

The Messenger

and Mayflower Hall News

Billericay United Reformed Church

Joint Pastorate with Brentwood and Ingatestone URCs

MEMBER OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BILLERICAY

Extracts

March 2008

Will you be at the Thanksgiving service, as the Southend District closes. End of story? By no means; as one chapter in the church's life finishes, a new one begins, and it's called

Vision4Life

Transforming the church

Vision4Life is going to be the next phase of the URC's process of change. It's to enable faithful people, like you, to find fresh excitement and encouragement in the basic things of our faith – the things that make us who we are. Although all churches are different, with their own pressures and their own delights, it may be that the very things that should be God's particular and special gift to us have become a little flat or a little scary. Perhaps we need to recover some 'oomph': a new excitement.

We say the **Bible** is important to us, but many of us are a bit wary of it, unsure of our own ability to read it aright, happy to leave it to the minister to study it and then explain it to us. Can we do anything to help us to enjoy engaging with the bible, and recover our confidence in it, and the confidence to share in the task of making it speak excitingly to people today.

We mainly have a deep sense that **Prayer** is important, but how much of a help is it with the frustrations, sadnesses, pains and pressures of life? Could we do better at finding God's support in the midst of our lives, and the lives of the communities round us. Are we sometimes confused or afraid of prayer? Couldn't we change that for the better?

We know that we want to see more people **sharing the faith**, but many of us are not good at sharing it, even when others seem interested enough to listen. For many of us faith is not something we talk about very often. So if we got more comfortable about talking our faith with one another, might we be better able to talk about our faith with others in the community?

That's what Vision4Life is about. It's three years where churches can tailor their own programmes from the suggestions and materials we are

making available. We'll give you a great selection of ideas for a Bible Year, a Prayer Year and an Evangelism Year so that your church can adapt them to your own needs.

The programme starts with meetings this Spring, with Colin Hunt on 24 February, then on 16 on the Bible and 23 April on Prayer, and finally our Topic Meeting on 18 June.

Billericay - Fairtrade Town

Thanks to the help of the churches in Billericay which Fairtrade goods Billericay is now a Fairtrade Town and to celebrate this there will be a launch event in St Mary Magdalen church in Billericay High Street on the morning of **Saturday 8 March** (from 9.30am to noon). During the morning, at 10.30am, an accreditation certificate from the Fairtrade Foundation will be presented. The press will be invited to attend for this part of the morning.

The church will be open all morning for people to come in and find out about Fairtrade in various ways and to sample products which will be provided by Waitrose. The Billericay Directory of shops, cafes and pubs which sell Fairtrade will also be available for the first time.

All CTB members and members of the churches are invited to this event.

Maralyn Buchanan

NB: If you can help on the Fairtrade Stall at any time during that morning could you please contact Ann Mynott.

The Health Help International Lent Project 2008. Each year I have been contacting you concerning the Lent Project and if you would like further information or would like me to send money to HHI on your behalf please let me know. This year's, there are floods at Monze in Zambia within walking distance of the Mission that Pat and I visited.

You do not hear about these floods in our media, but hear more about other African countries and Bangladesh. When Pat and I visited there was a drought that had lasted several years, and the enormous silo for grain that they had built was empty. Now since 21 December it has been raining heavily and almost continuously resulting in 'more than 500 houses collapsing in the Monze district, leaving families homeless with property worth millions destroyed due to heavy rains'. (Lusaka Times 31 December). David Munyama, the Zambian director of HHI reported that he has never experienced rain like it before in Zambia. Not only homes have been lost but within the compound lives have been lost as houses collapsed onto families during the night. Bridges

7.
have been washed away, roads made impassable and people isolated without food or clean water. HHI have helped, supplying tents and moving destitute families to alternative buildings and reaching isolated people. As well as the need to build new homes and provide food, seed and soil have been washed away and this will lead to starvation later in the years. As a direct result of the stagnant water, malaria and cholera will no doubt bring further health hazards. HHI UK has sent out immediate £1,000 for relief. The Zambian government is giving what help it can, but if you feel able to help now, in Lent, then it would be appreciated.

