



## Have your cake and eat it. Hear the Word and keep it

*A sermon on Luke 11:14-28*

As a local church, I hope you're aware of yourselves as partners in the project of interpretation of Scripture, rather than just consumers thereof. **Keeping** the Word of God. Not just hearing.

Not just water off a duck's back.

Keeping it in mind that there's never quite any such thing as a straight translation of Scripture, and even then, to have worked out what a text **originally meant** is still some distance from what the Spirit is saying to the church today. And **that's** a blessing.

The text in black and white on the page, *or on the screen, for that matter* has more work to do before it is initiated into the community of the Word of God. Before it **pupates** into what's worth "**keeping**".

That's why I probably need to spend time with Catholic friends, - who generally won't hear a word against Jesus' mother Mary - about how they would receive and interpret the "parting shots" of our Gospel Reading.

That bit, when, on receiving what seems like a kind and beautiful blessing from the woman in the crowd,

***"Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."*** -

Jesus, in some English versions, ***seems to issue a put-down*** both to her and to his mother.

*"Blessed are those who [both] hear the word of God **and** keep it".*

Two stages of blessing.

There is a **variety** of presentations in the differing English translations, but it makes sense to go with those who read Jesus' comment as **'yes, and all the more'** rather than ***"no on the contrary but rather"***.

Agreeing and adding, rather than correcting and dismissing. As for other languages, I checked Martin Luther's Reformation German: he adds a resounding ***"Ja!"*** - "yes!". I'm going with Luther.

Who shows me: that's exactly what Mary did. Hear and nurture, with all her being, the living Word of God.

Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Luke, where Mary is so prominently blessed and a source of blessing, is hardly about to disrespect his birth and his mother's nurture, ***so rather***, in affirming those **great** blessings in Mary, uses them as a springboard to building into our hearts and minds the readiness to respond day in

day out **and right now** to the utterly urgent demands of love and justice.

Then the **world as a whole** is blessed **by our being blessed**. As Abraham, who trusted God, was to be a blessing to all the families of the Earth, and not just the human families either.

Then we hear the Word of God and keep it, and by 'keep' we're talking something a bit stronger than 'observe' - indeed, something more actively interactive.

'**Keep**', like you '**keep**' a flock of sheep, a dog or cat or other valued living creature. With nurture, protection, and mutual benefits.

That's how the words are used elsewhere, and that's why there's still a lot to be said for the tradition of using scripture to interpret scripture.

I'm conscious that, according to the notes [**Spill the Beans**] chosen to guide this congregation, today is part of a series that leads up to Holocaust Memorial Day at the end of the month.

With an overall prescribed theme of '*awareness of evil*'.

An **awareness**, can I suggest, which is very much tied up with our relationship with the **Word of God**, which, if as our churches' [URC & CofS] statements of faith are trustworthy, finds a **habitat** in the Bible, and is discerned with the help of that wild wind, the Spirit, the breath of life.

The Bible is a book of blessings, but perhaps - and perhaps **therefore** - at least as much also a book of warnings. Which is why it's the most vital resource in motivating prayer and action by churches in the face of the threats we observe today.

The Word of God, **kept** in the crises of right now.

These notes you're working from, leading towards holocaust memorial, and which make no mention of the relatively **slow-**

**motion** holocaust of climate crisis are an interesting challenge for me as Environmental Chaplain.

Especially now, when we are approaching 50000 deaths in Gaza, and when it still seems to be acceptable to bomb a whole hospital if there's a suspicion of a terrorist hiding there; .... there nonetheless remains something like a tradition that to compare anything **else** to the holocausts in particular of Nazi Germany is disrespectful to the memory of those who suffered.

I don't think I'm able to agree there. Isn't it rather the opposite? That we respect and hear that previous suffering **as** the Word of God and **keep** it by learning a different way. By living a different way from violence as the only solution to violence. By living a different way from keeping our noses clean?

Holocausts past are unbelievably awful. All the more so, therefore the importance of hearing that Word of God in the cry of the suffering today... and "keeping it".

The idea of holocaust remembrance is, I trust, to be mindful not just of the **nature** but also of the **scale** of the evil concerned, and above all, to learn; to change; to act. And **thus** to **be** a blessing.

To be, even in a small way, part of the healing, not just to be swept along with the harm. Even in a small way. The straw that, blown away by the breath of your prayer, means that somewhere, a camel's back might not break. You don't **know** the difference you can make. But a prayerful life places that in God's hands.

