

WHEATLEY URC NEWSLETTER



JULY - AUGUST 2018

Dead Oak, Launde Abbey

*Rousing from the sleep of silence
I sit awhile and wake my drowsy senses.
The soft hill beckons
Rising, tree scattered,
The wind cool
Through cups of fragile gold
And feathery grasses.
My path dips through a hidden hollow
Of tufted rushes.
Above, the dead tree
Its branches battered and scattered
Stands firm.
I reach my hand to its aged skin,
Rest my back against its rough warmth
Supported
Searching the blue sky
Through bare broken branches.
Can it be that the past is present
In this single moment
Of remembering?*

Christine

Dear friends,

“The fete was a great success. We made nearly £2,000”.

The juxtaposition of these two statements leaves me slightly uncomfortable since to my mind ‘success’ is defined not by the financial receipts but by the enjoyment of those who came, whether it was the delights of Dr. Flury’s garden, the refreshments, the music, the various stalls and games or simply catching up with village gossip and meeting up with long lost friends.

I had similar thoughts when questions were asked about the Cogwheel project. Why are we doing the work? Clearly it will enhance our ability to use the premises for our own use; prayer groups, study groups or ministry group meetings. It will also enable more village groups to use the premises; but for what purpose? If it is to augment our income then we are failing, for some groups make no, or only a token, payment. If it is to entice more folk to join our church community then again ‘success’ is very limited. My own view is that it is our gift to the local community.

When I was a student in East London in the 50’s and 60’s, I was at times involved in various support services for many who were destitute and had fallen on hard times. The Barnardo homes cared for orphan or deserted children, there were ‘doss houses’ and Salvation Army hostels for homeless men, and shelters for ‘fallen women’. Alcoholism was rife and there were many meths addicts who congregated and slept rough in ‘Itchy Park’ in Spitalfields. A number of the churches provided soup kitchens or cheap meals, some of which were linked to an obligatory prayer meeting.

At our college Christian Union, we discussed why Christian congregations were giving of their time and resources. Was it simply a humanitarian response to need? Was it a practical manifestation of God’s love to all? Was it so that recipients of help would come to ‘know Christ’?

There may be a number of reasons for giving. “When we are giving we will ourselves receive” although, sometimes it may be difficult not to feel resentment if we are taken advantage of.

Christ’s love and the gift of himself is unconditional and it is His example that as Christians we try and follow. So whatever our motive try instead of starting each day with what do I want today, consider what I might be able to do for others.

So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone him:
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving. (Graham Kendrick Hymn 522)

With every blessing, **Malcolm**

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**Please remember in your prayers the members of Ann Hardiman's Pastoral Care List:** Ann & Roger Bettess, Annie Hughes, Dave Crosby & Elliott, Moira & Jim Watson, Allison & Colin Towner, Ellen & Bob Webster.

**We also ask you to pray for the members of the Finance Ministry Team:-** Chris Shelley, Christine Bainbridge, Robert Harding, Bob Webster.

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A Reflection on Launde Abbey Retreat

In June some of us experienced a time of mindfulness and prayerfulness at the beautiful location of Launde Abbey in Leicestershire. There was a lovely balance of silence and sharing coupled with the hard work of attempting to be in the present moment as we focused in on our senses. We all found some challenges quite difficult.

I was not alone in finding looking back over our lives with their joys and sorrows very difficult indeed. It can be hard to experience again the traumas and emotions of certain events and to realize a sense of deep loss. Life is precarious and dangers linger like dormant seeds waiting to sprout again. Exhausted after all this effort I fell asleep in the long silent session we had afterwards, and the poem printed earlier resulted immediately after.

Launde Abbey is in a wide basin of a valley surrounded by soft rolling hills. Undulating grassy slopes stretch up to the horizon on all sides. Individual trees, several of them dead, offer an oasis of shade for the sheep, and little dew ponds were home for a family of Egyptian geese. The overriding emotion I felt in this location was that of being cradled.