Margaret Dunn

God and Me

Lead Kindly Light:

***a Lenten sermon preached by Rev John Hickmore,
whose starting point is John Henry Newman's hymn***

Lead kindly light: What a wonderful way of calling on the Holy Spirit! The Spirit is always kind, always seeking our good. Sometimes the Spirit has to be quite rough with us, quite firm, and the pressure seems an awful discipline ..but he is in fact always kindly. *The encircling gloom* – sometimes our situation in life seems like that. All is dark and all we have is this tiny light leading us through, rather like Christian, you remember, in *The Pilgrim's Progress* - all is dark, and he just has one little light.

Lead thou me on, keep thou my feet I do not ask to see the distant scene. I do not want to know all that lies ahead of me. *One step enough for me.* All I need to know is: what is the will of God for this next step. This verse of Newman's hymn was the favourite Christian hymn of Mahatma Gandhi throughout his struggle, as he tried to lead the people of India in a godly way, out of empire into freedom. He tried to lead them in ways that did not involve physical violence to persons, but which stood up for truth and for liberty. These words were often on his lips and the phrase 'one step enough for me' meant most. There were times when he could not see what was the way, as he told those who were waiting to know what they should do. The Kindly Light had not shone clearly yet. "When I know the one step I will tell you, and we will walk it", he would say.

There's a lot for us to learn from this devout Hindu as he speaks about the meaning of a Christian hymn. If you have a concordance, look up the word 'lead' and you will find the many references to God's leadership, especially in the psalms. 'Teach me thy way O Lord , lead me in the plain path'. 'Lead me in the way everlasting', says another psalm. And one that you love and know so well 'He leadeth me beside the still waters'. Another psalm has 'for thou art my rock and my fortress, therefore for thy namesake lead me and guide me' – a normal prayer of the bible-reading person to ask for God's leading, to expect that this Holy Spirit, this kindly light will lead the way. Another psalm has 'from the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed'

– you know those times when your heart is overwhelmed. There cannot be a single person here who has not known the time when the heart is overwhelmed with duties with sorrows, with all that life brings – so the psalmist cries 'lead me, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.' A rock that I can stand on, cling to, will keep me safe. Or that wonderful Psalm 139 'Whither shall I go from thy spirit', - as if you wanted to escape for the pressures. Yes, there are times when I have longed to escape from this Kindly Light, from the pressure of God's leading and guiding. I want to be my own master, lead my own life 'Whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven thou art there. If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and they right hand shall hold me. If I say surely the darkness shall cover me, even the night shall be light about me'. And perhaps most gloriously in Psalm 143: 'Teach me to do thy will; for thou art my God: thy spirit is good. Lead me to the land of uprightness'.

We read that Jesus was led. You remember that at his baptism he received the Holy Spirit, that you have received by your baptism, the Holy Spirit that in one form or another enlightens everybody who comes into the world – that inner Light. We read that after Jesus' baptism he was led up of the Spirit. He is, just as we are, somebody who is led by the Spirit, but better than we are, in that he let the Spirit lead him, whereas we often resist. Not always are you and I led beside the still waters, not always are we led into an even 'plain' way. He was led literally into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil. He didn't stumble into the wilderness by accident. God, the Kindly Light, deliberately thrust him, as Mark has it, rather like a broom sweeps dust. Luke has the more natural word 'he was led to be tempted by the devil', so it was God's will that he was tempted.

So sometimes the Lord does lead us into times of testing, where the waters rage, but note this: it is for our own good. He is still the Kindly Light. He leads us to places where our mettle is tried. Yet God himself never tempts us directly. Hear the wise words of James: 'Blessed is the man or woman that endureth temptation, for when he is tried he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted I am tempted by God, for God

cannot be tempted neither tempteth he any man, but God does allow us to come into times of temptation'.

