

Steps in Discipleship

Resources for Study Groups



DIOCESE OF LICHFIELD



Come follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad

Our Direction Of Travel

The Invitation:

Come follow Christ in the footsteps of St Chad

We are responding to this invitation by:

- developing discipleship
- nurturing vocations
- inspiring evangelism

discipleship vocation evangelism

To become parishes, school, chaplaincies and fresh expressions that are:

- discovering the heart of God
- growing disciples
- Reaching new generations
- transforming communities
- practising generosity



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Written by The Venerable Paul Thomas & The Very Revd Adrian Dorber.
Design by Simon Jones.

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1 The Cross

Jesus said: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.' (Mark 8v34-36)

In Lent, we are invited to consider (or re-consider) what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. From the earliest times the symbol of the cross has been the distinguishing sign of Christianity. Jesus's death and resurrection is the central story of faith. Just as Jesus gave himself up, emptied himself, for the love of the world and was raised up to bring the world to God, so all Christians are called to offer their lives to God; to open the heart and let God's loving presence and purpose find a home there.

Biblical reflection

1 Corinthians 1v18–31

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised

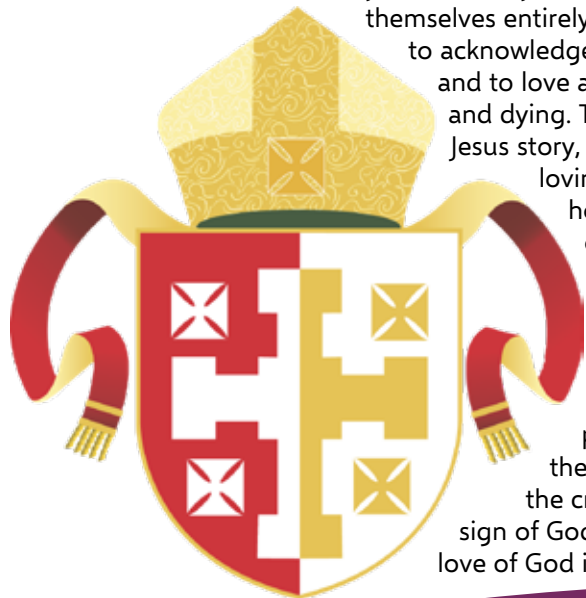
things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

St Paul sets out the sheer surprise of God’s wisdom. Jesus Christ did not compel people to accept him or receive him. He came utterly powerless. Born in humbleness, dying in degradation. In him, God has entered our darkness and the worst kinds of degradation in order to transform and heal.

- As a prayer exercise imagine yourself on Calvary watching Jesus’s execution. What do you see? Hear? Who is with you? How do you feel? What do you bring to the foot of the Cross? What can you ask Jesus to bear for you?

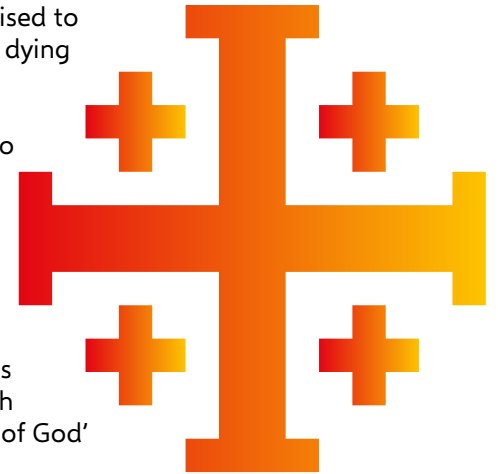
The cross in earliest Christian times was a matter of deep controversy. For Greeks, it was simply inconceivable, as sophisticated philosophical people, that God could be involved in the world of time and suffering, change and death. It was even more incredible that the hated and despised form of Roman capital punishment, the cross, could be worshipped and seen as a sign of salvation. Yet as Christians thought, prayed and reflected on the central story of faith, they realised their vocation was to identify themselves entirely with Jesus: to be one with him,

to acknowledge his Lordship over human affairs and to love and serve after his pattern of living and dying. The cross not only summed up the Jesus story, it also prescribed a pattern of life: loving to the limits, facing the world’s hostility whilst being ever forgiving, offering everything to the Father; hands and arms extended, in offering, and in open embrace of the world. It was all about providing friendship and welcome to people. As Jesus provided comfort and assurance to the thief who was crucified with him, the cross was understood as the potent sign of God’s limitless love. Even in death the love of God is at work, reconciling and saving.



It’s very interesting that the Lichfield Diocesan Coat of Arms (opposite) and that of the Cathedral is a cross with a broad middle panel and four bars: top, bottom, left and right. The cross is almost square shaped and in each corner between each space there are four small crosses. We like to call this the St Chad Cross. Its origins have nothing to do with St Chad in his lifetime. However, our Diocesan and Cathedral symbol is based on the Cross of Jerusalem.

The cross you see here (right), was devised to represent Jerusalem, the city of Jesus’s dying and rising. In early Christian thought Jerusalem was seen as the spiritually magnetic centre of the world. Yet it also symbolises the heavenly Jerusalem, (Revelation 21v11-14) with its 12 gates, three on every side, welcoming the in-gathered people of God. The four crosses surrounding the central cross symbolise Jesus’s own prophecy that people will come to the feast of his Kingdom ‘from east and west and north and south and will eat in the Kingdom of God’ (Luke 13v29).



The cross in this square form also represents the idea that the truth of the cross fills the whole earth. Put a circle around the sign and the cross absorbs all the space, interprets all that emptiness with its significance.

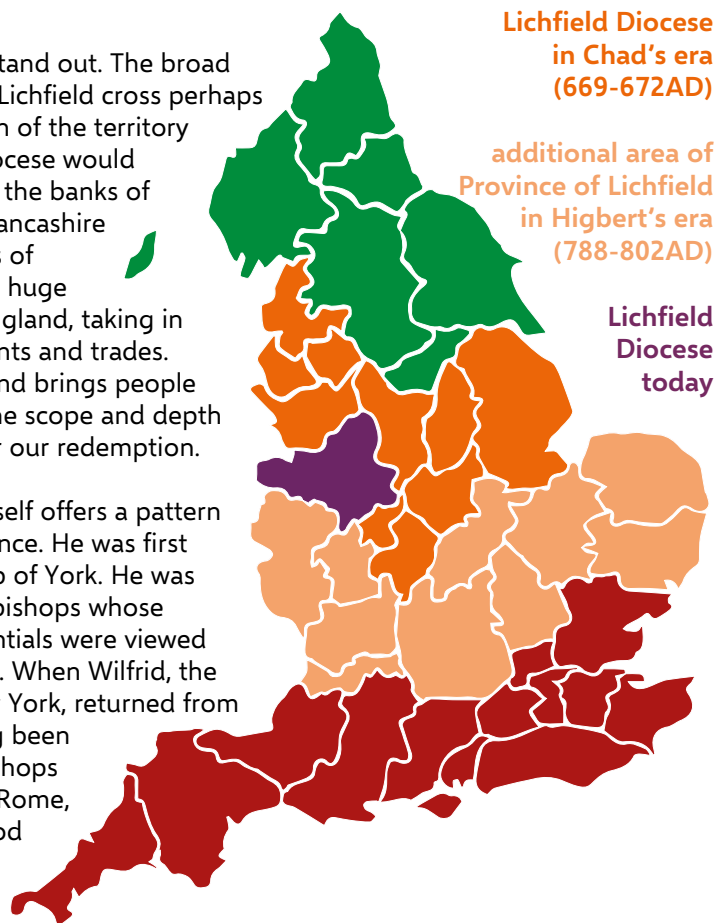
So why have we got a version of the Jerusalem Cross in Lichfield? Probably because medieval Bishops were aware that their Cathedral Church was one of the three great pilgrimage sites in Britain. (Lichfield City still has a medieval street plan devised by Bishop Thomas de Clinton, designed to funnel pilgrims towards the Cathedral). St Chad was honoured as a person of exceptional humility, approachability and Christ-like holiness. Visiting the place of his burial and the centre of his mission, put people in touch with the profound faith that inspired him. Chad lived out his baptism so that the light of Christ could be discerned so compellingly, charitably and attractively that Jesus’s influence and power could not be denied. Our medieval ancestors wanted to say: get in touch with Chad’s story and you will be directed to Jesus’s story. Coming to Chad’s resting place will be like coming to Jerusalem, the city of the Gospel, the city of God’s eternal promise.

