
3. How is God using me to further His Kingdom?

Prayer

Lord God, Your ways are not my ways
and yet You grace me with Holy Spirit to learn Your Way.
Using Jesus as my example
and the godly people You bring across my path
lead and uphold me as Your beloved child
to be a means of bringing others into Your Kingdom.
In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

Some Questions for group discussion and / or further individual reflection

1. What do you relate to most in the stories of Jesus and Mary & Martha?
2. Maybe God has met you in a time of great grief and/or trauma. What helped you cope?
3. Could you walk beside others in their grief?
4. Do you believe that God can use you to bring others into the Kingdom?

Mary the mother of Jesus

David Pierce

David is a lay member of the Ballarat Diocese. He is part of the Cathedral community, with a particular focus on the recently established Connect@5 service. He has worked as a health professional both as a clinician and as a research academic. He has a particular interest in why people make, or don't make, life changing decisions, including deciding to have faith in Jesus.

Readings for Sunday 22nd to Monday 30th June

In this final week of the Bible Reading Challenge, we will focus on Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary will be familiar to all of us and to many others in our community, including those without specific faith. As the mother of Jesus, Mary has an important position for all Christians. It is interesting to note that in Islam she also has a highly regarded position, being mentioned many times in the Quran.

The readings this week will focus on the more than ten occasions Mary appears in the biblical record, in each of the four Gospels and in Acts. One of the readings focuses on Elizabeth, who had significant interaction with Mary during her pregnancy.

After you have read the bible passage for the day, please read the notes. Incorporated in the notes are questions and reflections which will hopefully help each of us increase our understanding of what the bible passage is saying and encourage our prayerful reflection on what it might mean for each of us in our daily lives.

At the end of this week's notes are some questions that may be useful for group discussion.

Prayer for each day this week: this prayer will be used each day this week – it comes from this week’s daily reflections, and will be called **Prayer for the week.**

Lord God, thank you for the lives of those in the past who have faithfully served you.

Help us to be encouraged by them.

Help us to be inspired by the stories about Mary that we read in the bible.

We pray that we might recognise your grace in our lives and humbly respond.

We pray that we will trust You even if we don’t fully understand what is happening.

Lord God, help us to more and more be the people You want us to be.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

Sunday 22 June

Luke 1.26-38

The first time we meet Mary is near the beginning of Luke’s gospel. The events of this passage are dated to the pregnancy of Elizabeth, a relative of Mary (probably a distant relative) and wife of Zechariah, a priest in the temple.

The narrative begins in verse 26 with a visit to Mary by the angel Gabriel. She was in Nazareth in the region of Galilee and is described as a virgin, engaged to Josph. We don’t know what age she was, but based on social customs of the time she was most likely to have been in her teens. It is worth pausing and reflecting on the experience she had as a teenager, engaging with the angel Gabriel. How might we, many of us with more years of life experience than we care to mention, let alone when we were teenagers, have reacted to this experience. Perhaps reflect on verse 20, when the angel says to Mary, ‘don’t be afraid’. She appears to have been remarkably

focused. I wonder if fear, confusion, self-doubt and many other reactions might well have distracted us.

Most of us have probably not had such an immediate and dramatic engagement with God's messenger, but what about less dramatic engagements with God's messengers, often ordinary people through whom God communicates with us, making us aware of needs to be addressed, changes to be made or directions to follow. Will we like Mary say, 'let it be according to your word'.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Monday 23 June

Luke 1.8-25 & 59-64

The reading today is mostly about Elizabeth rather than Mary. Her husband Zechariah was one of the priests at the temple. Scholars suggest that priests were not in short supply and that there were more than enough of them to undertake the sacred duties.

Consequently, they drew lots to see which of them would stand at the altar with incense. For Zechariah, this would have been immensely significant privilege. The angel speaks to him, telling him that Elizabeth would become pregnant and have a son, who was to be called John.

This pregnancy, which produced John the Baptist, was unexpected; as Zechariah says (to the angel in verse 18), 'I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years'. Elizabeth did conceive. The immense significance of the pregnancy for her is reinforced by her sense that the disgrace she felt from not conceiving, would be removed. The social view of the time was that failure to conceive reflected a punishment from God.

Elizabeth finds herself pregnant, not just joyfully and unexpectedly, but aware that she would bear a son who would have an important role for God, turning many "people of Israel to the Lord" (verse 16).

