

THE MESSENGER

MARCH 2007

The benefit of the doubt

Sandy Christie

Leave your doubts at the door. Sign on the dotted line. Don't ask the tough questions. That's what many people expect of church. It's all about certainties, not doubts.

The price of freedom

In fact it's nothing like that simple. Doubt is a universal part of human experience, the inevitable result of living in an uncertain world where, if there is a God, he is invisible. And doubt is part of the price we pay for freedom. A loud and evident God would crush us and overwhelm us. Instead he steps back and gives us space. As John Irving wrote in his book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, if there were no room for doubt there would be no room for me.

More than that, doubt represents opportunity. A chance to think again,

question the assumptions we take for granted. And Jesus loved questions. More than half the time he speaks in the gospels he is answering a question, often with another question of his own. If Christianity is really about getting rid of all doubt that is a strange way to operate.

Two kinds of doubt

What matters is not whether we have questions or uncertainties, because we all do. It is what we do with those questions, and whether we are really looking for answers. In that sense there are two kinds of doubt – honest and dishonest. Maybe that's why Jesus answers the questions he is asked in very different ways. Sometimes – for instance to a very ordinary woman at a well – he gives answers of devastating clarity and penetration. Other times, particularly with the religious experts, he just ducks the question and walks away.

A tiny seed of faith

When our doubts are honest

and we're looking for answers Jesus will meet us wherever we are – even a tiny seed of trust will be enough. When a man in trouble says to him 'I believe, help my unbelief!', Jesus doesn't tell him to go away and sort himself out, he responds then and there.

Perhaps the best analogy might be someone who has fallen off a cliff, and in desperation grabs a tree branch on the way down. If the branch is strong enough to hold his weight, it doesn't matter how much confidence he had in it. It's the branch that saves him, not his confidence. He is not 10% safe just because he was only 10% sure.

Ask the tough questions

St Michael's aims to be a place where it is okay to ask questions, okay to wonder, okay not to have all the answers. You'd be surprised where a bit of honest doubt can get you.

Nothing happens at church

Marion Lane & Jonathan Causer

Most Londoners will have seen the posters on the Tube for the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the magnificent Baptist building at Elephant and Castle. They say, in deliberately slightly ungrammatical English, "I don't go to church, boring ceremonial and superstitious" but go on to show how vibrant, varied and busy the Christian life is.

Here is a compressed view of what went on at St Michaels over the last year:

we have ... welcomed schools: Brooklands; Riverston, Blackheath High and Blackheath Prep.

... welcomed Scouts and Guides

... had fun with: Sing Along Sound of Music; a picnic supper & concert at our first ever "Proms in Blackheath Park; Young Mums' and "Women of a Certain Age" Suppers; Men's Curry Nights; Quiz Night; Lent Lunches; Easter Egg Rolling Competition; a w/e away for our young adults. picnic & rounders on the Heath; a Harvest Lunch complete with Treasure Trail & Apple Bobbing; a return of "Stars in Their Eyes"; an Advent Fair raising over £2000 for charity.

... enjoyed choirs & orchestras: Blackheath String Orchestra; Second Chance Choir; Centenary Choir.

... studied the Bible in our home groups and in church

... had mid-week fun at our 11 O'Clock Club with: plays; talks (eg children with special needs;

Southwark Cathedral; Battersea Dogs Home; International Conservation work; Olympic Athletics; Journalism); an outing to Hever Castle; afternoon tea on the church lawn in August; and in December, a Christmas Lunch.

... encouraged our youth: with groups "Threads" and "Sneakers"; Holiday Clubs: "Life In the Sun" (July) & "Wrapped Up" (Dec); created an Easter display; Sneakers made a special video for Olive Kuhrt's farewell; did Tanzanian Work projects to raise money for Western Tanzania; participated in a special Prayer Day; enjoyed watching the World Cup together; continued to attend the monthly events for secondary school pupils: "Fusion" & "No Compromise"; went ice skating; and a group went to Soul Survivor in August.

... given money. In 2005 we gave over £18,000 to the charities we support and we expect a similar amount for 2006 (£3745 raised over the Christmas period alone)

... conducted baptisms, weddings and funerals

Helped and raised money for specific appeals and needs including: work on the Ferrier Estate; Greenwich Welcare; our Harvest Food Gifts went to London City Mission; Toys were collected for the local families in need on the Ferrier Estate; and Christian Aid Week raised £3,094 from the parish door-to-door collections.

... been fascinated by a talk kindly given by Neil Rhind on the History of St Michael's Church.

... changed youth worker assistants: said goodbye to our

Greenwich Youth for Christ worker, Shelley; and welcomed Kelvin Mtotha, a Care Force Worker from Malawi.

... studied hard. During Lent we had weekly meetings looking at "Life Balance"; our home-based Bible Study Groups have studied: An Overview of the Bible; Ephesians; and The Lord's Prayer; we have had morning sermon series on: our values; Bible overview; Luke; Prayer; Giving and 1 Peter and our evening services have considered Christian Life in Today's World and studied Mark's gospel, the Nicene Creed and Daniel; in October we held a Christian basics course: Introducing God and in November we had a discussion evening on Christian Parenting.

... improved & maintained our fabric; repaired our halls and bungalow roofs (thanks to financial help from Morden College); our steeple and church roofs repaired; paths re-laid; and re-sanded our hall floors.

... had some special services: Taize services involving reflection at Easter and Advent with music and meditation; and a Memorial Service of quiet remembrance and thanksgiving designed particularly for those recently bereaved or wanting the opportunity for quiet reflection.

