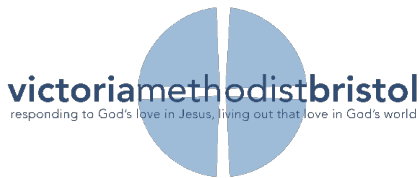

LENT KNIT-ALONG 2025 WEEK 1

Reflections Only



Reflections by John Barnett

Introduction

Our first week of daily reflections were kindly written for us by John Barnett.

John is a local preacher in the Bristol circuit. He is married with four children. His day job is as a tax lawyer. In his twenties he once managed to knit himself a bow-tie, but now can't remember how he did it. He looks on amazed at his wife, Helen's, many brilliant knitting and crochet projects.

WEEK 1 REFLECTIONS:

COMEDY AND CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

I recently took part in a stand-up comedy event for charity. It wasn't something I had any experience in before. Fortunately we were given some professional training beforehand. It was very helpful but I soon discovered that there is nothing quite as serious as the business of comedy.

In this first week's devotions I want to look at some of the lessons I learned about comedy and then link them - perhaps bizarrely - to some of the themes of Celtic Christianity. While this may seem an odd juxtaposition, we may discover that they are closer than they might at first sight appear.

Celtic Christianity is a debated term in academic circles. But I use it here to describe a particular form of spirituality present (particularly) in Scotland, Ireland and Wales during the early Middle Ages (fifth to seventh centuries) before the Council of Whitby in 664 imposed more uniformity on religious practice. Celtic Christianity is associated particularly with Saint Patrick in Ireland and Saint Columba on Iona.

Celtic spirituality emphasises the sacredness of all life and of the everyday. It looks for pattern and form and discerns God's presence in and through the rhythms of times, tides

and seasons. It involves a deep love for creation and a joy in the ordinary and seemingly mundane. It shares many themes with the later teachings of St Francis of Assisi.

Hopefully as the week progresses, some of the links between the two may become clearer.

Wednesday, 05 March

A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother."' He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

– Luke 18:18-25

Comedy

One of the first lessons in comedy is about maintaining **tension** - something that knitters will be very familiar with! All comedy involves keeping the audience waiting... tense... expectant until the tension is released with the pay-off or punchline. But a good pay-off takes you in a direction you weren't expecting - off at a tangent.

My daughter came home from school the other day

"Dad", she said, "I can't be bothered to do my Maths homework. Can you do it for me?"

I was shocked at how blatant she was

"Alice," I replied, "it just wouldn't be right"

"Oh I know that, Dad" she said, "But answer as many questions as you can."

The essence of the above is a simple ambiguity: two different meanings of "right". But it becomes a joke through building tension and then releasing it.

In the above passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus may well be using similar comic tension - and, in passing, a joke if not about knitting then at least about sewing.

The words for camel and rope in Greek and Aramaic are both similar. Jesus seems to be taking an existing saying about how difficult it is to get a rope through the eye of a needle

and subverting that by saying how **even more** impossible it would be to get a camel through the same aperture.

Celtic Christianity

Celtic Christians often used the metaphor of tension and release - or “binding” and “loosing”. And they would have been very familiar with the process of weaving. The intricate patterns we see in the illuminated Gospel manuscripts of the time are just one example of this.

For the early Celtic Christians, these patterns mirrored the pattern of life and the patterns that God had woven into creation.

St Patrick’s Breastplate is perhaps the best known example of this process of binding to oneself the virtues seen in Christ; and loosing from oneself all that holds us back from following Christ’s example.

Listen

I Bind Unto Myself Today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO3blhSCQBg>

Prayer

The weaving of peace be thine
Peace around thy soul entwine
Peace of the Father flowing free
Peace of the Son sitting over thee
Peace of the Spirit for thee and me
Peace of the one
Peace of the Three
A weaving of peace be upon thee

Around thee twine the Three
The One the Trinity
The Father bind his love
The Son tie his salvation
The Spirit wrap his power
Make you a new creation
Around thee twine the Three
The encircling of the Trinity

David Adam - The Edge of Glory - Prayers in the Celtic Tradition

Thursday, 06 March

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

– Ezekiel 37: 1-12

Comedy

When a young baby is unsure or scared, it holds its breath.