God did allow Jesus to meet head on with the tempter in the wilderness; but God himself does not do the tempting. Temptation happens as James puts it, when a person is 'drawn away by his own lusts or desire. Then when that desire hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin, and sin when it is finished bringeth forth death.' So James saw the evil power as something that wells up within us. It's more personalised in Matthew, Mark and Luke as 'the devil'. Whichever way we look at it, you and I know the truth of the fact that we are tempted and we do have to struggle with what is evil.

When the Lord allows us to experience such a time of testing, it is hard. Peter in his first epistle thinks of his readers sometimes living in what he calls 'heaviness', through manifold temptation. And heaviness is exactly the right word, for we feel weighed down in spirit. The lightness and joy of our normal Christian life is absent, and we walk in the dark. Peter says it is the trial of our faith. Faith untried is scarcely worth the name. The faith that is tried and tested and remains strong and true, 'is worthy', as James puts it, 'of the crown of life'. The person who in the midst of trial holds fast to Christ, trusts in the kindly light, trusts that God will help and preserve him, - such a person has faith indeed. Faith is not just believing ten thousand strange things before breakfast each morning, as somebody once put it. Faith is of course personal trust in our God.

You see this perfectly in Jesus in the wilderness. He is trusting in his father, he is quoting his father's book straight in the face of the devil. Text after text, fiery, as his shots in the battle. 'Get thee hence Satan for it is written thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve'. Jesus was, in the words of Peter, kept by the power of God, and we are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. In the Lord's Prayer we pray 'lead us not into temptation'. First let us realise that this prayer implies that we believe that God does lead us, that the Holy Spirit does guide us, says the prayer. Secondly let us realise that sometimes that right way will be a hard way, the wilderness way, to be tempted by the devil.

So why then does Jesus have us pray 'lead us not into temptation'? Simply, brothers and sisters, because we don't want to be led today into that situation. It's a perfectly natural prayer. We are saying: "there will come times when you test my faith, but please not today". Jesus prayed it: it's in the heart of the Lord's Prayer, the desperate request – "not today I don't feel strong enough today, or any day". God will sometimes say "No my daughter, no my son, today's the day to go into the wilderness", but it's natural to ask : "please don't let me go that way!" And it's good that the next phrase is 'but deliver us from evil'.

That 'but' implies that we may be led into the wilderness. And if we are so led then it is always right to pray : "deliver us from evil", asking the Lord to be with us , and to be the Rock and our Defender. "Be the rock that is higher than we are, deliver us from evil, do not leave us to tackle the evil one alone, may we be kept by the power of God, may we be delivered from the power of Satan, the evil one, may we know your salvation, your saving power, your deliverance, as Jesus knew your saving power".

Having thrown the Scriptures of God in the face of Satan, Jesus found that the devil left him "and angels came and ministered unto him". May those angels also come to us in our own hour of need.

The above is a precis of the recording made at the service, with John's approval.

God and our Neighbours

Speaking the Faith

and our personal Communication outside the Church

'Well I like talking to people on the bus', said one person, about speaking her faith. It was an intriguing and fruitful idea, especially as she is a bus pass holder and so in theory could ride up and down Essex all day talking to people. The car, she said, is isolating.

This was just one contribution to a discussion in Church Meeting led by Colin Hunt about communicating faith, both to adults and young people. Those who were older remembered how church youth leaders, the Sunday school superintendents and the scout masters had influenced their growing faith. The church was a centre for social and recreational activity. Demand to take part in Sunday School was so great that the queue there was longer than the queue for the Sunday cinema! The most respected and influential adults were those who allowed us to discuss and argue, who didn't do the authoritarian thing and expect us to accept everything without question. Under this regime gradually faith and confidence grew, matured and lasted. It was pointed out that Jesus' technique was often to ask the questions, and allow his hearers to work out the answers for themselves.

Today young people still need role models. Schools Ministry to some extent is replacing Sunday School, but the need remains for there to be adults to answer young people's questions and to be sympathetic and knowledgeable. Drop-in centres can be part of some schools ministries, where young people, and sometimes their parents can come for Christian guidance. In a past age the adult leaders were church members who devoted themselves in their spare time to the cause of Christian growth. Nowadays there is a demand for the skills of professional youth workers, and churches are looking to full time leaders to spearhead their ministry to the young.