Some other things stand out. The broad central panel of the Lichfield cross perhaps indicates the breadth of the territory Chad served. His Diocese would have extended from the banks of the River Ribble in Lancashire down to the borders of Oxfordshire. It was a huge swathe of Central England, taking in all kinds of settlements and trades. The cross includes and brings people together. It shows the scope and depth of God's strategy for our redemption.

Secondly, Chad himself offers a pattern of reconciled difference. He was first called to be a Bishop of York. He was ordained by British bishops whose authority and credentials were viewed with some suspicion. When Wilfrid, the original nominee for York, returned from the continent having been duly ordained by bishops in communion with Rome, Chad graciously stood aside and returned to Lastingham, his monastery in Yorkshire. Archbishop

Theodore recognised Chad's exceptional spiritual gifts and appointed him to be Bishop of the Mercians. So, Chad came to Lichfield, not protesting about his credentials or his dignity, but living with the Church as a bishop in a reconciled Church, himself a sign of reconciliation.

Thirdly, after Chad died his resting place became a focus for devotion and renewal. Until the Reformation, Lichfield's importance as a Shrine Church was in the same league as Canterbury, Walsingham and Durham. As a place of pilgrimage, of in-gathering, faith-sharing and vision-giving, four spiritual disciplines would have been encouraged. They still apply today, and the Cathedral urges pilgrims to practise them:



Lichfield Diocese
in Chad's era
(669-672AD)

additional area of
Province of Lichfield
in Higbert's era
(788-802AD)

Lichfield
Diocese
today

- Come with a prayer on your heart and lips – maybe the prayer is about a decision you have to make, or about a person, situation or problem. Offer that focus as your pilgrimage 'intention'.
- You will be coming to a cross-shaped Cathedral in company with others. Think about standing with others as a community of Christians at the heart of the cross. Share life-stories, enjoy the friendship, solidarity and companionship of others and perhaps put up with the irritations and frustrations of life in the Church (cheerfully). We build community when we stand in the same place and face the same direction.
- Chad and the Saxon Saints were good at learning to be reconciled to God and one another by examining their lives, confessing their sins and seeking God's forgiveness. They are good role models for us. The Church is held back by lack of reconciliation, by resentments and fears.
- Pilgrimages in faith mean learning to share one's bread and being a joyful giver, celebrating the abundance of God's kindness by returning a meaningful part of our money to God. Great enterprises in faith flourish through the oxygen of love turned into practical action.

As we think about the cross as a call to discipleship, the cross as a sign of God gathering his people, and the cross as a sign of our journey in faith, we can use the beauty and familiarity of it to re-appreciate the love and depth of its message and draw more people to its truth.

"And I", says Jesus, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself".

John 12v32

Action for the week ahead

- Think about Lent as a renewed journey and exploration of all that your life has been and what it might mean if it becomes, like St Chad's, intentionally 'cross-shaped'.
- As you set out on this path, who travels with you? Who are the people and concerns on your heart? What holds you back at times?
- Use this week to set your compass for Lent. Perhaps praying one short prayer very often 'Lord, what do you want me to be and to do? Show me and give me the grace to follow?'

2 Discipleship

As he followed the disciplines of the monastic life, Chad learnt at an early age that being a follower of Jesus meant a balance between contemplation and action. He knew it was essential to give God his undivided attention through prayer and worship; listening to and studying the Scriptures; learning to be still and silent as he waited on God. Chad was equally aware that active and outgoing service of God was important. On one level this might mean time spent on routine chores in the monastic community – food preparation; gardening; visiting sick brothers; running errands. On another level it would involve going beyond the monastery walls to preach and teach, to administer the Sacraments, and to give alms or assistance to the poor. Here was a way of life marked by a combination of solitude and solidarity, of being away from and also among people. It was also shaped by the bigger framework of the Church's pattern of feast and fast, of celebration and renunciation, as each season brought a different focus on God's call to follow Christ and in doing so to learn dependence on the Holy Spirit. Dependence, too, on the example and intercession of saints, past and present, as Chad the disciple recognized that he made his spiritual journey 'surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12v1).

We can imagine that as his responsibilities increased first as Abbot of Lavington and then as Bishop of the Mercians, Chad would have found it more difficult to maintain the balance between contemplation and action. Why not stay longer in the monastic cell or Bishop's house where reflection and recollection seemed so much sweeter than engagement in all the conflicts and complexities of life in the world? Or why not miss the odd hour of prayer so that he could attend to some pressing need in the monastery or diocese which others would be expecting? Yet Chad knew that if he let go of either side of his discipleship it could have dire consequences. Above all else he must safeguard his personal relationship with God because everything else sprang from that source. But such a relationship could never be genuine if it did not include care of his monastic brethren and the people of his diocese. 'Those who do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.' (1 John 4 v 20). To all healthy discipleship there is both an inward and an outward aspect.



The concept of the Two Saints' Way was to encourage people to walk the 87 miles between Lichfield Cathedral and Chester Cathedral, using the pilgrimage as an opportunity for prayer, reflection, healing and recreation. The two saints are St Werburga, a female saint of the seventh century to whom Chester Cathedral is dedicated; and St Chad after whom Lichfield Cathedral is named. The inaugural pilgrimage took place in spring 2012 and many groups have followed the route since. Such walking gives us an image of discipleship – people following Jesus together. Inspired by His example and the example of the saints down the ages.

Biblical reflection

John 15 v 10-17

¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

This passage is part of the 'Farewell Discourses' that span chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel. They allow us to hear Jesus sharing his deepest concerns and hopes with his intimate circle of disciples. They provide beautiful insights into the heart and mind of Jesus.

Right throughout these very personal disclosures, Jesus has in mind his forthcoming death on the cross and so mention of his departure and what

that might mean surfaces throughout. This passage is no exception. In v13 Jesus expresses the extent of his love for the disciples by saying that it will involve laying down his life for them. And then comes that special moment when Jesus calls his disciples 'friends'. They are no longer 'servants' because people of that status are not allowed to build a close relationship with their Master. They are part of the household but do not have any idea what the Master considers important or what plans he might have for the future. Friends are different. As St Augustine put it: 'A friend is someone with whom you dare to share the counsels of your heart.' You entrust yourself to them, reveal your mind to them, invite them to share in your deepest hopes for the future. Disciples, people just like you and me, are given that privilege by Jesus, and it is a wonderful privilege.

But we must be careful not to misinterpret what Jesus is saying. Not for a moment is Jesus suggesting that we are equal to him or that we can be casual or careless in our relationship with him. Alongside the talk of friendship there is mention of obeying Jesus' commands (v14,17); a reminder that it was He that chose us, not the other way round (v16); and that we have been appointed by him to go and bear fruit (v16). Jesus is indeed our friend, but he is a divine friend who deserves our deep reverence and respect.

- Take a few minutes, with eyes closed, to imagine yourself in the upper room with Jesus. As you listen to those words about being his friend how do you respond? What do you feel? What do you think? How does this affect your relationship with the others who are present?
- What helps or hinders us in worship to maintain the tension between confidence in God and restraint towards God?
- How helpful do you find the idea of 'fearing God'? What do you understand it to mean?

Three aspects of discipleship

• Being Chosen – 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' (v16)

This is the foundation stone of Christian discipleship: the realisation that you are part of the adventure of following Jesus because of his initiative not yours. God has called, invited, allured you into a relationship because God takes great delight in you. It was this realisation that dawned on Martin Luther 500 years ago and which has become the distinguishing mark of Protestantism ever since. Alec Ryrie puts it like this:

'Luther's theology was not a doctrine: it was a love affair. Luther's passion was an intense, desolating, intoxicating passion sparked by his life-upending glimpse of God's incomprehensible, terrible, beautiful love for him. Like any lover, he found it incredible that his beloved should love him, unworthy as he was. It was sheer gift. All that mattered was accepting it.'