All this is why, given what you **all** can **easily** find, even in the respectable and sometimes censored statements of the United Nations Panel on Climate Change [IPCC].... given **that**, it is right to point out that today the **choice of more oil** is a **choice to kill your neighbour**, not to love them.

Is oil evil? If it were; **would** we be **aware**? And that's over and above the clear human and environmental injustice of the exploitation of fossil fuels around the world, where local populations suffer disruption without compensation.

(If you want an example of that, look up the Niger Delta.)

Sometimes theologians tie themselves in knots by talking about **'natural evil'** meaning the **harm** that **is** done, without a human cause, by natural disasters of various sorts.

But I can't forget the lady from the church in Pakistan, whom I met at the World Council of Churches who said, after the floods in her country: ***"I want you to promise me that you'll go home and tell your people that this isn't natural."***

When you're on the receiving end of floods, epidemics and extreme weather, you might not have the luxury of such philosophical nuances.

I lose count of the times I've heard that smug and self-deceiving denialism trotted out, that 'weather changes over time'.

Of course it does. But not like this. Like those causes of stumbling of which Jesus speaks, which do come anyway.. but then, *recycling* Isaiah [5:20] he adds "but woe to those who add to such things"

Woe to those who consciously and therefore intentionally add to the disasters that life, including human life, is subject to.

It really is amazing how much effort had to go in the last few years into the decisions of churches to pull out of fossil fuel investments.

To hear the word of God and keep it.

And we're well past any reasonable doubt that our culture's use of fossil fuels directly and causally adds to the severity and frequency of extreme weather, of the rise in sea levels....*and I probably haven't got time here to list in detail what else.* Even the news we do get, even what they bother to report, should give some hints.

This is the Word of God we can hear, and keep **as** we continue to change our hearts and minds, and **as** we build up our spiritual resilience to be people of hope with eyes wide open, who don't just

lament what has passed, but take step after step on such a path that, as a minimum, less harm is done. Do **less** harm.

Which is the **preparatory** starting point we see in the Good News of John the Baptist, speaking the word of God not just to the righteous who keep it, but to those completely implicated in undermining it.

There is no dilemma about the causality of disaster which not even the rich nations can long ignore, hiding behind their wealth, comforted that the poor, who always suffer, suffer first.

But of course, the rich are not protected for ever. You may just catch the irony, that the biggest oil ports stand to be flooded fastest as the seas, now inevitably, rise. Maybe a metre in the next 45 years, according to an authoritative report last week. Who's to blame there?

It's interesting that the story in Luke begins with Jesus' very **personal** engagement with the spirit that kept the man from being able to speak. Healing as **negotiation with personalities**, rather than neutral administration of chemicals. Healing that engages the full gifts of humanity. Like Mary, blessing that child at her breast.

As EcoChaplain. I **have** inevitably looked in the last few years at the nature of **sin**, and with the support of some very heavyweight religious voices, concluded there's no point in suggesting that environmental devastation is anything other than unambiguously sinful. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away what truly harms the Earth.

Today, and perhaps since Putin invaded Ukraine, we're alarmingly conscious - and perhaps numbed by the **more traditional evils** that are daily perpetrated in Gaza, Ukraine, Russia, Sudan, perhaps still Syria. Right now, the list seems to go on and on. Atrocities are not a thing of the past, nor genocide, nor the **ecocide**, which links them all.

Perhaps the blossoming of the traditional fast-paced evil of warfare, in which it seems Creation is always the first casualty **on**

**whatever side**, has obscured the urgency of what I feel compelled, reasonably and responsibly, to call the **climate holocaust**.

The word **holocaust** goes back to the idea of a burned offering, and that's somewhat appropriate given the prime direct cause of the burning of fossil fuels. The burned offering of the life of the world on the altar of power and money, rather than even of welfare and wellbeing, though invariably passed off that way.

And campaigners experience what Jesus experienced: the manipulated public opinion that what is harmful in the way things are, is good, and to tamper with it is bad.

The cost of **transition with justice**, those obvious first-step sacrifices: like eating less meat, flying less, and not at all within the mainland UK or Europe. Less waste, less war.

And as an action: to conclude:

Our leaders and politicians are not at all ignorant. They are very well-informed about the harm and its causes, but scared by strident voices calling good evil and evil good. **They** are in need of your blessing, and your encouragement, even more than they are in need of your criticism. Pray for them, and when you get the chance speak to them.

Hear the Word.

Keep the Word.

Pass the Word on.