

Christ connects us to God

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[0:00] In Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, verse 1, we read these words from the disciples.

! Teach us to pray. Let us pray. O God, our Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. Who wrote this?

As kirks wi' Christianity he done, burns clubs wi' burns, wi' orthing it's the same. The koral ocht is only for a few, scorned by the money, thrying wi' its empty name.

Who wrote that? These lines come from what may be regarded as the greatest poem in the Scots language in the 20th century.

[1:09] A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle by Hugh McDermott. This year sees the centenary of its publication in 1926.

Although McDermott himself was an atheist, by the time he wrote this epic poem, he had a devout Christian upbringing in Langham in the Borders.

There he taught in Sunday school and was first inspired to write poetry by his minister, himself a poet. The poem is McDermott's vision of Scotland, seen through the delirious mind of a drunk man fallen in a ditch, contemplating the iconic Thistle.

In well over two and a half thousand lines, you thought sermons were long, in well over two and a half thousand lines, the poet shows his command, not only of the Scots language, but of the Bible, where biblical references recur time and again, from Adam in the garden, to Christ on the cross, to the tongues of fire at Pentecost.

The poem proves the old say, you can take the boy out of Langham Sunday school, but you cannot take the Sunday school out of the poet, even an atheist poet.

[2:34] But in the lines from the poem that I quoted at the start, McDermott is showing that he learned more than Bible stories. He knew that the biggest judgment of the prophets in the Old Testament and Jesus in the Gospels was on the disconnect between the claim of the devout to godly piety and the lives they actually lived in the real world.

The prophet Amos said, it's no good bringing your sacrifices to the temple if you're going to exploit the workers and neglect the widow and the orphan. And Jesus' anger was not for the vulnerable sinner like Mary Magdalene.

It was those proud religious people who stood on the corner and said their prayers, but neglected the poor. And so in this poem, McDermott condemns what he saw as the hypocrisy of the Scottish Kirk of his day.

The Kirks may have been full in 1926, yet in McDermott's eyes their churchgoers were far from practicing the radical message of their founder. To translate the verses I read in Scots, the heart of the matter was only grasped by the few.

For most thought McDermott, Christ was but an empty name. But Hugh McDermott was not the only person to write in 1926 about this disconnect between the professed faith of the church and the lives people lived.

[4:12] In that same year that McDermott published A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, a young Scottish theologian called John Bailey published his first book, The Roots of Religion in the Human Soul.

The book's opening chapter considers the attitude of soldiers to religion during the recent Great War from 1914 to 1918.

This had been well documented in questionnaire surveys of the troops conducted at the time and in studies by army chaplains who'd served in the trenches with them, including Bailey himself.

Bailey went on to be a distinguished professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh and moderator of the General Assembly during the darkest days of the Second World War in 1943. But everything he would later write, Bailey said in 1926, everything he would later write would always be haunted by those men in khaki hovering in his memory.

[5 : 20] The questionnaires revealed the fact that four-fifths of the army serving in the trenches had little or no vital connection with any of the churches. But to Bailey, this was not the most significant finding.

Rather, it was the distinction the officers and the rank-and-file soldiers made consistently between the reality they were enduring in the trenches, in all its horror, and anything that seemed a sham, including organized religion.

And so Bailey wrote in 1926, if we put all the evidence together, one main charge stands out in the very boldest relief. And that is, there is a lack of reality about the religion of the Christian church and a conspicuous unrelatedness to the real problems of human life.

It turns out that both the atheist poet and the Presbyterian theologian agreed in 1926. The biggest charge against the Kirk of their day was the disconnect between the religion it professed and the real problems of human life.

As experienced by the troops in the trenches, returning to what turned out to be not a land fit for heroes that they were promised, but a land of real-life hardship for which the Kirk had few or any relevant answers in the 1920s.

[6 : 56] But that is not the end of the story for the Kirk. John Bailey, that young army chaplain who had experienced at first hand in the trenches the disconnect between the soldiers' lived experience and the church's message, went on to chair a General Assembly commission during the Second World War that enabled the Kirk to reconnect the gospel of Jesus Christ with the problems of the post-war world and the lived experience of ordinary people in the 1950s.

In the world of work, the Kirk advocated for full employment and came alongside workers and management in industrial mission. With the end of empires, the Kirk's General Assembly was prominent in supporting independence for former colonies in Africa.

And having gone through the Second World War, generations of young ministers of all theological outlooks went into the new housing schemes to serve their local communities as one among them connecting with them.

It turns out that thanks to ministers like John Bailey, George MacLeod of the Iona community and Tom Allen in the Tell Scotland movement gripped by the gospel.

The Kirk was not done with Christ and his connection with the everyday lives of people across Scotland. And as we heard so movingly last Sunday in the story of Jane Haining, it turns out that the love of Christ for those in her care led an ordinary Kirk member to connect with them even in the hell of Auschwitz.

[8 : 50] And so exactly 100 years after its publication, we should be sobered by McDermott's poem about a drunk man looking at the Scotland of his day, seeing only a disconnect between the message of Christ and the witness of the Kirk.

And we should be heartened by the witness of John Bailey and his mid-20th century generation who led the Kirk back to reconnecting the risen Christ with the reality of people's everyday lives. One story of the Kirk is the story of decline after the Second World War, but this is the real story. Men and women gripped by Christ amid the horror of war, giving their lives to the people of Scotland.

Today we face that challenge again. In a Scottish society that has turned away not only from the Kirk but from Christianity, how do we reconnect the good news of Jesus Christ with the lived experience of our neighbours?

That is the question that will be at the heart of our congregational conference, Craig Lockhart Connects. How do we connect with children and alienated young people growing up after COVID with falling school attendance, fewer job prospects and little chance of buying their own home?