(*'Protestants'*, page 20)

This takes us to the very core of discipleship and friendship with God. Jesus spies (or watches) us and loves us and calls us to know and serve him. Such love can be comforting and challenging at the same time. When Ralph Reader used to hold Gang shows in the Albert Hall he would have a thousand boys performing on stage and the hall would be full to capacity. On one occasion a few minutes before the curtain went up a boy approached Reader in tears. 'What's wrong?' asked Reader. 'Sir', he replied, 'I've got the wrong socks on!' 'The wrong socks!' exclaimed Reader. 'You will be one among a thousand boys on the stage who will notice your socks?' Without a moment's hesitation the boy said 'My Ma'am will'!! He knew that his mother would scan each row of boys on stage until she found him, and then she would scan him from head to foot leading to that terrifying moment when she realized he had not changed his socks as she had told him to! No matter how big the crowd of boys the mother espied her son with love, a love that meant she noticed every detail of his life.

In the same way, there may be seven billion people on earth but God spies each and every one of us with the beauty and intensity of divine love. God knows each one of us in detail as Jesus reminded us (Luke 12v7) and that means that God knows both what is right and wrong with our lives. God's love is both comforting and challenging. Sometimes we become aware of our sins and short-comings and recognize that we are lukewarm in our response to

God. We feel guilty and unworthy and we tell ourselves that God cannot love us as we are. If only we could do better, but we can't – so why would God be interested in us?

One person who thought like that was Paul Tillich, a famous theologian. When he reached his 60th birthday he had deep regrets and deep shame (he had been a womaniser involved in many affairs). So Tillich wrote a sermon addressed to himself. In it he explores at length the deep darkness into which he had descended spiritually. But then he talks about God's grace: 'Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life.' Tillich next goes on to describe the difference God's grace makes to our lives:

'It is as though a voice were saying: You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact the you are accepted.'

- Spend a few moments re-reading this last passage about being accepted and let the words sink deep into your mind and heart. Try to realize that you are accepted, and that the foundation of your Christian life is: 'Simply accept the fact that God accepts you.'
- What does the grace of God mean to you?
- How can we prevent belief in our unconditional acceptance by God from breeding complacency or pride?
- How do acts of kindness and 'good works' fit in if we do not need them to impress God or win God's approval?

• **Becoming Friends – 'You are my friends if you do what I command you.'** (v14)

Archbishop Michael Ramsey was once addressing a large audience of students. One questioner was a Muslim. 'Sir, how long have you been a priest?' she asked. 'Fifty years' came the reply. 'Wow!' she exclaimed, 'that is a very long friendship!' She could see that the essence of what Ramsey was about was developing and sustaining a friendship with Jesus Christ. It is the same for us. Whether we are ordained or lay if we want to be disciples of Jesus we need to work out how to stay friends with him. Here are three suggestions about how we might do that.

a) Experience

In v16 Jesus says 'Whatever you ask in my name, the Father will give you' and in so doing invites us to pray. In this case to make intercession, to pray on behalf of others. But what difference can our prayers make when God is all-knowing and all-loving? Here is one possible answer. As a boy on sunny days I used to hold my magnifying glass about two inches above a dry leaf. The glass drew the rays of the sun to a small spot on the leaf which first turned black, then began to smoke and finally ignited. I had found a way of channelling the sun's heat towards a specific place. Perhaps then intercessory prayer involves you and me becoming like that magnifying glass. Though the rays of God's love are constantly flowing towards creation, we become the means of focusing that love on specific people and situations. Not because God's love falls short, but because God chooses to have us play a part in conveying divine love to all creation. And at the same time to draw us into a deeper relationship with God. Bishop Charles Gore in a little gem of a book called 'Prayer and the Lord's Prayer' put it like this:

'The object of prayer is to educate us in [relationship] with God. We are sons of God capable of something better than mechanical obedience; capable of intelligent correspondence with our Father; capable of fellowship and communion with Him in one Spirit. There is to be what the New Testament calls 'freedom of speech' and an open avenue of inquiry towards God. That is our highest function; and that is the glory of our eternal occupation. To train us for it now, in the childhood of our immortal life, even though we babble with half inarticulate sounds, we are to be practised to pray.'

So intercessory prayer draws us into a deeper relationship with God. It is what Bonhoeffer called 'love on its knees', a love which conflates God's love with our love and releases them more fully and freely into the life of God's creation.

b) Explore.

Jesus tells us that we are his friends because 'I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.' (v15) We are privileged to receive key insights into the plan and purpose of God for the world. But there are still lots of questions to be answered and tensions to be resolved. 'Now we see in a mirror dimly' said St Paul which means that we need to look hard to work out how to make sense of what we see. People often give the example of suffering or natural disaster as question-marks about the love of God. Others are more concerned about moral problems or even the lack of moral character in the church. When Dave Tomlinson, a London Vicar, ran a group in a pub

for people who had left the church, he discovered that their chief complaint was that no one had taken their questions seriously. There is always room to explore – to try and find better answers– and often that requires study and hard thinking. ‘I have often buried my head in a Greek lexicon’ said A.C. Hoskyns ‘and arisen in the presence of God.’ Of course we can’t all master New Testament Greek, but we can all try harder to understand the will and ways of God as we see them revealed in Jesus. Every friendship needs to be explored if it is to grow.

c) Exult

In v 11 One reason Jesus is sharing what he does is ‘that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.’ He wants us to enjoy our friendship with him. There is a lovely medieval parable which illustrates this. A taverner has vinted a very special claret, and he shares it with a small group of customers. When they taste it they find it really intoxicating. It is so smooth and rich and has such a lingering effect on the palate that the customers crave more of it. So when they run out of money they start to trade in their possessions – just so they can have more of that beautiful claret. Bit by bit they lose everything as the enjoyment of the drink takes hold of them! And this claret, says the author, is just like the love of Jesus – once you taste it, nothing will stop you wanting more of it. Jordan, a medieval Dominican, wrote this about Jesus:

‘he will wipe up the water of this sad and savourless life and replace it with holy and fruitful wine... that wine with whose sweetness the beloved of God are inebriated. I mean the wine of everlasting joy.’

But the point not to be missed is that in your state of inebriation you might well find that sacrifices have to be made. T.S. Eliot describes discipleship as: ‘a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.’ Yet the costliness should not finally eclipse the joy. Indeed evidence of joy is an indispensable qualification for canonisation (saint-making) in the Roman Catholic Church – a good reminder that it should certainly feature in our Christian lives.

- What helps you to offer prayers of intercession regularly?
- What sort of opportunities to explore your faith do you think your church should provide?
- In what ways do you enjoy being a Christian?

• Bearing fruit – ‘I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.’ (v16)

Discipleship is not just about me and ‘my’ relationship with Jesus. It is also about how my friendship with Jesus connects me with others and impacts on others. Hopefully, I am a different, more caring, more co-operative, more compassionate, more committed person because I have ‘rubbed shoulders’ with Jesus. This must surely be the meaning of that exclamation in Acts 4v13: ‘They could see that they had been with Jesus.’

Speaking of Acts, it is fascinating to read in chapter 16 how two very different people with very different experiences of becoming followers of Jesus, both express that new relationship by extending hospitality to others. The first is Lydia. We read of her: ‘The Lord opened her heart’ (v14) – a quiet, undramatic response to the good news about Jesus – leading on to the invitation ‘Come and stay at my home’. The other person is the jailer. He experiences a veritable earthquake of emotion as he faces the possible escape of Paul and Silas but having responded to their message ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus’ he then ‘brought them up into his house and set food before them’ (v34).

There is often a correlation between these practical acts of compassion and the proclamation of the Gospel. We ‘bear fruit’ in a doubly effective way!

One of Australia’s best known authors, Tim Winton, is a Christian, and he has explained why. When he was a boy he was the proud son of a policeman. His father patrolled the local town and was well respected by the community. Then one day he was mown down by a hit and run driver. He spent six months in hospital. Tim, then a boy of nine, was standing in the doorway of the house when his father, a crumpled figure he hardly recognised, was carried in on a stretcher, and taken straight to bed. The next day a tall, broad man called Len Thomas appeared at the front door. He spoke briefly with Tim’s mum and then went upstairs. He lifted Tim’s father from his bed, carried him to the bath where he washed him, and then he took him back to his bed. This happened five times a week. Len never said much but Tim knew he was a member of the local church. It made Tim want to know more about the Christian faith – and eventually led to his becoming a Christian. Here was a fine example of a man who loved and followed Jesus ‘bearing fruit’ in his actions and good deeds.