This can be something as simple as a game of Peekaboo when a baby is unsure why the other person is no longer visible.

When the tension is released, the baby exhales. And it comes to associate this exhalation with happiness and pleasure.

Laughter is born.

And, as we mature, we go on experiencing laughing as a pleasurable sensation.

Comedy works by building tension in the audience who, without knowing it, hold their breath as they listen to the storyline - and then release it when the pay-off occurs.

But the experienced comedian knows how to get not just the one laugh, but to build a rhythm of multiple tension and release, so that the audience are breathing in synchrony.

And then just as the audience are breathing together, the comedian disrupts that rhythm, hitting the audience with two jokes in succession...and then a third. You need to laugh again before your breathing is ready; and then again. It is here that you experience the “belly laugh” the “gut-wrenching”, the “I-almost-split-my-sides-laughing” moment.

The comedy routine builds to this high point. And then there is a warm-down, as breathing is restored and the good comedian leaves the audience wanting more.

Celtic Christianity

The Hebrew word for “breath”, *ruach*, is the same as the word for Spirit - a pun which Ezekiel makes play on in our reading above.

The Celtic Christians were also familiar with the process of breathing being a way in which we encounter God’s Spirit - becoming part of us as we breathe in; and cleansing us of sin as we breathe out. Prayer and breathing are closely intertwined.

In this, the Celtic Christians took something everyday - indeed breathing is perhaps the essence of the simple and the everyday - and made it sacred.

In the practice of breathing as prayer, Celtic Christianity shares a tradition with other religions and traditions - perhaps most notably some of the practices of Yoga.

We should not wonder that other traditions have also discovered the sacred in breathing exercises, because God’s Spirit is for all and God desires all to encounter him and his love.

And if this is right then laughter too is sacred. The joy we experience in a shared joke is the joy of breath, the joy of the Spirit. The joy of God’s very self.

Listen

O Breath Of Life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkebWO0jqiM>

Prayer

As I breathe in
God’s Spirit is with me
Within me
Surrounds me
Encompasses me

As I hold my breath
I wait
Expectantly
For God to reveal
God’s purpose
and God’s plan

As I breathe out
God is at work
In my work
In my actions
In me

As I breathe in
I breathe God's presence
Suffusing mine
Making my will
God's will
Goodwill

As I hold my breath
I wait
With all creation
For God's punchline

As I breathe out
God's Spirit
Flows out of me
Laughing
Joyous
Sharing God's love
Which is for all.

Friday, 07 March

Haman went out that day happy and in good spirits. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, and observed that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was infuriated with Mordecai; nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. Then he sent and called for his friends and his wife Zeresh, and Haman recounted to them the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the ministers of the king. Haman added, 'Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king. Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate.' Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go with the king to the banquet in good spirits.' This advice pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

That night the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king. It was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Then the king said, 'What honour or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?' The king's servants who attended him said, 'Nothing has been done for him.' The king said, 'Who is in the court?' Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. So the king's servants told him, 'Haman is there, standing in the court.' The king said, 'Let him come in.' So Haman came in, and the king said to him, 'What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour?' Haman said to himself, 'Whom would the king wish to honour more than me?' So Haman said to the king, 'For the man whom the king wishes to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; let him robe the man whom the king wishes to honour, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour."' Then the king said to Haman, 'Quickly, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to the Jew Mordecai who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.' So Haman took the robes and the horse and robed Mordecai and led him riding through the open square of the city, proclaiming, 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honour.'

Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered.