... improved our Communications by installing a new sound & visual system in church, introducing a new visual identity, agreeing a clear Set of Values and strapline: "Making Time for the things that matter".

Re-designed The Messenger to make it more attractive for our readers.

Voluntary Slaves

On 25th March comes the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807, which forbade the transportation of slaves on British ships anywhere on the high seas. It imposed a fine of £100 for every slave found aboard a British ship, so its title implied rather more than the Act delivered. All that was abolished was the trade: existing slaves were not freed.

Thirty five years had passed since 1772 and the famous judgment of Lord Mansfield in favour of the slave Somersett, declaring that he could not be transported back to Jamaica and again sold, which had established that slaves had civil rights and were not property of their owners. Another twenty-seven years were to pass before all slaves throughout the British Empire were emancipated. It had taken the campaigner William Wilberforce eighteen years of constant pressure to achieve this, and the Act became law just a month after his death in 1834.

Slavery was certainly not new. Throughout history there had been groups of people deprived of their full rights and held in servitude by other groups.

The Christian religion may be said to be founded in slavery. Exodus is all about Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and to the promised land. The promise of the 'promised land' was of a country where Jews could decide their own destiny and worship their own God. Ironically, the Egyptian society was not known for slavery, and

the pyramids were built by free workers.

The Israelites are constantly reminded of their deliverance, but soon forget what they owed to God. For example, the Lord called on the Hebrews to remember their own bondage in Egypt so that they would deal fairly with their own brothers who were slaves, placing a

limit of six years on their servitude (*Deuteronomy 15:12-15*). Again, the memory of bondage was to be an incentive not to pervert justice and to provide generous charity for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow (*Deuteronomy 24:17-22*). The implication is that slavery was an injustice not to be repeated.

Later in Israel's history the people had forgotten the lessons of bondage, and were reminded through the prophet Isaiah of God's heart (see *Isaiah 58:1-7*)

It comes as a surprise that the Bible does not explicitly condemn slavery: in fact, slaves are even told to obey their masters (*1 Timothy 6: 1*). Yet, it is equally clear that no-one can claim to be a Christian and hold another in bondage, as Paul explains to Philemon when inviting him to release his slave Onesimus (*Philemon 1: 8-16*)

The Bible makes this clear in many passages: it tells us that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God

and are worthy of respect (*Genesis 1:28*); and that all human beings are loved by God who cares for us (*John 3:16*); and that all Christians are to love their neighbours as themselves (*Matthew 22:39*). Anyone who accepts these commandments could not excuse slavery.

It is easy to see the parallel between deliverance from physical slavery and from the slavery of sin: St Paul makes it explicit in his letter to the Galatians (5: 1) 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery'. Christ still offers that deliverance, and sadly we still need it.

When the birth of Jesus was announced to Joseph, the angel said that 'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'. The name Jesus is a version of Ye-shua or Joshua, which means "God saves".

The experience of slavery which comes to mind now is that of black Africans in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, people like Somersett. Yet they were not the first slaves, and nor unhappily were they the last. Men and women are still sold into durance in many parts of the world. Beyond that, so many of us volunteer to be slaves by rejecting the deliverance which Jesus offers us.

The service of God is perfect freedom, or as the letter to the Romans (6: 19) puts it, we may offer ourselves in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.



Services in March

4th March
10.30 Worship Together
6.30 Holy Communion

11th March
10.30 Holy Communion
6.30 Evening Prayer

18th March
10.30 Morning Prayer
6.30 Holy Communion

25th March
9.00 Holy Communion
10.30 Holy Communion (with children)
6.30 Evening Prayer

Answer to A Post-Christmas Quiz by Sarah Burnard

1. "What does the Doctor hear?"

Place:- Blackheath Park and close surroundings; time:- 10.10am...Doctor hears birds chirruping, wind in the trees, light traffic noise.

10.15am...Doctor hears REAL CHURCH BELLS RINGING AT ST MICHAEL'S.

2. "What is the cause of the patient's problem?"

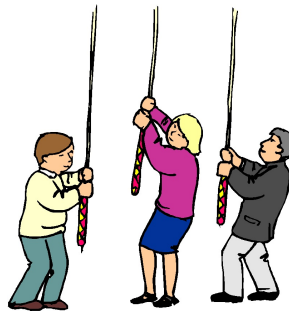
Answer:- Relief all round..it WAS nothing serious after all. Bella heard the church bells being rung at St Michael's.

We have recently begun to

ring these bells every Sunday morning from 10.15 am for ten minutes, The bells have not been rung regularly for some years, as we had to save up some money to spend on reinforcing the bell tower. This work has now been completed, so we can ring the bells again safely.

There are 2 bells, so we have two bell ringers every Sunday, ranging in age from 13 years old and upwards!

We hope that you enjoy the sound of our bells!



Joseph of Nazareth

26th March is the festival of Joseph of Nazareth, the husband of Mary the mother of Jesus. After Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph went on to have more sons and daughters – we do not know how many – so Jesus had a real first-hand understanding of family life.

J - i - C No. 96 & 97

What word or phrase can be reversed in meaning by entering a space?

These are all quadrupeds:

* I * O *
* A * E *
* Y * N *
* Y * A *
* L * M *
* O * S *
* H * E *
* T * A *
* A * I *
* I * E *
* T * E *
* E * R *

Solutions

Walks, beds, knots, links, oxen – all sound like counties.

Using each of the digits 1, 3, 4 and 6 once and with only the simple mathematical signs of +, -, x and ÷, make the total 24 – 6/(1 - 3/4)

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