- 'I will believe in the Redeemer of Christians when they look redeemed' (Nietzsche). What does it mean to 'look redeemed'?
- How do you think you are being asked by Jesus Christ to 'bear fruit'?
- Do any of you have a story to tell similar to that of Tim Winton's?

Action for the week ahead

- Focus on the relationship you have with some of your friends. What makes that relationship special? Then think of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Is it like a friendship? Each day list a way in which you want to deepen your friendship with him.

3 Vocation

In modern parlance, Chad might be called a 'cradle' Christian. He was part of a devout family who would have taught him to love God from his earliest years. Then when he was about ten years old he was placed in the care of Aidan at the monastery in Lindisfarne. There he lived in the community alongside his three older brothers and gradually learnt to spend time with God both alone in his cell and in company when the community gathered in the monastery church for the seven offices (or services) of the day. The monks followed the pattern of Psalm 119v164 which says 'Seven times a day will I praise you' – beginning at dawn and ending at about 9pm. As Chad followed that rhythm of personal and corporate prayer so he came to believe that God was calling him to be a monk and a priest.

We have no idea how that call became clear to Chad. It might have been a sudden awareness that he should give himself to that particular way of life or it might have been a long struggle. And after the call had come there is no guarantee that he never felt any doubts nor asked any questions. Not least of course when having been elevated to the See of York he had to step back and allow Wilfred, the first candidate (who had disappeared abroad for two years) to return and replace him. One of our most recent and inspiring exemplars of Christianity, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, admitted that she had prolonged periods of spiritual darkness in which she lost all sense of God's presence, but she never wavered from the chosen path of compassionate service in India. Whatever Chad's personal experience, he also had the Church's affirmation and that led to his becoming Abbot of Lastingham as his gifts of leadership and qualities of holiness were recognised. Later he would also hear the call to be a bishop – a vocation that would bring him to Lichfield and an extensive ministry in West Mercia.

Vocation is never a private experience. Sometimes it is an act of obedience to Church leaders as they identify a particular role for us; always it requires some act of corporate affirmation from the Church that our aspiration to serve God coincides with their own discernment.

'The Church cannot afford the luxury of simply accepting the claims of every self-proclaimed apostle who blows into town... Vocation is not tested once, the Church tests it all the time. That is a task that cannot be left to the individual... At some point the issues of authority and consent have to be settled. This is done by the community which has to recognize the ministry that it sets over and within it. The community shapes its ministry as ministry shapes the community.' (David Hoyle, 'The Pattern of Our Calling' p66).

Here the word ministry includes both ordained and lay, ministries which operate in the wider church and those which are confined to the local church.

Photo by Lichfield Cathedral Photographers



It is fascinating that in 2003 during excavations under the nave of Lichfield Cathedral the remains of a stone coffin-chest were discovered. Part of the front end of the chest was still intact with the limestone carving of an angel. It is thought that the chest was made at the close of the eight century to hold the remains of St Chad. The angel is probably Gabriel with the missing section of the carving probably depicting the Virgin Mary as she received the news that she was to become the mother of the Son of God.

Biblical Reflection

The story of the Gabriel's visit to Mary is told in Luke 2:

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

The first thing to realize about the passage is that it reflects God's compassion for the whole of humanity. God desires to bring His saving presence into the world. R.S. Thomas captures this truth in his poem 'The Coming':

**And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.**

It was that decision which Gabriel had now been commissioned to take to Mary in order to win her consent to be the mother of the new-born babe.

There have been many artistic portrayals of the encounter between Gabriel and the young maid from Nazareth. Some have the Angel, radiant with heavenly light, standing in front of Mary who is kneeling in humble adoration or cowering in fear. But there is an icon in the Orthodox Church in Nazareth which depicts the Angel Gabriel running towards the figure of Mary who at that point has her back turned to him. Gabriel was the bearer of such exciting, world-changing news that of course he ran! God wanted to stoop down and share in the life of humanity to bring His transformative presence to bear upon it. "And you, Mary", was his message, – "yes you! – are being asked to carry this child in your womb, to suckle him as an infant, to protect him in his early years and finally to prepare him for adulthood and his life's work." What an amazing vocation!

- How is it possible to tell the difference between God's call and your own inner urges?
- If you have ever had an insistent sense that God was calling you to do something, share what happened both at the time and afterwards.
- What keeps us going when we do not have any sense of calling from God?

If we turn our attention to Mary, it is almost impossible to imagine how stunned and bewildered she must have felt. She was being invited to receive into herself the very being of the Son of God. To begin to contemplate what this must have meant for Mary we can enlist the help of the Northumbrian poet, Kathleen Raine. She likens Mary's experience to her own experience of being in a small cottage in the wilds of Northumbria as it is bounded and battered by the sounds and sights of powerful natural elements. As the wind howls and the rain hammers around the cottage the poet nestles inside it deeply aware of her own fragility and at the same time contemplating what it might be like to open a door or a window so that those massive forces could enter the interior of the cottage. That, after all, was the kind of step Mary was asked to take in admitting a Divine Being into her womb:

**'Let in the wind
 Let in the rain
 Let in the moors tonight...
 Let in the nameless formless power
 That beats upon my door
 Let in the ice, let in the snow
 The banshee howling on the moor...
 Let in the snow that numbs the grave
 Let in the acorn tree
 The mountain stream and mountain stone
 Let in the bitter sea.
 Let in the fire
 Let in the power
 Let in the invading might .
 Gentle must my fingers be
 And pitiful my heart
 Since I must bind in human form
 A living power so great –
 A living impulse great and wild
 That cries about my house
 With all the violence of desire**

**Desiring this my peace.
 Pitiful my heart must hold
 The lonely stars at rest...
 Let in the wound
 Let in the pain
 Let in your child tonight.'**

And so Mary utters her 'yes' to God and consents to be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit so that the miracle might come about.

- What is the most powerful experience of God's presence that you have ever had?
- How far do you think it is natural for us to want to keep God at arm's length, perhaps fearing that we will be 'taken over' by God?
- To what extent do you believe in angels?

Look at the Lichfield Angel again. Over the course of time the carving of Mary has crumbled leaving a blank space next to the figure of the Angel Gabriel. That leaves room for Chad or for you and me to occupy her space. We can think of the Angel approaching us, inviting us to accept God's call – whatever that might be for us as individuals. And then the possibility of our 'yes' being uttered and the Holy Spirit coming to overshadow and empower us for the work or witness God might have called us to fulfil.

Vocation is not always a dramatic or disorienting experience. We have sometimes been too influenced by God's call of certain people in the Bible eg Moses (Exodus 3); Jacob (Genesis 28); Isaiah (Isaiah 6); Paul (Acts 9) or Peter (Acts 11). But there are examples of quieter moments of response. Abraham (Gen 12) or Hosea (Hosea 1v2-4) in the Old Testament and Matthew (Mark2v13,14) or Lydia (Acts 16) in the New Testament. Why some people have a vivid and memorable sense of God's call and others have a gradual and almost unnoticed acknowledgement of that call we cannot be sure. Professor Krailsheimer in his book 'Conversion' concludes that the more dramatic forms of receiving God's call act as catalysts and encouragements to the rest of us.

Another important point about God's call is that it may not lead to any major change in our personal circumstances. After attending a week's mission in the local town, a woman wrote to the speaker. 'Dear Sir, I have a burning desire to proclaim the Gospel, but I am married with six children. What can I do?' He wrote back: 'I am delighted you desire to serve God and equally delighted he has provided you with a ready-made 'congregation' of seven!' Being true to

God's call can mean using the constraints of our life in such a way that they become the means of conveying our love of God. To do that we need to be very awake and alert to their potential. Jean-Pierre de Caussade spoke of 'the sacrament of the present moment' – meaning that every situation, every encounter with another person, however brief, can contain and release God's grace.