In our few days apart we could be free from world news, the distraction of television, emails and the phone (there was no reception). This freedom allowed other things to blossom so that we could touch base with a deep immediate reality. Yes it is possible to do this at other times, but sharing in this journey with others is invaluable. Thank you everyone who made this possible.

Christine

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## “Synod Calling”



What are your gifts?

How do you share them?

Sometimes we think our gifts are too humdrum to be much use to other people, but this is just not true.

Look again at these well-known verses from 1 Corinthians 12 in “The Message” version:

“You are Christ’s body—that’s who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your “part” mean anything. You’re familiar with some of the parts that God has formed in his church, which is his “body”: Apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, organizers, those who pray in tongues.”

We are all somewhere on that list! We just need to “accept our part”.

And then comes the question: where are we called to play that part – in our community, in our local church, in the wider church?

The work of Wessex Synod relies on the many volunteers who generously play their part and share their gifts.

At the moment, we are in need of;

- Someone with legal and accounting skills to serve as a Trustee.
- People willing to take minutes at some of our Committee meetings.
- People interested in social justice issues to serve our Church and Society group.

But the needs are constantly changing. Why not find out more about the work we do by looking at the Synod website <http://wessexsynodurc.org.uk/>

If there is an area of our work that interests you, **please contact Sue Brown to find out more:** [clerk@urcwessex.org.uk](mailto:clerk@urcwessex.org.uk) or 01329 232454.

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Wheatley United Reformed Church

Discernment Process for Choosing Elders

Introduction

The fundamental body by which we in the URC govern ourselves is the Church Meeting. All members of the church are entitled to attend and vote at Church Meeting. As was the case in the earliest days of the church, we choose some of our number to work on our behalf, ensuring worship is held regularly and properly, providing pastoral care to members of the church meeting and friends of the church, and taking care of the resources of the church (money, building and so on).

These people we call Elders and we believe their role is sufficiently important in the life of the church, to hold them in that esteem which we recognise by using a process of 'ordination'.

How we choose our Elders is important.

The process, which is designed to encourage all of us to take part, focuses on discernment and a sense of call.

The whole Church community has been challenged to consider whether they have the gifts, talents and skills to enable them to fulfil the role of Elder and all are encouraged and given time to take part in the discernment process.

JULY

- At their July meeting, Elders will then prayerfully consider the names of all those whose names have come forward, and will, with God's help, discern those who they feel are being called at this time.
- The list of names of those discerned to have a call will be brought to the July Church Meeting. During the months of July and August, each Elder will contact those in their pastoral group to ask them for any thoughts they may have. In this way the whole church will share in the prayerful discernment of our Elders over the summer.

SEPTEMBER

- At their September meeting, Elders will once again prayerfully reflect on the list of names. Elders will then indicate who they believe are

being called. In our experience, it will be clear at this time who these are. The Minister or Church Secretary will then speak to those (if any) who are discerned not to be called at this time.

- At the Annual Church Meeting in September members will be invited to consider the names of those whose call to Eldership has been discerned, and, after an opportunity for prayerful reflection, to approve them.

The serving Elders due to complete their current terms in September 2018, are, Ellen Webster and Ann Hardiman. In addition we are still trying to find a new secretary to replace Robert. We are very grateful for all that they have contributed during their time as elders.

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### **Ann Hardiman's Faith Journey**

“**Journey**” indicates movement and you will hear that I have moved quite a lot in my life, in terms of faith and in terms of places. My journey begins in, of all places, Swindon, where I was born, the eldest of 3, during the Battle of Britain. My mother was a shining example for us of caring for those in need or distress, often children. During the war my father was Directed Labour, which meant he had to go wherever he was needed – which happened to be re-building bridges which had been bombed.

