

Thought for the day 18 – 24 January 2021

by Andrew Goodman

Monday

[Each Thought for the Day this week is inspired by a phrase or line from a song written and/or recorded by Canadian singer songwriter Bruce Cockburn during his 50 years in the music business.]

"..... *nothing but a burning light*" (from 'Soul of a Man' on the album 'Nothing but a Burning Light', 1991)

'Soul of a man' was written by blues musician Blind Willie Johnson sometime around the 1920s-1930s in the USA. Cockburn learned it off an old record. It includes the verse:



*I read the bible often,
I try to read it right.
As far as I can understand
It's nothing but a burning light*

Jesus was steeped in the Jewish scripture which we have in the Old Testament. Scripture inspired Jesus' words and events that happened around him (such as the example of Jonah we see tomorrow).

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus remarked to one another "*Were not our hearts burning within us while [Jesus] was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*" (Luke 24:32 NRSVA)

Reading the Bible can be like a virtuous circle into which we can enter. We can learn about the history of the Jewish people, their poetry and prayers, and the prophets. We can read this history through a window which Jesus has opened for us and, in turn, we

can learn from reading about Jesus - his life, ministry, death and new covenant - in the context of his Jewish heritage and the old covenant.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel puts the relationship with Jesus like this:

"Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

(Matthew 11:29 MSG)

Tuesday

"Get up, Jonah" (from 'Get up Jonah' on the album 'The Charity of Night', Bruce Cockburn, 1996)



This song relates to the Jonah story in the Bible. The book of Jonah poses many questions, such as the fish (really?) and there is no account in Nineveh's history of its conversion. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was a prophet, and the Jews placed the book among the

prophetic books, not the historical books. Yet it focuses on the prophet and not the prophecy, his life, his argument with God and his mission.

When Jesus was asked for a sign, he said, *"No sign will be given except the sign of Jonah."* (Matthew 16:4 and Luke 11:29 NRSVA)

Jonah knew what he was supposed to do. He paid attention, but initially didn't respond appropriately. It took a storm to grab Jonah's attention and respond appropriately.

Many of us have found ourselves in a prolonged storm, or a series of storms. The storms we face are not just the Covid-19 pandemic, and they should grab our attention. If we're concerned about the quality of our politics and political leaders, the climate and ecological emergency, the disparity between rich and poor, racism and modern slavery, we too should get up, get involved and change them.

This words that came to Jeremiah can help us make a start:

"Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."

(Jeremiah 6:16 NRSVA)

Wednesday

"..... kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight" (from 'Lovers in a Dangerous Time' on the album 'Stealing Fire', Bruce Cockburn, 1981)

(U2 fans may recognise this phrase quoted in their 1988 single 'God Part II' on the album 'Rattle and Hum'.)

Recent political life and activity in the UK has exposed division and inequalities, also evident elsewhere in the world.

The Bible shows us what good government looks like. It doesn't oppress the poor, mislead, conceal transgressions and mistakes, lack understanding, show partiality or trust in their own wits.



Rather, it walks in wisdom and integrity, understands justice, listens to the law and hates unjust gain.

In another song Cockburn wrote, "*The trouble with normal is it always gets worse*" (from '*The Trouble with*

Normal' on '*The Trouble with Normal*', 1983). So what can we do if we sense that 'normal' was a crisis, if 'normal' was inequity, oppression and climate breakdown?

This words that came to Ezekiel, equating prayer as 'standing in the gap', can help us along good paths:

"I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land."

(Ezekiel 22:30 NIV)

Thursday

"This blue green ball in black space" (from '*Planet of the Clowns*' on the album '*The Trouble with Normal*', Bruce Cockburn, 1983)

My environmental and faith awakening kind of happened simultaneously when I was a student. At the same time that I came across the beautiful creation stories and the Garden of Eden I scared myself reading books on exponential economic and population growth with a finite supply of resources. The verse Cockburn wrote captures this dissonance:

*This blue green ball in black space
Filled with beauty even now
Battered and abused and lovely*



Many meetings have taken place over the years to discuss climate and ecological emergencies. United Nations Climate Change Conferences began in 1993, and the delayed 26th conference (COP26) is due to take place in Glasgow this November. Swedish student Greta Thunberg offers blunt criticism of business and political leaders' failure to take

effective action: *"Leaders happy to set targets for decades ahead, but flinch when immediate action is needed"*.

Deep down we know the inaction isn't an option, but then we possibly freeze in the face of the size of the problem. Climate anxiety is an understandable response to the existential threat.

Some words that came to Jeremiah, echoing Psalm 1, can help us along good paths:

"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.

They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."

(Jeremiah 17: 7-8 NIV)

Friday

"Trickle down everywhere trickle down blood" (from 'Trickle Down' on the album 'You've Never Seen Everything', Bruce Cockburn, 2003)

The proposition of trickle down economic theory is that reducing taxes on businesses and the wealthy stimulates business investment in the short term which 'trickles down' to benefit wider society in the long term. There is little evidence that this has ever achieved its stated goals.

Before coronavirus, 14.5 million people in the UK were caught in poverty, more than 1 in 5 people. A recent Resolution Foundation study claims that the richest 1% have almost a quarter of UK wealth.



Economic disparity isn't new. The Old Testament prophets called it out, most notably Micah who said, *".....what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:8).

Jesus requires us to feed the hungry, provide drink for the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. (Matthew 25:34ff)

No doubt Jesus was familiar with this scripture, with its reference to 'daily bread' echoed in the Lords' prayer, which can help us along good paths today:

*".....give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you*

*and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonour the name of my God."*

(Proverbs 30:8b-9 NIV)

Saturday



"An Indian's good when he cannot be seen" (from 'Indian Wars' on the album 'Nothing But a Burning Light', Bruce Cockburn, 1991)

Statistically, living in Hertford we are likely to be white and privileged. One unfortunate aspect of the political populism mentioned on Wednesday is the demonising of people perceived as 'other' - because of the colour of their skin, their religion or merely by being 'foreign'.

The UK Government's approach to migrants and refugees doesn't sit

comfortably with the Bible's exhortation to care for orphans and widows, the foreigner and *"the least of these"* (Matthew 25:45).

Jesus suggested a good, but not necessarily easy, path to follow:

"Stand up for me against world opinion and I'll stand up for you before my Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32 MSG)

Sunday

"O love that fires the sun keep me burning" (from 'Lord of the Starfields' on the album 'In the Falling Dark', Bruce Cockburn, 1976)

If you listen to Saturday Live on BBC Radio 4, you'll know about the 'inheritance tracks' slot in which a celebrity introduces a track they would pass on. Mine would be 'Lord of the Starfields' as both the track I inherited and the track I would pass on.

The psalms were an inspiration for this song. The psalms in turn inspire us to worship and pray. Some of the emotion expressed is visceral, but honest.



What impact have lockdown restrictions had on this day of the week set aside for worshipping together? Have I finally learnt that worship isn't confined to services in a specific building?

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognise what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." (Romans 12:1-2 MSG)

['Lord of the Starfields' from the album 'In the Falling Dark', 1976](#)