'The present moment is always the ambassador who declares the order of God...

Everything is a means and an instrument of holiness; everything without any exception.

The 'one thing necessary' is always to be found by the soul in the present moment...

Does not reason, as well as faith, reveal to us the real presence of the divine love in all creatures and in all events of life?'

(*'Self-abandonment to Divine Providence'* chapter 2).

Whether or not it does so will depend on us. Did we enter the situation or meet the particular person with a negative attitude? Or were we open to discover something or indeed to impart something to them? Those who met Teilhard de Chardin in the trenches of the First World War recorded that his presence made a significant difference. 'The look in his eyes when they met your eyes revealed the man's soul: his reassuring sympathy restored your confidence in yourself. Just to speak to him made you feel better. You knew that he was listening to you and that he understood you.' Here was a priest fully alive to the sacrament of the present moment.

- How do we best 'hear' the voice of God in our lives? What part might the Bible or other Christians play in helping us discern God's will?
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well regarded Christian pastor and theologian, became convinced that he should take part in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler and so stop the spread of Nazism. The plot failed and Bonhoeffer was hung. How would you decide if he was responding to God's call?
- How highly do you value the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Our vocation as Christians does not end with this life. We are called into eternal fellowship with God, a relationship which will transcend death. This means that what we have begun to experience and enjoy of God now will go on growing and deepening throughout eternity. One of the loveliest stories we have of Chad concerns the manner of his death.

About February 672AD, two and a half years after Chad became Bishop of the Mercians, he was praying in his oratory whilst his servant, Owen, was working just outside. Owen suddenly heard the sound of beautiful angelic singing approaching and then settling over the place where Chad was praying. It lasted about half an hour and then disappeared. When Owen and the other brothers entered Chad's room they were told that he had received a revelation that he would soon be taken to his eternal reward. Later Chad told Owen that his elder brother, Cedd, had been part of the angelic visitation and that he had learnt that he had just seven days to live. This news Chad received with great joy and anticipation, even though it caused his brothers great sorrow and heartache. Sure enough, a week later on March 2nd Chad died still only in his early 40's. His vocation to follow Christ would now reach its fulfilment in the life of heaven.

It is perhaps only natural to ask what form that fulfilment might take. Looking back through Christian history there have been two competing visions of life in heaven, one focused on contemplation and the other on activity. The contemplative vision was given classic expression by Thomas Aquinas:

'The fulfilment of man... consists in the vision of God.

There will be no change then in either intellect or emotion for having reached the first cause the intellect's search will come to an end, and having attained the fullness of all goodness nothing remains to be desired. The final fulfilment consists in perfect stillness.'

But such a picture of heavenly life does not really allow for the body! The Christian does not believe in the immortality of the soul but in the resurrection of the body. And if we are to be embodied beings then we might expect some form of interaction with each other. It is fascinating that the central portal of Notre Dame Cathedral, dating from about the time of Aquinas, depicts rows of the redeemed in heaven looking up to the exalted Christ. And among them is a couple holding hands!

The idea of an active heaven is most strongly associated with Emanuel Swedenborg, son of a Swedish bishop, who claimed to have had dreams and visions of what heaven is really like. He saw heaven as divided from earth by only a thin veil and to be a sphere which retained many resemblances to earth. The environment of heaven brings fulfilment through many and varied activities and through pre-occupation not so much with the vision of God as the community of other believers. Here was a much greater recognition of the

physicality of heavenly life and of the need for the communion of saints, the total gathering of all those sharing the life of heaven, to be acknowledged as vital to its true character. What has become much weaker is the focus on the divine love as the centre and climax of heavenly life.

The most honest response we can give to these competing conceptions is that we do not know what heaven will be like. The New Testament admits to a degree of agnosticism: 'We do not yet know what we will be, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him.' (1 John 3v2). It also encourages us to expect a fuller relationship with God: 'Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' (1 Corinthians 13v12). That was what Chad looked forward to as he approached death: his call to follow Christ would reach a much fuller degree of completion as he was drawn to a closer relationship with God and clearer grasp of His nature. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it like this:

'Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal; death, cast aside all the burdensome chains and demolish the walls of our temporal body... so that at last we may see that which here remains hidden. Freedom, how long we have sought thee in discipline, action and suffering; dying we now behold thee revealed in the Lord.'

(poem: 'Stations On The Road To Freedom')

Those are words to which Chad would have said a loud 'Amen'. Passing through death and into God's eternity he knew that he would experience the fullness of that freedom for which Christ had set him free. The calling he had received in early life would now finally issue in eternal life. As we follow in his footsteps may we too one day share with Chad in that eternal inheritance as we rejoice with all creation and all forms of life that ultimately the Kingdom of God is creation healed. It will be when everything and everyone is filled with the fullness of God. That fullness is:

'The rapturous fullness of the divine life: a life that communicates itself with inexhaustible creativity; an over brimming life... a life from which everything that lives receives its vital energies and its zest for living; a source of life to which everything that has been made alive responds with deepest joy and ringing exultation.'

(Jurgen Moltmann, 'The Coming of God' p336)

Participating in that vision of God with Chad, and with all the saints, is the final outcome of vocation.

Action for the week ahead

- When you pray, spend a few moments holding out one of your hands as if you were gently grasping the hand of the Lichfield Angel (Gabriel) and spend that time:
 - (a) thanking God for the vocation you have received;
 - (b) seeking to know what God is calling you to next;
 - (c) asking that for the very first time you might have an awareness of God's call to you.

4 Evangelism

Chad was an intrepid evangelist. He had a burning desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ with as many as possible, motivated by his great love of God and his great love of people. Having spent many hours pondering the message of the Bible, Chad believed that God's mercy and compassion could bring healing and hope to everyone. What mattered therefore was to help people hear and believe and then experience the wonder of God's presence and peace in their lives. This meant finding the right way to mobilise the Church for evangelism.

It was Antoine de St-Exupery who wrote: 'If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs and organize the work; teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean.' Chad knew instinctively that if he were to release the Church of God for mission he needed to give people a vision of the wide, boundless love of God. Once he had done that the rest would follow. So in his preaching and pastoring Chad was always pointing both by word and example to the beauty and bounty of God's love. His heart had been thrilled by it; now he wanted others to share the same sense of delight. This was the overriding characteristic of his evangelism and his primary texts for explaining that divine love were the four Gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Photo by Lichfield Cathedral Photographers



The Chad Gospels date from the eighth century – a century after Chad was Bishop of Mercia but are exactly the kind of Gospel text that he would have known. Scholars believe that the Gospels are the work of a single scribe and that the script shows strong links with Northumbrian, Iona and Irish manuscripts. These Gospels may have been produced in Lichfield and apart from a short time during the Civil War (the Cathedral library was looted in 1646) they have been in the Cathedral since the eleventh century. Sadly they are not complete because a second volume probably disappeared in the Civil War.

They contain beautiful artwork depicting the evangelists and in the margins are some of the earliest known examples of written Welsh.

The Gospels are kept in the Cathedral Chapter House and every new Bishop of Lichfield swears allegiance not only to the



Crown, but also due obedience

to the Archbishop of Canterbury and fidelity to the customs of Lichfield Cathedral on the Chad Gospels.

Biblical reflection

Luke 1v1-4

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

In this short preface to his Gospel, Luke sets out his credentials. He has prepared an orderly account of the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which will help his readers see that they are true. Notice in particular how Luke tells us that the account of these events was handed on to him 'by those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (v2). Here are the sources of Luke's information about Jesus, and it is worth looking at them more closely.

Lots of people have argued that the time-lag between the Gospels and what they wrote about undermine their credibility. Mark, the earliest Gospel, was probably written about 55AD which means that no full version of Jesus' story was available in writing for at least twenty-five years. Matthew and Luke are usually dated after 70AD and John's Gospel as late as 90AD. So how accurate are the Gospels and how reliable is the information they used about Jesus? Had the passing of the years led to exaggeration or distortion? Did the Church start to develop ideas about Jesus that did not reflect what he had really said



Images: Lichfield Cathedral/Archive

or done? Had they for instance started to inflate the importance of Jesus so that he went from a humble Jewish rabbi into some kind of Divine Saviour figure?

