

# Food for the journey

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Exodus 16:2-4. 9-15

Imagine it. You and your family have fled from an oppressive regime. With many others you have followed a charismatic leader across borders. You have dramatically escaped murderous pursuers. Now you are safe.

But you are in a wilderness. There are a lot of you, and there is no obvious food. Going back means slavery at best, death at worst. Going on means thirst and starvation. You turn on your leaders. What were they thinking, bringing you out here? What is the point of freedom if you are going to starve?

It could be the story of twenty-first-century refugees. But it is also the story of the Israelites. And God has things covered. It is not for the sake of their own freedom

that they have been rescued from Egypt; it is because they are destined for a role as God's people, God's representatives in the world. They have a lot to learn, and one of the first things is trust. It will take forty years to learn, and this is the first lesson. In the evening God sends meat in the form of birds. And after the morning dew there is something else, something they have never seen before, something they call "whatsit", "manna".

In our developed world we mostly take our food for granted. But on Sundays we gather to remember our dependence on God, and to eat our manna, the bread of heaven that binds us together in Christ as God's saved people. 🍞

**Give us today, Lord, our daily bread, that we may be sustained on our journey. Keep us always mindful of our dependence on you, and feed us with the bread of life, that we may look forward with joy to our final feast at your table. Amen.**

## The Sheldon community in a time of pandemic

### Part I – "guinea pigs needed"

by Julian Smith

"Guinea pigs needed", said the email – and who could resist? The Sheldon Centre was looking for volunteers to test its procedures and help assess its readiness to re-open for retreats after the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

The centre exists to support the work of people in ministry and is the home of the Community of Mary and Martha. The online aspects of the centre's work continued throughout lockdown last year, but the residential side

of Sheldon's life had, of course, to close.

The "guinea pigs" normally help with hospitality during retreats, so being a guest was a strange experience. For many of us this was the closest contact we'd had with anyone other than our husbands or wives since 24 March and a dozen people felt like a multitude.

The usual rule – "no clergy shop talk" – was supplemented by directions on social distancing, one-way routes and new procedures, and constant watchfulness proved exhausting.

To learn more about the centre's work, go to [www.sheldon.uk.com](http://www.sheldon.uk.com) 🍞



## The books of the Old Testament

### "In the beginning" – the book of Genesis

by Gillian Cooper

Genesis is the first chapter in a grand story that takes us from a garden of delight to a glorious city. It sets the stage, as God makes the world and its creatures, despairs of human beings, but allows them to play a role in the plan of salvation.

There is drama, when it seems Abraham will never have the descendants God has promised. There is humour,

when his grandson Jacob wakes up after his wedding to find he has married the wrong sister (chapter 29). There is horror, when Isaac lies on a sacrificial pyre, his father's knife descending on him (22). There is pathos, when Joseph and his brothers are reunited (45). There is mystery, when God and Jacob wrestle in the night (32).

Ancient tradition suggests that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah to Jews, the Pentateuch to scholars, were written by Moses. Yet many inconsistencies are evidence of more than one author. Scholars have long believed that these books grew up over centuries, with stories from different sources collected to make a rich tapestry. The final editor is probably responsible for prefacing the whole with Genesis 1, a statement of the supremacy of God, who brings order out of chaos. 🍞

“Do not be afraid... I am your shield.”

Genesis 15:1

# "Only" human



Heather Cooke *reflects on* Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2 and John 6:35. 41-51

**D**o you ever get angry? We all do. It's only human. So it's reassuring to read those two words near the beginning of today's epistle: "Be angry..." But it doesn't end there. "Be angry but do not sin." The difference is explained in the wise advice not to let the sun go down on our anger. Don't let it

last too long, don't let it fester. Put it away from us, later verses advise, and build loving relationships. Sometimes, of course, we're right to get angry – if we can turn that anger into healing action. Even Jesus did, in righteous anger, cleansing the Temple of greedy money-lenders.

**Loving God, you came down from heaven in Jesus, that he might lead us home. In our journey, may we see him in all of humanity, share his anger at injustice, and follow his example of service and sacrifice. Amen.**

## The Sheldon community in a time of pandemic

### Part II – "spot the difference"

by Julian Smith

Social distancing (SD) meant that the centre was running at half capacity and there were plenty of compromises to be made. The chapel had been rearranged to allow for SD seating, so a simultaneous Morning Prayer took place downstairs. Face masks were worn in the chapel and indoor meetings. For our final plenary the warden wielded a two-metre garden cane to check SD and assess the capacity of the meeting room.

The long dining table had been dismantled and smaller SD tables were dotted around the dining room, as in the chapel. The seats we chose were ours for the duration. There were changes, too, to the way in which food was served. It involved more work for the community running the kitchen but, as usual, the food was excellent and plentiful.

Things worked well for us as guests. How would we fare coming back as volunteers?

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People seem angry with Jesus in today's Gospel. How could he have "come down from heaven", they grumble, when they know he is human, with a father and mother like everyone else? What they don't appreciate is that his dual lineage, human and heavenly, is not only possible but crucial – in the strictest sense of the word. The miracle of the cross, giving life

to the world, reconciling heaven and earth, can only work because Jesus is both human and divine, son of Joseph and also Son of God. His humanity manifests itself in many ways – weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, using humour in his teaching and even getting angry. It's only human.