I learnt how important love and togetherness were, as my parents bought a caravan and we travelled to wherever he was sent so that the family could always be together. So, we lived at various time in Coventry, Leamington Spa and Warwick, then Sandford, Kidlington and eventually Oxford at the end of the war. Oxford, because that's where the car gave up the ghost and we couldn't go any further. We landed up at the foot of Donnington Bridge still in the caravan. Donnington Bridge was actually a footbridge in those days. All the local children walked to Sunday School in James Street off the Cowley Road. It was an evangelical church which later became linked to the Granary church in Wheatley. I don't remember much about it but I do remember going to a similar church on Hayling Island where we were on holiday and I was simply petrified by the sermon – one of those “Fires of Hell” sermons and bad dreams followed.

In 1947 we moved to a flat in North Oxford and started going to St Michael and All Angels church, its church school and its Sunday School. I recall being given a stamp depicting Bible stories for attendance, but I also remember feeling very left out when the adults went up for Communion.

In 1951 I went to Oxford High School where the Assembly always included a Bible reading and I was bowled over by the passage from Philippians 4: *“Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”* And I did – and still do.

We moved to Cowley next and started going to another Church of England church, St Luke’s which is now the Oxfordshire Records Centre. Here was a real family church with prams down both side aisles and the vicar himself with 6 children. I was confirmed at 13 and started teaching in Sunday School at 16. We heard a lot about vocations and since I had wanted to be a teacher from a very early age, this was my next move. Of course, I chose an Anglican college, St Mary’s Cheltenham, where I joined the chapel choir and the Student Christian Movement.

A friend and I got our first teaching jobs in Dartford, Kent but I can’t say we enjoyed it much. Our school was on a new housing estate and we got digs living with 3 ladies who were strict Plymouth Brethren. The local church we attended ignored us. No-one spoke to us there, though being persistent, I continued going for nearly a year. We then tried a different church in Crayford where the vicar, a few weeks later, committed suicide. You may imagine how our faith was shaken.

But in the meantime I had met Fred at a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party in Hook Norton and I had other things to think about! I came back to Cowley and home and returned to St Luke’s church where we were married. Both our boys were baptised at St Luke’s and I joined the Young Wives Group and then the Mothers’ Union.

In 1967 we moved to Wheatley, mainly to give the boys more space to play, as we only had a very small back yard in our house in Jeune Street where we lived after we got married. Here, I naturally gravitated towards St Mary’s where the



Revd Brazier (Theresa May's father) was vicar, and worshipped there for more than 2 years.

You can tell by now that I had stuck firmly to the path laid out for me by my upbringing – an Anglican one, an accepting one, a non-questioning one; but I began to feel that something was lacking. A friend suggested I come here, to the Congregational Chapel, as it was then, and I'm so glad I did. Immediately I felt that I had come home, though, even then, it was 13 years before I took the step of becoming a member. I am quite a traditional person, so it came as a revelation to me that you could look at your faith in a different way, that it wasn't just following a set of rules, but being open to an all-encompassing God.

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CHURCH CALENDAR FOR JULY 2018

Everyone is invited to stay for coffee or tea after 10 am Sunday services

Date	1 st July	8 th July	15 th July	22 nd July	29 th July
Service	Morning Service with HC	Morning Service	Morning Service	Morning Service With HC	Morning Service
Time	10 am	10 am	10 am	10 am	
Worship Leader	Revd. Pauline Main	Kate Pryde	Peter Pay	Revd. Colin Thompson	Laurence Devlin worship leader John Fox preaching
Vestry Elder	Pauline Shelley	Ellen Bennet	Catherine Harding	Peter Devlin	Malcolm Benson
Welcomer	Peter Devlin	Ann Hardiman	Tom Goss	Pauline Shelley	Charles Bennett
Steward	Bob Webster	Liz Barry	Bobbie Stormont	Ann Hardiman	Liz Barry
Reader	Richard Wood	Charles Bennett	Ann Hardiman	Jean Boxall	John Kidd
Prayers	Ann Hardiman	Bobbie Stormont	Richard Wood	Liz Barry	Bob Webster
Flowers	Alison Towner	TBA	Ellen Webster	Ellen Webster	TBA

Elders' names in **Bold** are on Communion duty. Simple Sunday evening worship in the style of Taize will take place at Barns Close on Sunday July 22nd.