One way to restore the credibility of the Gospels lies in Luke's sentence about eyewitnesses. Most scholars believe that people who had first-hand experience of Jesus – see seeing him in action and hearing him teach – had pooled their knowledge and that the church community had carefully passed on their memories. This transmission had been done orally (by reciting information through speech not writing) but in a controlled way so that fundamental facts did not get changed. So when the Gospels came to be written there were plenty of streams of this oral transmission available to help the authors, plus a few small collections of Jesus' sayings in writing.

In 2006, Professor Richard Bauckham wrote a 500-page book called 'Jesus and the Eyewitnesses' which invites us to take our understanding of the oral transmission about Jesus one stage further. He argues in detail that memories of Jesus were not woven into an anonymous "church" narrative passed on by word of mouth. Rather each eyewitness had his or her name put against the particular piece of information that he or she had supplied. That person was the guarantor of its truth. So, very often, when names occur in the Gospels they are there as an indication that this person was the source of what is being written. In Mark's Gospel for instance there is what Bauckham calls an 'Inclusio'. Very near the beginning of the Gospel (3v16) and again at the end (16v7) Peter is mentioned. These mentions of Peter are meant to show that what you read in between is the testimony that he gave to Jesus.

To give a more specific example we can think about the man who carried the cross of Jesus on the way to Golgotha. Most of us know his name – Simon of Cyrene. But most of us have probably missed a certain detail in the sentence about him: 'Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus, a passer-by, was compelled to carry his cross' (Mark 15v21). Why has Mark included the names of Simon's sons when normally he is very restrained in the use of names? The simplest explanation is that Alexander and Rufus were known to Mark's readers. It is as if he is saying – 'You want to know who this Simon was – well, he was the father of Alexander and Rufus! And of course he would have told his sons about that day when he got involved with Jesus on the road outside Jerusalem. And now Alexander and Rufus are telling us what their father told them.'

What is more if, as many scholars think, Mark's Gospel was written in Rome then it could be that we have another mention of Rufus in Romans 16v13. There are lots of links between the Jerusalem church and the Roman church (as we see from the names of those associated with both), so it is quite possible that the 'Rufus' of Mark 15 is the same as the Rufus of Romans 16. That is how close we are to the original events of Jesus' life – and the golden cord is the eyewitnesses whose testimony Luke had listened to and then recorded in his Gospel.

But some will object that eyewitnesses can distort the facts – not least when they are relating the kind of stupendous events which surrounded the life of Jesus, and specially the Resurrection. Here Bauckham makes a fascinating comparison with the eyewitness accounts of those who were victims of the Holocaust. 'The Holocaust is an event whose reality we could scarcely begin to imagine' writes Bauckham, 'if we did not have the testimonies of survivors.' Those testimonies are unique but have a 'correspondence in exceptionality' with the Gospels. Both are uniquely unique events. Holocaust testimonies evoke horror; Gospel testimonies evoke wonder. 'But', concludes Bauckham, 'the testimonies are what enable us to connect with reality. Thus they are indispensable and highly significant.' The other point that Bauckham makes is that when eyewitnesses accounts can be checked against more objective information, in the majority of cases, what the eyewitness relates is accurate in all the essentials. The human mind has greater powers of retention than we often allow for and Bauckham gives plenty of evidence to support this conclusion. In other words, eyewitness accounts can be unique, accurate and reliable sources of information about the recent past.

- What do you find most exciting about reading the Gospels?
- Which is your favourite Gospel and why?
- Identify any part of the Gospel that you find it hard to understand or believe.
- What would be the advantages or disadvantages of using 'testimony' as a way of pointing to what the Risen Jesus is doing today? How do you think we could test the value of such testimonies?

The other description that Luke uses alongside 'eyewitnesses' is 'servants of the word.' This might well mean those who had been called to preach and teach and who were therefore familiar with the testimony of more than one person. Thus these servants or ministers of the word had begun to piece together a fuller narrative of the events associated with Jesus and the

significance which they held. It has been pointed out that Luke's mention of 'The word' ('servants of the word') links to John's Gospel preface and its much longer description of 'The Word', reaching its climax in John 1v14: 'The Word became flesh.'

Fortunately, Professor Bauckham is still working hard in St Andrew's University, Scotland, and about to produce a new book on John's Gospel. It is fascinating to read what he says about 'The Word'. Often scholars have looked at the Greek behind 'word' which is 'logos' and a significant term in Greek philosophy. But Bauckham is equally interested in the Old Testament background. This is to be found in Exodus 34.

It is the story of Moses going up the mountain and hoping to see the face of God. Of course, he sees only God's back but at the same time he hears a proclamation: 'The Lord God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and sin' (v6). Moses may not see who God is but he hears who God is.

That is the word or the revelation of God's nature that continues to inform the rest of the Old Testament story. But John has a very important addition to that story in Exodus 34: in Jesus Christ, he tells us, the audible word (what can be heard) has become the visible word (what can be seen). That is why Jesus is never again after that great sentence of Chapter 1v14 ('The Word became flesh') called 'The Word'. From now on, he is not only audible but visible. God is being made known in human flesh, in the person of Jesus. And that is why the Gospels were written – to proclaim that amazing truth! William Barclay summarized it like this:

'In Jesus I see perfectly and completely and finally and once for all revealed and demonstrated the attitude of God to humanity, the attitude of God to me. In Jesus there is the full revelation of the mind and heart of God. And what a difference it makes to know that God is like that.'

(*'Testament of Faith'* ch3)

This was the truth Luke had received from the 'servants of the Word.' It was also the message that Chad longed to proclaim and that was why he saw in the Gospels a wonderful resource and powerful springboard for his message. It is still the same today. A few years ago, Anthony Bloom was the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church in the UK, but until his mid-teens he had been an atheist and anti-church. In his book, 'School for Prayer' he explains what

changed his outlook. He was a member of a youth organisation and the leader arranged for a priest to address his group. Bloom was angry and determined not to listen; indeed he only attended out of loyalty to his leader.

'But my ears pricked up. I became more and more indignant. I saw a vision of Christ and Christianity that was profoundly repulsive to me. When the lecture was over I hurried home in order to check the truth of what he had been saying. I asked my mother whether she had a book of the Gospel, because I wanted to know whether the Gospel would support the monstrous impression I had derived from his talk. I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. I started to read St Mark's Gospel. While I was reading the beginning of St Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was the real turning point. Because Christ was alive and I had been in his presence I could say with certainty that what the Gospel said about the crucifixion of the prophet of Galilee was true, and the centurion was right when he said, 'Truly he is the Son of God'.'

- What would encourage you to read the Gospels more?
- How much would you value the opportunity for questions or discussion about the Gospel reading on Sundays rather than a sermon?
- How far do you regard the Gospels as relevant to life in the 21st Century? Can you give an example?

Chad and his way of evangelism

There is a famous story about Chad receiving the royal gift of a very fine horse so that he could travel around his diocese. King Oswy believed that as a bishop Chad should have this dignified way of being seen by the people. But Chad could not reconcile himself to being in such an elevated position and talking down to people. Very soon he handed the horse over to a needy passer-by and resumed his work on foot. Chad wanted to stand alongside people, be on their level, share their perspective, express genuine solidarity with them.

Such an approach was very Christ-like. The theologian Daniel Hardy once wrote this:

'I woke one night with a strong sense of the power of Jesus walking. It wasn't theory; it wasn't doctrine or theology. He was walking step by step through the land, and after every set of steps he met someone, stood by someone, one to one, and in some way touched and healed each one... God's presence is outworking among us in a low-key way and we may not have been looking for so modest a way'

(Daniel Hardy, 'Wording a Radiance' p80)

Recent changes in society have made it clear that most people, and certainly the younger generation, are intolerant of hierarchical institutions dispensing instructions to the wider population about what they can or cannot do. This includes the Church. Such institutions can come across as impersonal, unfriendly, inaccessible, and sometimes abusive in their use of power. They need to reveal their human face and human compassion. By dismounting his horse, Chad shows us the way forward. It is a way that requires proximity, presence and powerlessness, a way that enables people to hear our proclamation of the Gospel. As the church increasingly loses prominence and privilege in society so God may well be opening up the paths for greater engagements with people outside the church, many of whom still retain a belief in God and want to know more about spirituality.