Fortunately for us, Jesus isn't "only" human. 

## Mary Sumner

*Tomorrow, Mary Sumner is commemorated in the Common Worship lectionary. Caroline Hodgson considers the legacy of this remarkable woman.*

In 1876, when she became a grandmother, Mary Sumner was reminded how challenging she had found motherhood. She organised a meeting in the parish for mothers from all backgrounds, to offer mutual support in bringing up their children. Ironically, at that first meeting Mary's nerves got the better of her and her husband spoke on her behalf. But Mary persisted and her courage grew, and by the turn of the century

the MU had 169,000 members. When the council was formed in 1896 Mary was elected president, a post she held into her nineties. In 1897, during her Diamond Jubilee, Queen Victoria gave the MU the royal stamp of approval when she became its patron.

In 2016 MU representatives from across the globe attended the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in New York to lobby governments and the United Nations on women's economic empowerment. From the acorn planted by Mary Sumner, a huge tree had grown, supporting women and families around the globe.

[www.mothersunion.org](http://www.mothersunion.org) 

**“If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would look like one single growing thing – rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other.”**

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), writer and theologian

# Magnificat



Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Luke 1:46-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord.” Where does Mary find the strength and the courage for this song? Pregnant before marriage in mysterious circumstances, visited by a terrifying divine messenger, why is she not covering in her parents’ home, hoping it will all go away? But Mary is brave. God has, it seems, chosen well.

Mary’s Magnificat is extraordinary. It is magnificent. It comes from a meeting of two women, both bearing miracles inside them. And it tells of possibilities. The rules that govern the life we know can be broken. Those who think a lot of themselves may not necessarily be rewarded. Those who hold power can lose it. Those with all the money may find it does not buy them what they need. And those who are poor, marginalised, oppressed, insecure, despairing – they can find freedom and hope. As we solemnly sing Mary’s words at Evensong, we are singing about revolution. We are reminding ourselves that God’s values are not the values of our world and that God’s plans do not involve the obvious people. The most important event the world has ever known is announced by a young woman from an obscure village in a remote corner of the Roman empire.

Therein lies our hope. When we look at the world and despair, Mary reminds us that things can change. God’s angel can come, God’s Spirit can breathe, the world can be transformed. 🍷

Keep us mindful, Lord, of your promises, brought to their first fulfilment in Christ, that our spirits may rejoice in you, our Saviour, as we look for the coming of Christ’s reign, when all things will be made new. Amen.

## The Sheldon community in a time of pandemic

### Part III – “it is good for us to be here”

by Julian Smith

When we met for Sheldon’s first post-lockdown retreat, both guests and volunteers echoed the words that Peter said to Jesus at the transfiguration.

Things had moved on since the trial run in July, and much time, thought and money had been invested in the safe re-opening of the centre. Opening windows had replaced fixed glass, air “scrubbers” had been bought, and open doors

and windows enabled fresh air to circulate. Face masks were standard and one was never far from a hand-gelling station. Lunch and supper were served cafeteria-style to masked, hand-sanitised queues.

It wasn’t Sheldon as we had known it, but the welcome was still warm, the atmosphere tranquil and God was close at hand. Above all, in these uncertain times, we felt safe and knew that everything that could be done for our well-being was being done.

[www.sheldon.uk.com](http://www.sheldon.uk.com) 🍷

## Catherine Booth

*Co-founder of the Salvation Army, Catherine Booth is commemorated with her husband William on Friday. Jeni Parsons looks at her life and legacy.*

Here is a woman of great spirit who, with her husband William, founded the Salvation Army. Her Methodist background and her work among very poor people led her to try to help those struggling with alcoholism from the cheap “grog” of the time. Catherine was working against poverty rather than as a killjoy.

She founded food shops where those who were poor could buy a cheap meal. She was a remarkable preacher at a time when it was thought unfeminine for women to speak in religious meetings and her preaching was to those who were rich.

So here is a practical, energetic, Christian woman who raised eight children and was active in the Church and the world. That makes her an interesting role model for all sorts of people of faith, because what motivated her was a profound belief in the equality of men and women before God, rather than a secular view of equality. 🍷

“I don’t believe in any religion apart from doing the will of God.”

Catherine Booth (1829-1890)

# Choosing sides

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Joshua 24:1-2a. 14-18

It may seem obvious whose side the people of Israel *ought* to be on, but it is more complicated than we may think. The Old Testament tells a story of a bunch of slaves, rescued from Egypt, formed into a cohesive whole by many years of wilderness travel and by a meeting with God at a desert volcano, settling in a land occupied by others among whom they have to live. They have plenty of gods to choose from; gods of Egypt and of the Canaanite people of the land of Israel. The Canaanite gods in particular have their attractions; they are gods of fertility and harvest, gods for an agricultural community. What can Yahweh the God of the desert mountain know about making the crops grow?