There's a movement for establishing a new type of church which isn't a church as we know it. A minister in Liverpool abandoned her huge city centre building when only 30 were left in the congregation and began to talk to people at large, on park benches in the shopping malls, and anywhere where they were happy to talk about their experiences of life.

Some were down and outs, and drug users. Her manse, and later a small rented area, became her new 'church', where they bake bread and eat it together. Some of the bread they then give away. This is a church which puts personal relationships, and the expression of Christian love, before all church formality.

Yet in other situations the question is put to us which needs an answer: Why do you go to church? Some will answer 'because I believe in the church's message, that Jesus died for our sins' or 'because I can be sure of a welcome and a concern for my problems'. People are often glad to know they are being prayed about when they are in difficult situations, or to be the subject of an impromptu prayer. But this needs to be followed up if possible, so that the caring can continue, until the anger, sorrow and confusion of a traumatic experience has been worked through. Most people are not anti-God or anti-faith, and are glad to talk when they are in difficult or questioning situations.

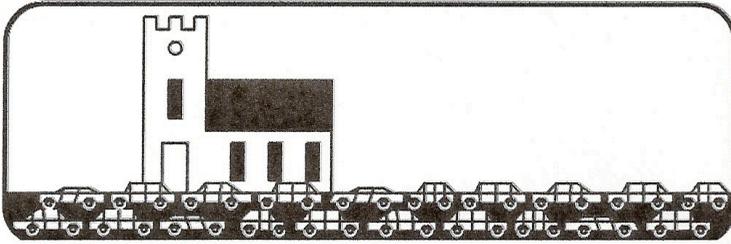
So back to the informal contact in the train or bus, and good news for our bus pass holder. Soon her pass is to be valid for travel all over the country. For example a bus for Liverpool leaves the High Street every morning around 10.15.....

“Henry is making a real effort for Lent – he’s giving up the remote control and walking to the TV”!



God and our Planet

Lent and Climate Change



The congregation turn up to hear a wonderful sermon on the environment.

Our study group looks for the Link

A sizeable group from our congregation, together with friends Sean from Most Holy Redeemer, David from Emmanuel and Michael from the Methodist church is meeting over Lent under the leadership of our Minister, Trevor, to consider the Christian approach to climate change.

What better time to launch a series of discussion meetings on this subject than in Lent - a time for reflection, repentance, self-discipline and abstinence. A little attitude exercise at the outset showed that collectively, while we believed we could and should be changing our behaviour, we were very doubtful about whether this would do sufficient to slow the process of climate change.

So we went to the bible, to see what it had to say about abstinence and fasting, and saw the severity with which Isaiah 58 castigated the ostentatious fasting which disregards the interests of those we are in a position to help. God, said Isaiah, was not interested in our sham piety; he looks for actions which promote social justice and fight oppression, such as loosing the fetters of injustice, sharing food with the hungry, housing the homeless and clothing the naked. Matthew 6: 16-18 further condemns the hypocrisy of 'gesture fasting'.

Isaiah clearly had in mind the society he knew, divided between the rich and influential on the one hand, and the poor and the weak on the other.

His words were to the former, and in the global terms which we understand today, they are also addressed to us. Over-consumption is not just bad for our health, it harms others, because while there is food and water sufficient for all, our powerful position can easily enable us to take more than our fair share. And in recent times a more insidious form of inequality has appeared, when by over-use of energy resources we inflict flood and drought on people on the other side of the planet. An environmental activist spoke out about the impact of climate change on his country, El Salvador.. He said it was like 'the rich eating a slap-up meal and handing the bill to the world's poor'.

The question of fairness is complicated, as we agreed. If we cut down our food miles, by turning our backs on food grown in the developing world, then they lose their markets and their livelihood. If we take too much of what they produce they have too little left to feed themselves. If we supply the poor of the world with our surplus and subsidised grain and rice at low cost (it's called dumping), the local producers can't compete and go to the wall. We point the finger at China and India who are consuming more and more energy to fuel their developing industries, produced by fossil fuels which pollute the atmosphere with CO2. But our economy has benefited from their cheap products, and anyway this is only what developed countries such as ourselves were doing 200 years ago.