To make those engagements possible the Church needs to have the right formation and ethos. This is a major concern of Bishop Stephen Pickard who serves the Australian Anglican Church. In his book, 'Seeking the Church' he questions the strong emphasis of recent years on the church 'creating community' and emphasizing the quality of the relationship between church members. He sounds a note of caution because community can easily become 'the habitations of the likeminded' and can mask 'a non-porous sociality' which then breeds an 'us-and-them' relationship between the Church and the world. It encourages congregations to be inward-looking. So Pickard wants to add to the importance of community an emphasis on companionship. Companionship allows for a looser connection with others and 'lives and grows through the affirmation of otherness', by respecting other people's right to be different. Pickard wants to speak of:

'a travelling Church... a travelling caravansary, nurturing companionship, collecting pilgrims on the journey, sharing food, attentive to God and others, discovering the secrets of a life of praise... The principal features of this [portrait of the church] are movement, renewable energy and elastic structures that seek to embody the height, depth, length and breadth of the mystery of the life of the Church.'

(p233)

The church begins to look more like those long processions of people on protest marches through big cities. They pass through the crowds of on-lookers proclaiming their message but also interacting spontaneously with those on the edges of the march. There are verbal exchanges, smiles, and hand shakes, perhaps small gifts of flowers, drinks or chocolate as symbolic reminders of the march – and perhaps too some people from the crowd who join in the march as they see its relevance.

This is the context for evangelism.

Evangelism is about positive and direct contact with people who see themselves 'outside' the church. It is about deeply attentive listening. It is about a gentle gossiping of the Gospel. It is about being a link to an authentic experience of companionship and community. It is about sharing how Jesus has changed your life for the better. It is about protesting on behalf of the weak, the downtrodden and neglected and demanding justice for them. It is about offering, in appropriate ways, the possibility of forgiveness, healing and hope. It is about saying, 'Come with us - Chad, me, and so many others - as we do our best to follow Jesus.' In all of this we should never underestimate the importance of personal relationship and example. One Sunday evening an evangelist issued his regular appeal for people to come forward and accept Christ. One repentant drunk shuffled down the aisle and knelt to pray: 'Oh God, make me like Joe!' Joe was the local street evangelist. 'Please Lord make me like Joe' he repeated. 'No,no', said the preacher, you should pray, 'Make me like Jesus.' The man looked up and said: 'Is he like Joe?' What people see of Jesus is often what they see of him in us, and that is the essence of evangelism.

Evangelism is also about doing what we can in the conviction that God will be at work in the lives of those we meet, gently drawing them to participation in God's divine life and love. Such divine ways far exceed our competence and wisdom. In the mid-1920's Lord Radstock was staying in a hotel in Norway. Each day a little girl began playing the piano down in the hallway and made a terrible noise: 'Plink...plonk...plink'. It was driving him mad! Then one day a man came and sat beside the little girl and began playing the keyboard so that her 'Plink...plonk' was swallowed up in the most beautiful music. Radstock later discovered that the man playing alongside the little girl was her father, Alexander Borodin. He was the composer of the opera, Prince Igor, and clearly she had gained her love of music from him.

We might well be like that little girl when it comes to sharing the Gospel. Our attempts to communicate the 'music' of the Gospel might well be on the level of 'plink' and 'plonk' but our Heavenly Father knows how to transpose our feeble efforts and make them thrill the souls of those who hear so that they capture the delight and beauty of the divine love and compassion. Evangelism, as Chad knew only too well, is not about human brilliance or bravado; it is about divine bounty and blessing.

- How far have you experienced church membership as belonging to a closed circle of people, a 'special interest' club?
- How helpful do you find Pickard's idea that the church is like a column of pilgrims or companions interacting with people on the edges as well as in the centre of the group?
- In what practical ways do you think Christians can identify with those who do not share their faith?
- Should Christians be open to receiving as well and giving as they try communicating the Gospel?

Action for the week ahead

- For the first five days write down and pray about one way in which your church makes contact with outsiders. On the last two days write down two new ways in which the church might make such contact and pray for God to guide you.

5 Community

As a young boy Chad joined the monastic community at Lindisfarne with his three brothers, Cedd, Cynibil and Caelin. The island of Lindisfarne lies about three miles off the Northumbrian coast opposite Bamburgh and King Oswald had granted it to Bishop Aidan for the founding of such a community. Young men joined not just to pursue a monastic vocation but also to train for the priesthood.

Chad would have lived in a tiny cell where he would have led an austere life devoted to praying, reading the scriptures and manual labour. There were seven services in the church during every 24 hours and so Chad would have joined the other monks at set times of both day and night for worship. There would also have been meals together and regular meetings to discuss the corporate life of the monastery.

This meant that Chad's Christian life was powerfully shaped and developed by his participation in the monastic community. He would have been very aware of his obligations to the other monks, and Aidan, as Abbot would have supervised his formation as a Christian very closely. In later life, Chad became Abbot at Lastingham and when after that he became Bishop of Mercia (with his seat at Lichfield) he was still surrounded by a small group of monks who shared the devotions and disciplines of monastic life with him. At every stage of his life Chad knew that believing and belonging go together; to be in step with God meant to be in step with the Christian community. His identity as a disciple of Jesus had both a personal and a corporate dimension to it.

In 2011 the 13th Century monastic seal (pictured here) was found in a field near Cobham in Surrey. The main image is of Mary with the child Jesus. The inscription reads: 'Church of St Mary and St Wulfade, Martyr, of Stone.' There was an Augustinian Priory in Stone, Staffordshire from 1130 but it was the successor of a much older community which had used the site since about 670, at the time when Wulfad's Martyrdom was strongly linked to the story of St Chad. The seal is now kept in the Church of St Michael and St Wulfad, Stone. The seal reminds us of the kind of monastic community which played such an important part in the life of Chad.



Photo by British Museum / CC BY 2.0

Biblical reflection

Chad's experience of being firmly embedded in the Christian community chimes in with what the Bible teaches. St Paul regards the gift of the Holy Spirit as coincident with the gift of church membership: 'By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Corinthians 12v3). He goes on to talk about each of us being a 'member' of the body of Christ (the church) and sees our spiritual welfare as being closely connected with, and even inseparable, from that of the other members. This is a theme to which he returns in a number of his letters (1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4; Romans 12 v 1-9). One of the ways Paul sees Holy Communion is as the renewal of our Baptism so it is no surprise to find him saying: 'We who are many are one bread, one body' (1 Corinthians 10v17). As we take the bread and wine not only is our relationship with God renewed but also our relationship with each other. In the following passage, Peter, maintains the same balance between the individual and the community.

1 Peter 1v3-5, 22-23; 2v4-5, 9-10:

¹³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

²⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

These words probably began life as a homily given at a Service of Baptism.

They are an exhortation to new believers, most of whom would have been adults, to recognize the privilege of their calling. Each of them has received 'a new birth into a living hope' and is 'being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.' (1v3-5)

At the same time the privilege of that calling to be a Christian extends to their integration with other believers in a shared life: 'you are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.... you are a chosen race, a holy nation, God's own people.' (2v5,9)

Once again we see how a person's individual experience of God is completed by his or her corporate experience of being part of the Christian community. Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin's in the Fields, London, has said that 'with' is the most important word in Christian theology. 'With' is about connection, about being linked up, about solidarity. The good news of the Gospel is that God has chosen to be connected, linked up and in solidarity with the human race through Jesus Christ. But the kind of love and compassion which Jesus showed means that the 'with' has other dimensions. It is about being connected, linked up and in solidarity with other followers of Jesus both past and present. Furthermore the 'with' of Christian faith connects, links up and expresses solidarity with all other members of the human race. When Jesus died on the cross his arms were stretched out in total openness to all people and when he gave us the cup of wine to commemorate his death, Jesus said 'This is my blood, which is shed for you, and for the many. Do this in remembrance of me.' That reference to 'the many' stretches the 'with' to embrace the whole of humanity, not just those who profess Christian belief. But even that does not exhaust the 'with' of Christian theology. Paul says that as believers we groan with the created order as together we seek God's renewal and release from imperfection. We are connected, linked up and in solidarity with the web of creation – a creation which was in God's sights when God sent Jesus (John 3v16).