– Esther 5:9 - 6:12

Comedy

The book of Esther – by the way the only book of the Bible in which God isn't mentioned – is a wonderful story. And that story is at the heart of *Purim Shpil* a form of Yiddish theatre akin to Pantomime where the crowd boos Haman and cheers for Mordecai and Esther. The extract here has a great sense of comic reversal as Haman is forced to honour Mordecai and a great sense of comic tension as to what will happen to the 50ft high gallows he has built.

All comedy involves storytelling to a greater or a lesser extent. It is part of the process of building tension...and then subverting the story in a different direction. And the tradition of storytelling allows liberties to be taken with strict truthfulness. The story of my daughter and her Maths homework (see Wednesday) may not have happened exactly like that...or indeed at all...but we still appreciate the story for the humour it contains.

And if storytelling is at the heart of comedy, then at the heart of storytelling is shared experience. Something to which we can all relate and in which we can find common

ground. Good comedy involves finding a point of commonality with the audience - which is why so many jokes start with stories about our families.

Celtic Christianity

The Celtic Christians understood the power of story. They told stories and stories were told about them. Simple, everyday stories to which their audience could relate. Stories about farming and fishing, about wind and weather. Stories sometimes with fantastic characters - of animals that could talk (a much older tradition dating back to Balaam's donkey - see Numbers 22), of sea monsters (again see similar Biblical stories in Psalms 74 and 104).

One imagines such stories being told on dark evenings around the fire as the exploits of the day were ended and communities and families came together in a time of sharing.

Sometimes the stories moved from being told by the saints to being told about them. The stories about Saint Patrick (driving the snakes out of Ireland) or, later, of Saint Francis of Assisi are well known examples.

Such stories often emphasised the created world, our stewardship of it, and God's ultimate purposes and rules over creation.

Listen

Touch The Earth Lightly: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuB0mW7Axbs>

Prayer

God

Your story is seen in Creation
And continues in the world today

In Jesus, you wrote yourself into the Story

In our Bibles we read the story of your people
A story of which we are still a part

Help us to be story-tellers and story-sharers
As we read your word, help us to experience your story anew
Help us to weave your story into our everyday encounters
That all may come to hear the greatest story of all
Of your love for us and for all creation. Amen.

Saturday, 08 March

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they

went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

– Luke 24:1-11

Comedy

The comedian Jerry Lewis once said that “*the premise of all comedy is a man in trouble*”.

And whether that be slapstick comedy (the pie in the face or the person slipping on the banana-skin) or stand-up comedy, it is true that there is inevitably a butt of the joke...the person at whose expense the joke is told.

Comedy, of course, can be cruel.

But - and to my mind this is the best sort of comedy - it can often be self-deprecating where the comedian themselves is the butt of the joke. In the story of my daughter's homework (see Wednesday), the joke-teller - the put-upon father outwitted by his teenage child- is the object of the humour.

Comedy and tragedy are often, therefore, not far apart from each other. And perhaps this is right.

I think, perhaps, of the funeral service, where the solemnity of the occasion is punctured by a humorous memory about the deceased person. A shared memory...a recollection that sums them up so much more than pious platitudes or banal recitations of their virtues.

Is laughing together in the face even of adversity that which makes us most human?

Celtic Christianity

The Celtic Christians were not immune to hardship or tragedy. They lived in a harsh and unforgiving environment where storm and weather conspired with disease and crop-failure. Their environment was bleak and barren.

Yet through this they found joy and laughter even amid tragedy and loss. For them this was all part of the pattern of life and the pattern they found in Christ himself.

For, in Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection we perhaps see the greatest joke of all - God's cosmic humour. How, even in the face of the worst that the world can do, God laughs - and in that laughter comes resurrection and new life.

Listen

Lord Of The Dance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Epl6p2Xa_Ug

Prayer

Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant too

We are pilgrims on a journey
Fellow travellers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the nighttime of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through

When we sing to God in heaven
We will find such harmony
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony

Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant too

Richard Gillard - The Servant Song (1977)

Compiled by Vicky Davies