So the effect of climate change is yet another inequality issue, to go with poverty and trade justice. Christians, though they may not come face to face with the poorest of the world, must remember that what we do can affect them for good or ill.

Footnote: the International Panel on Climate Change reckons that to avoid the worst effects of climate change, by 2050 the global target should be 700kg equivalent per person per year. Present figures:

One Return flight London-New York: 1,700 kg

One Year's car driving: 3,300kg

Refrigerator per year: 100kg

Annual emissions per person in Bangladesh: 900kg

How Climate Change is affecting Bangladesh

The URC's 'Commitment for Life' brings us regular news of our partner countries, and this month has this report on the effects of climate change on **Bangladesh** and surrounding countries:

Every year, monsoon seasons in South Asia bring severe storms and flooding to wide swathes of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Climate change is now making things worse, as melting glaciers in the Himalayas increase the risk of flooding but cut the supply of fresh water.

- worst recent floods in 2005 killed 3,400 in the region
- scientists predict more devastating floods and landslides
- Indian Subcontinent one of the areas most affected by climate change

Monsoon rains are essential for the region's agriculture, but poor infrastructure and poverty have left communities increasingly ill-equipped to cope with the impact of heavy rains. Flooding and landslides claim lives, destroy property and crops and increase the prevalence of diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. The seasons can be loosely categorised into the north eastern winter monsoon which runs from December to early March, and the south western summer monsoon, which normally lasts from early June to early September and supplies more than 80 percent of annual rainfall. The winter monsoon - which blows in from the northeast carrying moisture from the Bay of Bengal - is also normally responsible for cyclones in India.

Paradoxically, faster melting glaciers increase the risk of rivers bursting their banks because of the larger volumes of water, but the fact that they are also receding means that water supplies aren't reaching as far as they used to. Not only that, experts say rising temperatures are affecting moderate summer monsoon rainfall which is normally easily absorbed by the earth and recharges the ground water. Instead, rain now falls in heavier bouts on drier ground, which is more prone to flooding and landslides.

Researchers also say rising temperatures will mean mosquito-borne diseases will spread to higher altitudes.

Too busy to come to the feast – What a laugh!

During my working life I came to know quite a number of Jewish persons; with few exceptions very nice people, extremely generous and very good company. Many of them also had other characteristics in common – a gift for telling funny stories and a satisfaction for driving a hard (but not harsh) bargain.

Jesus and his hearers were Jewish, and I suspect, as we treat the bible so solemnly, we miss the Jewish humour in both the Old and the New Testaments. I think that Jesus enjoyed a joke. He certainly has a sense of humour. He enjoyed hyperbole (for example the camel going through the eye of a needle): his wit could be caustic at times but I believe that the funniest of his stories which has come down to us in the one in Luke 14, verses 15-24, about the invitation to feast, which I'm sure his audience would have found very comical. It was unthinkable that anyone, when famine and hunger were never far away, would miss an opportunity to enjoy plentiful food and drink and the reasons given for turning down the invitation would have raised hoots of laughter from the Jewish crowd. They would have thought it hilarious that anyone would buy land unseen, or oxen without a prior 'test drive', and in either case without protracted haggling which accompanied any business deal. And needless to say, with regard to the third excuse ...the henpecked husband is still part of the comedian's stock in trade.

Of course we realise, and so would his hearers, that Jesus was not just telling a funny story about a bean feast, but was inviting his hearers to join him in the work and joy of what he called 'The Kingdom of God'. It is an invitation which remains open to us all. I don't know about other people, but I am aware that my acceptance had been, and is, often far from enthusiastic. But then I can offer cogent reasons for my response being less than whole-hearted. However occasionally I still face the nagging question 'Are they really good reasons, or simply very poor excuses.

Charles Lodemore