This 'with' is strengthened as we grow in the life of the Spirit through the rhythm of worship and fellowship in the Church. As we are reminded by the phrase in v9 of 1 Peter: 'God's own people or special possession.'

That phrase has a lovely background in the Old Testament. It originates in Deuteronomy 7 where Israel is described in the Hebrew as God's 'segullah'. A segullah was a treasure chest, a large box in which were kept very personal possessions, the kind that had sentimental value. Every king had a segullah – and that is the context here. The Jewish people are being reminded that as

sovereign over all creation every nation belongs to God. But such a sweeping 'ownership' could hardly compare with the depth of affection that God held for Israel. That tiny nation was indeed God's 'segullah', God's 'treasure chest'. Imagine peering into the chest and seeing lots of different objects glistening in the light, representing different individuals; but also inside the chest there being a riot of colour and contrast as together the contents make a magnificent array of beautiful objects. What the Deuteronomist said of Israel can also be said of the church. As God's segullah (his very own) each of us is precious to God – and all of us together bring God sheer delight.

It might be an original thought for some of us to think of our church congregations as glistening jewels reflecting light and colour and beauty as we rub up against each other week by week in church!

- Discuss how important the church has been in the nurture and development of your Christian discipleship.
- What answer would you give to those who say 'I don't need to go to church to be a Christian'?
- Some people feel very hostile to the Church – they are offended by its attitude to women, by its apparent indifference to recent child abuse scandals, and its negativity to the LGBTQI community. How far do you agree with them? How do you think the Church should respond to these critics?

Community and contemporary society

An outlook we have inherited from Western philosophers is that each and every one of us is a self-contained individual. 'I think therefore I am' wrote Descartes by which he meant that who I am is determined by what goes on 'inside' me and is not affected by my relationships with others. We are like billiard balls bouncing off one another, each containing a hidden world of our own. The Greeks had a word for this idea of the isolated, insulated human being. It was 'idiotes' and it described someone who was eccentric and disconnected from the community. We translate it as 'idiot' or oddball. Yet so often we act in this 'idiotic' way – separating ourselves off from each other. Little wonder that Tesco encourages us to have 'me' time rather than 'us' time. It was Noel Coward who once greeted a long lost friend with the words: 'We haven't got time to talk about both of us, so let's just talk about me.' Yet that self-centred approach to life leaves people feeling lonely and empty and vulnerable.

In contrast to this modern outlook is the Christian view that I cannot be fully myself without relating to and receiving from others. The Bible emphasizes again and again that each individual needs the enrichment and empowerment of the community. This is something that other cultures across the world understand only too well. In Africa for instance they understand the value of togetherness and the theologian John Mbitu has expressed it in a single sentence: 'I am, because we are.'

The New Testament way of expressing this truth is through the word 'koinonia' (pronounced coin-no-near). It is a word that commonly meant 'partnership' and referred to business or marriage partners. In other words it described deeply committed, enduring and loyal relationship, directed to the welfare of both participants and this was the quality of relationship that Christians should seek to sustain. In so doing they would be acknowledging the fact that there is a vital bond holding us all together, and without it we are impoverished. A simple story illustrates this. A group of people are sitting in a small boat when one of them starts to drill a hole in the bottom of the boat. 'Stop! Stop!' say the others. 'Why should I?' he replies. 'What I do is my business, and has nothing to do with you.' The fact is that our life, our world, is like that boat. As human beings we are essentially interdependent not independent. Martin Luther King puts it like this:

'All life is interrelated... somehow we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be, until I am what I might be.'

(quoted by Timothy Radcliffe, 'Take the Plunge' p53)

The possibility of finding deep fulfilment in a close and caring community is a gift that the church should be able to offer today's Western world where so often people struggle with an experience of fragmentation, loneliness and isolation. The Church says that living in community (or communion) with one another is an essential part of what it means to be human.

Another reason Christians think this is because they believe in God as Trinity. This means that though God is One, God is also Three Persons. Anthony Harvey has said that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'overheard' in the New Testament – and it took 400 years to spell it out. But it was worth the wait. One of the most attractive ways of describing the Trinity is provided by St Augustine. He speaks of the Three Persons of the Trinity as the Lover, the

Loved and the Love. The Father as the Lover empties Himself unreservedly in self-giving to the Son who is the Loved. The Son as the Loved receives that self-offering of the Father unreservedly and then returns it as He pours Himself out towards the Father. All the while, the Holy Spirit, as the Love, energises the exchange from Father to Son and Son to Father. This eternal rhythm of giving and receiving, of what Bishop John Taylor, called 'in-othering', creates a life of total harmony and fulfilment. Such a vision of Divine Personhood, by which each Person of the Trinity found completion in their relationship with the other Persons, inspired the church to see the riches of communal life. Such a vision of God and humanity lay at the heart of Chad's experience of following Christ. What is more it is an important aspect of what Christians mean by salvation. Timothy Radcliffe, a leader of the Roman Catholic Dominican Order, gives a very powerful example of this:

'I went to Burundi during the renewal of ethnic conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis. I wanted to visit the community of Dominican nuns in the north of the country. It was a tough trip. We were stopped by the army.. we found a busload of people killed. Shots were aimed at us along the road. All the country was brown and dead, all the crops were burnt. And then in the distance we saw a green hill and there was the monastery.'

'Six of the nuns were Tutsi and six Hutu, yet they lived together in peace and harmony. I asked how they managed it and they replied that besides their common prayer, they always listened to the news together and shared the pain. They had lost nearly all their families in the slaughter. Slowly people from all ethnic groups realized the monastery grounds were safe and gathered in the church together to pray and grow their crops alongside it. It was a green place in a burnt land – and a sign of hope.'

(Timothy Radcliffe, 'What is the Point of Being a Christian?' p20)

Finally, here is a description from nearer home of what a church should strive to be:

'Church is not supposed to be a place of theological 'purity', or rigid conformity to certain beliefs and conventions, but a mishmash of believers, doubters, dissenters and malcontents, each of whom is grappling in his or her own way towards the mystery that is God. The Church is a place of refuge and hope, a place of prayer and laughter, a place of dreams and fresh imagining, a place of birth and rebirth, a

place of welcome and acceptance, a place of thought and theology, a place of weddings and funerals, a place where proud mums and dads bring tiny people to offer them to God, a place of parties, a place of bread and wine shared, a place of affirmation, a place of new beginnings, a place of freedom and generosity, a place of friendship, support and healing, a place of creativity, a place of reconciliation, a place of faith and doubt, a place where people can belong without necessarily knowing how or what to believe.'

(Dave Tomlinson, 'Re-enchanting Christianity' p111)

- What do you think helps develop and strengthen the community life of your church?
- In what ways is your local church a sign of hope to its surrounding community? What more could it do?

Here is a ditty you might (or might not!) enjoy:

To live above with the saints we love
That surely will be glory
To live below with the saints we know
Ah, that's another story!

- What are the benefits of relating to those who are very different from us?

Action for the week ahead

- Each day write down the names of five people in your church and spend time giving thanks to God for each one of them – rejoicing that you can be enriched and empowered by them.



DIOCESE OF
LICHFIELD



Come follow Christ **in the footsteps of St Chad**

It is a joy to commend this booklet for study, reflection and prayer in the season of Lent.

Chad of Lichfield was a man whose humility, energy and holiness inspire us today, and his story is threaded through the geography and history of this precious part of England. As we seek today to answer Christ's call to follow Him in our own time, there is so much that we can learn from our first bishop's lifelong response, made at a time when Anglo-Saxon Mercia was as diverse, conflicted and yet full of opportunity as modern Mercia is today.

My hope and prayer is that the resources in these pages will be opened up by individuals and by groups as a way of renewing discipleship, multiplying vocations, and strengthening evangelism.

+ Micheal Igrave

The Rt Revd Dr Micheal Igrave
Bishop of Lichfield

discipleship vocation evangelism