[10 : 24] How do we connect with adults anxious about their own jobs with the onset of AI? How do we connect with our contemporaries across all generations, young and old, anxious about the future of the world with climate change and war again in Europe?

How do we connect with one another in our church and community in pastoral care and mutual support as we all live more socially isolated lives? How do we connect with our society in

communicating the gospel in the age of social media?

These are the questions we shall be asking in our conference, but at the heart of all these questions lies the deeper question, the perennial question for humanity across all ages.

How do we connect with God? This Sunday and over the next two Sundays, we are thinking about that fundamentally important question.

How do we and our neighbours connect with God? If we try to connect with our neighbour and with one another in our own strength as the church, we shall always be subject to the judgment of Hugh McDermid and John Bailey a hundred years ago, as relevant today as it was then.

[11 : 47] without Christ at the centre, Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ around us, without Christ at the centre, people will always see a lack of reality about the religion of the Christian church and a conspicuous unrelatedness to the real problems of human life.

Unless and until we connect with the living God and connect with our neighbour and one another in God's way and with God's wisdom through Jesus Christ, we shall always fall short at best and fall into hypocrisy at worst.

As the psalmist says, unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain. Unless the Lord connects us to our neighbour and to one another, we connect in vain.

And so, how do we connect with God? This is the question the disciples asked Jesus in our reading from Luke's Gospel. The disciples saw two things happening in the real world around them that made them hungry to connect with God.

They saw that fiery prophet John the Baptist teaching his followers how to connect with God in prayer. And they saw Jesus, their teacher, so often going apart from them to connect with his God in prayer.

[13 : 18] And so, one day when he had finished praying, the disciples asked Jesus, Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. We're familiar with what follows from infancy.

Many of us have prayed this prayer, the Lord's Prayer. In Luke's Gospel, we find the shorter version compared with the longer one in Matthew chapter 6.

In Luke it says, And Jesus said to them, When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us, and lead us not into temptation.

What do you make of this prayer? The one that probably you've been praying since infancy. What does it tell us about how we connect with God?

[14 : 21] The common criticism of our faith is that when we pray and connect with God in prayer, we're escaping from the real world into another world, a spiritual world far removed from the problems of everyday life.

Nothing could be further from the truth. God in teaching his disciples this prayer, Jesus was connecting them with a God who is involved with the problems of the real world.

Each line of this prayer is about God in the real world. When you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name.

It's often been claimed by Christians and preachers that Jesus was the first Jew to call God Father, and even more intimately to call God Abba, Papa.

But that is not true. The chosen people Israel had been calling God Father down through the centuries, as Jesus well knew from his reading of the scriptures, his scriptures, the Hebrew Bible.

[15 : 32] As the New Testament scholar Tom Wright comments, the first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of the idea of God as Father comes when Moses marches in boldly to stand before Pharaoh and says, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my son, my firstborn.

Let my people go that they may serve me. And Tom Wright writes, For Israel to call God Father was to hold on to the hope of liberty.

The slaves were to be called sons. And so when Jesus teaches his disciples, now as then, to pray to God as our Father and to hallow, to revere this name, Father, Jesus would have us pray to the God who sets people free from every slavery and every oppression in the real world and calls us to do likewise, to be on the side of all who are oppressed and as we say in Scots, to be on the side of all who are hard and doing.

And when you pray, says Jesus, say, your kingdom come. Here is the heart of the gospel. Not an escape from the real world, but the prayer that this God whom Jesus calls Father, the liberating

God of the slaves in Egypt, will reign on earth as he does in heaven.

And what does the coming of God's reign on earth look like? Jesus has already set out what the coming of God's reign looks like in the sermon he preached in his home synagogue in Nazareth, recorded in Luke's gospel chapter 4.

[17 : 26] taking the scroll of the scriptures he read, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set at liberty those who are oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

prayer. In the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples, now as then, Jesus connects us with a God who loves the wretched of the earth and calls on us to bring them good news in word and action.

We see this in the remaining three petitions in the Lord's prayer in Luke's gospel. When you pray, say, give us each day our daily bread.

The God Jesus prays to is concerned with our bodily hunger and the need for food, daily bread, as much as this God is concerned with our spiritual hunger and feeding.

[18 : 35] When you pray, say, forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. The God Jesus prays to liken sin to debt.

God our Father is concerned with the world of financial debt, as prevalent in Jesus' day among the laboring poor as it is today among those afflicted by loan sharks.

This is the real world that Jesus taught about in his parables. In this drawing by Rembrandt, we see the prodigal son in the arms of his forgiving father.

When? After the son had wasted his father's inheritance, his money in the real world of debt.

And when you pray, say, lead us not into temptation, which can also be read as, save us from the time of testing. What Jesus means here is that when we connect with this God, the one Jesus calls father, then we're going to be tempted and tested in the real world as it rejects God's reign on earth as the worshippers in the synagogue in Nazareth rejected Jesus and his story of the coming of God's kingdom.

[19 : 58] The world will reject us when we are called to be good stewards of God's creation and to care for God's poor. And that is why we are called to pray, lead us not into temptation, to give up on the coming of God's kingdom.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, how do we connect with God? By saying day and daily the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

The Lord's prayer connects us with our heavenly father, yes, but a father who is concerned to liberate us from every oppression in our own lives, in the circle of our family and friends, in the circle of our community, in the circle of our city, in the circle of our land, in the circle of the world.

The Lord's prayer connects us with our heavenly father, yes, but a father who is concerned to liberate us from every oppression in the real world and to restore our dignity as God's daughters and sons.

Christ connects us to God. Let us pray. let us pray in the words we learned so many of us in infancy and in our own version.

[21 : 24] Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.