

## Welcome

Our Lent and Easter issue embraces two themes.

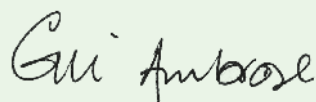
### Becoming the good news:

**Jesus and the God of Israel** takes us through the five remaining weeks of Lent. As we encounter incidents and teaching recorded by Mark and John that reveal Jesus living out the teachings of his Jewish faith, we find a context for our own journey to live out and share the good news of the gospel.

On Easter Day the nature of this journey is transformed, as we take up the call to live a **Resurrection life**. The encounters between the risen Jesus and his disciples show us how their relationship with him empowers their mission to witness to the transforming nature of his love. Here we begin to perceive clues about what will sustain us when we set out to share the overwhelming love that God offers to a needy world.

In addition to the material in this magazine, do remember that there is much more on the [WEB](#). Log on each week to see what else there is to support your worship preparation, preaching and teaching, not just in Sunday worship, but in groups and other settings, too.

With best wishes for the journey



Gill Ambrose



## Our writers

ROOTS is a joint Churches' initiative, supported by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland along with representatives from the Churches and church publishers throughout the UK and Ireland. Writers for this issue were: **Ann Blackett**, music in worship adviser; **Arnold Browne**, New Testament scholar; **Sarah Earnshaw**, **Victoria Goodman** and **Ellie Wilson**, early years practitioners; **Helen Garton**, administrator, student, presbyter; **Robert Halshaw**, RC parish priest; **Yvonne Hendrie**, Church of Scotland minister; **Jacqui Hyde**, Anglican priest; **Pete Kelsall**, Church worker; **Clare McBeath**, Baptist minister; **Elaine Murray**, children's story writer; **Simon Oxley**, Baptist minister; **Cathy Westby**, Anglican children's worker; **Caroline Wickens**, Methodist minister.

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## In this issue

**Through the Lenten Gospels we observe the way in which Jesus strives to live out the teaching of the Jewish Scriptures, and in Eastertide we consider how to live our lives in the light of the resurrection.**

## Becoming the good news: Jesus and the God of Israel

Karen Armstrong<sup>1</sup> argues that the Jewish Scriptures were so significant for the first Christian writers, 'that there is scarcely a verse in the New Testament that did not refer to the older scriptures'. This close relationship between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures remains central to biblical scholarship.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of 'the good news' that Christ died for our sins and was raised 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15.1-5), and he constantly searches those Scriptures to show that it is the righteousness of Israel's God that is revealed in the gospel of Christ (Romans 1.16-17). All the New Testament authors find ways to show how the good news of Jesus is 'in accordance with the Scriptures'. Luke's risen Christ opens his disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures (24.45), and Armstrong helpfully describes early Christian interpretation of Jewish Scriptures as 'a spiritual discipline, rooted in grief and bewilderment, which spoke directly to the heart, and set it alight'. Whenever his followers studied their Jewish Scriptures, they believed that the crucified and risen Christ was with them.

In Luke 24.44 'the Scriptures' are described as 'the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms', and often the New Testament refers to 'the law and the prophets' (Matthew 5.17, 7.40, 22.12, Luke 16.16, Acts 13.15, Romans 3.21). This reminds us that the Jewish Scriptures used by our first Christian writers were not yet the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jews, that is 'the law, the prophets and the writings', the list of which was 'closed' only in the Christian era, perhaps as late as the third century AD. The fourth-century Christian teacher Jerome argued that the Christian Old Testament should include only the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jews demonstrating, William Horbury<sup>2</sup> suggests, that 'learned Christians honour the Jews as custodians of the scriptures'. Horbury reveals the contact between Jews and Christians as they studied their shared Scriptures, and we must celebrate the renewal of such contacts today, opening our minds to the subtle depths of our holy texts.