So Joshua makes them choose, once and for all. And they give the right answer. There is only one God who is their God, the one who has watched over them for generations and brought them to where they are now. They swear allegiance. They make a covenant. They will, of course, break it many times, but for now they know whose side they are on, and who is on their side.

Our world presents many claims on our attention and our allegiance, many of which matter greatly. But above all, like the Israelites, we have to choose to be on the side of the God who saves and guides us through all eternity. ☺

Help us, Lord, to stay true to you amid all the complexity of our lives. Keep us mindful of the immensity of your love for us, that we may know where our true allegiance lies and worship only you, our one true God. Amen.

## St Paul

### Part I

by Becky Mynett

For the next four weeks Becky will be looking at St Paul, his life and theology.

Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey, at around the same time Jesus was born. He was Jewish and (like many Greek-speaking Jews) he also used a Jewish name, Saul. According to Acts, he was a Roman citizen, but he was also a Pharisee, which means he followed the Jewish Law in the strictest possible way. Acts says Paul was

brought up in Jerusalem and studied under Gamaliel, the leader of the Pharisees, but most scholars now think he was brought up in Tarsus (although he may have studied in Jerusalem later). In any case, he did not follow Gamaliel's advice to leave Jesus' followers alone; in his letter to the Galatians he admits that he was initially a violent persecutor of the Church.

Without Paul, we may never have heard of Jesus, far less consider him to be the son of God. His influence on Christianity was crucial to its development from a minor Jewish sect to the world religion it is today.

Becky is a translator, editor and writer, and Reader in the Diocese of St Albans. ☺

“Faith, as Paul saw it, was a living, flaming thing leading to surrender and obedience to the commandments of Christ.”

A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), pastor, author and spiritual mentor

## Food in the Bible

### Locusts

by Caroline Fletcher

John the Baptist is well known for eating locusts. Some argue that the word translated as “locusts” in our Bibles refers to carob beans, but most disagree. After all, consuming locusts was not unusual. Jewish dietary laws allowed them to be eaten and even today they are part of some people's diets across the world.

Indeed, in 2013 the BBC reported Israelis dealing with an influx of locusts by enjoying them coated in chocolate and breadcrumbs. In biblical times they were often ground up and added to flour, providing an invaluable source of protein.

John's diet was compatible with the simple lifestyle of a prophet living in the wilderness. This is probably why the Gospel writers tell us he ate locusts: they wanted to emphasise his link to the wilderness to show John as the new Elijah, recalling the Old Testament prophet Elijah who spent time in the wilderness hiding from queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19). ☺

# Never forget

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Deuteronomy 4:1-2. 6-9

**B**e careful, says Moses to the Israelites as they prepare to establish themselves as a settled people in the land of Israel. Watch yourselves. Do not forget.

They have been formed by escape from slavery and wilderness journeying, but soon they will be safe in a land where they will become farmers and tradespeople. They will stop travelling with the Ark of the Covenant. They will put the Ark in a house, and they will live in houses themselves. They will get to know their Canaanite neighbours, and they will trade with other nations. Time will pass. It will be easy to forget the past, to settle securely in the present, to worship the Canaanite gods of the land, to become complacent, to think they no longer need the God they met at Mount Sinai.

So Moses warns: be careful, do not forget. Tell the story to your children, and let them tell their children. Tell them what God has done, and tell them what God expects in return. Remind them of God's rules, because they have been given for your own good. Remember to whom you owe your salvation.

So we too tell our story, a story of death and new life, of body and blood, of salvation hard won. We take the bread and the wine in remembrance, because we too must never forget what God has done for us. 🍷

**You, Lord, are our God. You rescued us from sin and death, and promised us eternal life. Help us never to forget, and inspire us to tell our story, that the world may know the truth of your salvation, throughout all time and to all eternity. Amen.**

## St Paul Part II

by Becky Mynett

Despite opposing the Church, Paul never met the pre-resurrection Jesus. His teaching and message were rooted in a mystical experience of the risen Christ. According to Acts, this famously took place on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says that he saw Jesus, while in Acts it says

that he saw a blinding light and heard Jesus' voice. Whatever form it took, this experience would lead Paul to travel around the north-eastern Mediterranean, taking the Gospel out through Asia Minor to Greece and Rome, visiting early Christian communities and founding new ones. It also led Paul to write numerous letters to those communities, some of which are in our Bibles today, and some of which are now lost. Next week we will look at which New Testament letters were written by Paul, and which of those traditionally attributed to him were probably written by later followers. 🍷



## Walking with Poppy Home

by Gillian Cooper

We are walking on the canal towpath. As usual we are greeted by people on the canal boats, and also occasionally by their dogs or cats, to Poppy's delight. Many of the boats are clearly homes. They have piles of logs, TV aerials, and places to hang washing. Others are hire

boats, holiday homes. But even the established boats are not fixed in place. The moorings are temporary, and their residents spend life on the move.

Poppy and I like our home to be fixed, with walls and a roof and familiar surroundings. But this too is temporary. We have not lived in our present home for long, and no doubt we will move on one day. There is one home, however, that is permanent. There is a place in God's house for each of God's children, where we can one day go home for all eternity. I hope Poppy will be there too! 🍷

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

Romans 13:8