How did she react? It appears she responded with quiet humility. We are not told why she stayed in seclusion for 5 months, by which time her pregnancy would be showing. She was obedient to God, as we read in verses 59-64, that when the child was to be named, she said (her husband Zechariah was still unable to speak) that he was to be called John, despite all the relatives protesting that no one else in the family was called John. This obedience was not a matter of rejecting family names but obedience to God, reflecting the role her infant would have as John the Baptist.

Whilst we are unlikely to have in our lives an event as significant as being a parent of John the Baptist and like Elizabeth, all of life may not be as we would like it to be, we may be reminded again of her humble trust in, and obedience of God, as a model for our lives.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Tuesday 24 June

Luke 1.39-45

The next encounter with Mary in the narrative is during the next three months when she goes to stay at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Many of us will be familiar with the Magnificat (verses 46-55), in which Mary declares a response of praise for God's initiative. In the seven verses before this, we read of Elizabeth's response to the presence of, the still in utero Jesus, and his mother. Elizabeth describes a response by her unborn child. Whilst movements at her late stage of pregnancy would be expected, she being filled with the Holy Spirit, applies meaning to this observation, recognising the blessing to all that would come from the as yet unborn Messiah. Although not described in the narrative in such terms, this could be seen as prophetic – as she first greeted Mary, she would not have known about the visit of the angel Gabriel.

Elizabeth was open, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to expect the saving actions of God. We might reflect on how that has relevance for us. Her openness to God allowed her to identify His actions and be part of them, most immediately in her support and encouragement of Mary as she carried the Messiah for nine months. How may we stop our routine and often closed thinking, to become aware of God and His actions, that we might be a part of those actions.

The other interesting observation we might make here about Mary's response, is that when she is honoured by Elizabeth as the mother of Jesus, she deflects this honour to God and His actions, as expressed in the Magnificat (reading for tomorrow).

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Wednesday 25 June

Luke 1.46-55

The Magnificat is one of those very familiar texts. Sometimes we need to pause and reflect again upon it to fully understand what it is saying. It is called the Magnificat because in the original Latin translation the first word of the first sentence is the verb magnificat (to magnify). Mary, despite her special place in God's plan, starts with a sense of her perspective before God, that He has done great things, has looked upon her with favour and is her saviour. This last phrase, that God is her saviour, reminds us that everyone of us requires salvation, restoration with God.

We might ask, why did Mary express the words of the Magnificat and why is it recorded in the Gospel narrative. Part of the answer may be that it helps us understand more about God's character – that God is powerful (v49), is holy (v49) and is merciful (v50). She also reminds us that these characteristics of God have been consistently displayed and experienced by many generations,

through good times and bad times. This is especially poignant as she was living in a time of Roman occupation.

In verse 53, we are reminded that the hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty. Does this have a dual meaning, emphasising both the direct social justice God expects us to bring and also a spiritual insight. The 'spiritually rich' (and often certain of their righteousness) may not meet God because, unlike those who are spiritually poor and recognise their need for God, those who are spiritually rich may not be able to see this need.

The Magnificat can help us to pause and recall how God has been active in the lives of those before us and active in our lives. Are we, as Mary was, able to see that action of God in our lives?

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Thursday 26 June

Luke 2.1-7 & 16-20

In today's readings we are reminded of the complex circumstances of Jesus birth. Mary, in late-stage pregnancy, travelled the 120km from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is reasonable to assume that on foot and/or donkey this may have taken about 5-7 days. Quite an ordeal to endure, just to have your name recorded in the census at the correct location. Given the circumstances, it is reasonable to assume Mary gave birth without much, if any, assistance.

In this immediate post-delivery period, there was an influx of interested people and further life disruption. First the shepherds, (verses 15-20), followed by the Magi, (Matt2. 11-12) and finally the need to escape to Egypt to avoid the violence of Herod (Matt 2. 13-15). What an exhausting, mind boggling start for a new mother, a new father and an infant.

How did Mary react – she reflected on what these events might mean (verse 19). This may seem like an understatement, perhaps trying to communicate that she was trying to make sense of her experience. From a human perspective this might be quite a task, but we are here dealing with God's activity. Do we try to make sense of all in our lives as humans alone, without recognising that God is active in our world and in our lives? Recognising that God is active in our lives, as I suspect Mary did, may help us make sense of our experiences.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Friday 27 June

Luke 2.41-52.

Jesus is now 12 years of age, and his family have, as they did every year, gone to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. It is worth remembering this was a journey of some days, as indicated when we are told his parents can't find Jesus on the way home, after travelling a full day, (probably walking). Three days later Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple, listening to and asking questions of the religious leaders.