In Jesus' time, there were more Jewish Scriptures than found their way into the Hebrew Bible, and many Jews accepted as authoritative books written in or translated into Aramaic and Greek. This is seen in frequent New Testament allusions to the books separated out as 'The Apocrypha' by the sixteenth-century Reformers and also in a quotation from 1 Enoch 1.9 in Jude 14-15, and a quotation in James 4.5 of 'the scripture' that is otherwise unknown. The Greek translations of Hebrew Scriptures were particularly appealing to Christian readers because they intensified messianic hope. For example, Habakkuk's vision ('wait for it', 2.3) becomes 'the one who is coming' (quoted in Hebrews 10.37).

<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography*, Atlantic Books, 2007; <sup>2</sup> William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy*, T&T Clark, 1998; <sup>3</sup> Stanley E. Porter (editor), *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 2006.

Stanley Porter<sup>3</sup> has shown how the use of Isaiah 61.1-2 in Luke 4.18-19 points 'quite possibly to a tradition that could only have found initial articulation by Jesus'. In Isaiah 40-66, 'the good news' of God's coming to save is carried into effect by the messenger's proclamation (40.9, 52.7, 60.6, 61.1). That Jesus announced 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4.21) continues to challenge us to discern God's Word for us 'today' in the relationship between our Old Testament and New Testament readings.

## Resurrection life

This year we explore the readings for Eastertide through the theme of skills and resources for mission. We 'abide in Christ' so that we have the strength to 'go and tell'.

Along with 'passion', 'mission' is one of the most overused words in our language. Companies develop 'mission statements'. There is no great problem with this use of an essentially theological framework to define the aims and objectives of a particular group, but it should not be confused with Christian thinking about mission.

Christian mission is inspired by God, and is therefore neither predictable nor capable of being broken down into a series of aims. We set out in hope and expectation with rather little idea of where we might end up; except that a healthy bottom line is unlikely to be part of the process. Unclear about our target audience, our methods and our resources, mission proceeds through dependence on God, not our own resources. So, as Eastertide unfolds we consider the resources for mission offered in the Gospel and the psalms.

It is important to take account of the context which John's Gospel was written. What little we know of John's community suggests that they faced many difficulties. A small group in a big, multi-cultural city, they had to work hard to incorporate people from different backgrounds into a coherent group, and seem also to have faced hostility from outsiders, both Jewish and Gentile. Yet their concern for mission continued to be central to their understanding of their faith, and Jesus' last words to his disciples are interwoven with reflections on this theme.

Our context in today's post-Christian West is probably closer to John's than in the centuries between our time and his. We live in a multicultural society, where Christianity occupies a position of little remaining privilege. We find ourselves defending our faith against attacks from the 'new atheists', and negotiating a position where some consider religion as, at best, an unpredictable force in society. But at the same time, the Government recognises the huge resources available through the Church for its 'Big Society' project, offering us opportunities to foreground our capacity for committed service as a response, both to God's call and to social need.

There is, then, great value in exploring Jesus' teaching about mission as John expressed it for his community. Fundamental to this thinking is the insistence on a profound relationship with Christ as the foundation of everything. Rooted and grounded in Christ like the branches of a vine, knowing his voice as a sheep knows its shepherd's, the primary resource for mission is a dynamic, life-giving engagement with Christ. These metaphors speak of personal and community relationships with Christ as the context for all that we do. As the focus shifts from Easter to Pentecost, it becomes clear that the Spirit brings immense energy to enable this relationship to bear fruit, overcoming the human limitations faced by the disciples.

In a culture of increasing professionalism, it is salutary to observe the extent to which the unlikely and unsuitable are chosen to be bearers of God's message. The immense responsibility entrusted to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning was in many respects countercultural because she was a woman. The doubt, uncertainty and fear expressed by the disciples after the resurrection suggests that they were not as committed as modern practice might demand; what would Lord Alan Sugar have made of them as apprentices?

The ideas about mission reflected in these readings are not polished and refined. Yet throughout this series of texts we find ideas about skills and resources for mission in a hostile society; and in a society where it is difficult and increasingly unusual to profess the Christian faith, they have much to offer the Church.