Try and imagine what was in Mary's mind. After the anxious horror of not being able to find her child for 3 days she clearly didn't understand what Jesus was doing as a 12-year-old debating with the religious leaders (verse 50).

Her response was to reflect on these things and remember them as important experiences (verse 51). She knew that God was active in this situation, that the Messiah was emerging, and although she could not understand fully what was happening, the passage suggests she had a sense of peace because she knew, as she had expressed in the Magnificat, that God was acting in what she had observed. In this, is there a lesson for us, that sometimes we don't

fully understand what is going on, but we, as did Mary, can have a sense of peace and confidence because we know that God has been active and continues to be active in our lives and in the wider world.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Saturday 28 June

John 2.1-12

Jesus' ministry is now well underway. The disciples have been recruited, and they, as well as Jesus, are attending a wedding at Cana in his home territory of Galilee. Mary is also present as a guest. It was clearly a big celebration, with all the wine consumed. At this point there is an interaction between Jesus and his mother in verses 3-5 that doesn't immediately fit with the mother - adult son interaction that we might have expected. Jesus' response to being told by his mother that there was no more wine – "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me" is then followed by "My time has not yet come". Scholars who have considered Jesus' response have asked, given its unexpectedness, whether a translation or understanding issue may be at play here, but have mostly concluded it is not. Perhaps it is that Jesus' role has now changed, and his language communicates this with some distance between his mother and himself.

Mary tells the servants to "do whatever He (Jesus) tells you" (verse 5), suggesting she has complete confidence in Jesus. This confidence is despite her immediately preceding experience in which Jesus' response to her may have been confusing and probably not what she expected. Sometimes for us life is confusing, not as we expect it, but as with Mary we can be confident of the certainty of God and trust Him even when we don't fully understand what is happening.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Sunday 29 June

John 19.25 -30.

We meet Mary again at the cross. Jesus is being executed, a long and painful process of many hours, with the horror deliberately in the public arena, presumably as a warning to anyone whom the Romans perceived to be a potential threat to their power, control and societal stability. Imagine being present as a mother, watching as your son is being tortuously executed. The familiarity of many of the words may make us a little numb to the true horror, but if we pause, we may get a sense of Mary's experience.

Jesus speaks from the cross. He speaks to the "disciple whom he loved" (who remains un-named) and to Mary, adding to existing family connections, new spiritual family connections.

Jesus is dying on the cross but already the new idea of the supportive Christian community of faith is emerging. For Mary, and the un-named disciple whom Jesus loved, a new type of family connection and support has begun. For us, we don't need to be present at the horror of an execution to learn about and be part of a broader idea of family. We see it in the stories of the early church, in Acts of the Apostles. Even when we are isolated and feel alone, we can remember Mary's experience and be reminded of the strength and support of the new Christian community. We might also consider if we have lost some the potential benefit of this Christian community as a consequence of the isolated nature of our contemporary society.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Monday 30 June

Acts 1.6-14

The final time we meet Mary in the biblical record is in Acts. As we have read, Jesus has ascended into heaven and now His followers are gathered in Jerusalem. This is before the day of Pentecost. We are told about those involved in this gathering, with eleven males being named along with some women, the only one of whom to be specifically named is Mary. It is worth remembering that women were present as part of this group of the leaders of the faithful. Some of them were likely witnesses of the empty tomb. Apart from Mary, the other women are not named, perhaps a consequence of the dominant cultural norms of the day. It is also worth noting that Jesus' family members, his brothers, are recorded as being present.

How would we have reacted had we been members of this early church community of faith? We might have felt confused and perhaps disappointed as Jesus, despite having been resurrected, had recently left to return to heaven. The teaching from Jesus, about how we should live as God's people would be fresh in our thinking. For the early church community, prayer was an essential element in their lives, as they sought to live as followers of Jesus.....a good reminder for us.

As we conclude a week of readings from the bible which tell us about the life of Mary the mother of Jesus, we might reflect on the model she provided, recognising the power and grace of God, and exemplifying how we can respond, acting with confidence and trusting in God even if we don't fully understand what is happening.

Prayer for the week

See page 39

Some Questions for group discussion and / or further individual reflection

1. In the readings this week, in what ways do we see God communicating with Mary and with Elizabeth?
2. How did each of them respond?
3. God has many ways to communicate; how do you think God may communicate with us today?
4. We have read about a range of Mary's experiences. Are there experiences in your life when you have felt God was at work?

[illegible]

[illegible]



**Ministry
Development**