COMMON LECTIONARY READINGS

(leaders may use other readings.)

Date	1 st July	8 th July	15 th July	22 nd July	29 th July
First Reading	1 Samuel 3: 1-10.	2 Samuel 5: 1-5, 9-10.	2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19.	2 Samuel 7: 1-14a.	2 Samuel 11: 1-15.
Psalm	Psalm 130:	Psalm 48.	Psalm 24.	Psalm 89: 20-37.	Psalm 14.
New Testament	2 Corinthians 8: 7-15.	2 Corinthians 12: 2-10.	Ephesians 1: 3-14.	Ephesians 2: 11-22.	Ephesians 3: 14-21.
Gospel	Mark 5: 21-43.	Mark 6: 1-13.	Mark 6: 14-29.	Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56	John 6: 1-21.

Deadline for the September newsletter is **6pm on Wednesday 15th August**. Please send email copy to newsletter@wheatleyurc.org.uk Paper copy may be handed to Moira or Jim Watson.

***Disclaimer:** The editors of this newsletter welcome letters, articles and announcements from individuals and organisations but reserve the right to publish or not, and to edit.*

CHURCH CALENDAR FOR August 2018.

Everyone is invited to stay for coffee or tea after 10 am Sunday services.

Date	5 th August	12 th August	19 th August	26 th August
Service	Morning Service with HC	Morning Service	Morning Service with H.C.	Morning Service
Time	10 am	10 am	10 am	10 am
Worship Leader	Revd. Pauline Main	Richard Bainbridge	Revd. Colin Thompson	Stephen Thornton
Vestry Elder	Moira Watson	Tom Goss	Charles Bennett	Ann Hardiman
Welcomer	Ellen Webster	Malcolm Benson	Catherine Harding	Moira Watson
Steward	Sybil Beaton	Zena Knight	John Kidd	Barbara Joiner
Reader	Liz Barry	Sybil Beaton	Malcolm Benson	Laurence Devlin
Prayers	Barbara Joiner	Ellen Webster	Tom Goss	Christine Bainbridge
Flowers	Barbara Joiner	Phyllis Williams	Francis Simpson	Catherine Harding

Elders' names in **Bold** are on Communion duty. Simple Sunday evening worship in the style of Taize will take place at Barns Close on August 9th and 23rd.

COMMON LECTIONARY READINGS

(leaders may use other readings)

Date	5th August	12 th August	19 th August	26 th August
First Reading	2 Samuel 11: 26-12: 13a.	2 Samuel 18: 5-9,15,31-33.	1 Kings 2:10-12, 3: 3-14.	1 Kings 8: (1, 6,10-11) . 22-30,41-43.
Psalms	Psalm 51: 1-12.	Psalm 130.	Psalm 111.	Psalm 84.
New Testament	Ephesians 4: 1-16.	Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2.	Ephesians 5: 15-20.	Ephesians 6: 10-20.
Gospel	John 6: 24-35.	John 6: 35,41-51.	John 6: 51-58.	John 6: 56-69.

Deadline for the September newsletter is **6pm on Wednesday 15th August**
 Please send email copy to newsletter@wheatleyurc.org.uk Paper copy may be handed to Moira or Jim Watson.

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### **OCCASIONAL EVENTS IN JULY**

|                       |          |                                                  |                                                                                         |
|-----------------------|----------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> July  | Sunday   | 10.00am<br>11.30am<br>2.30-4.30pm<br>7.00-9.00pm | Foodbank<br>Church Meeting<br>Afternoon Tea in the hall<br>Pulse Group - Games URC Hall |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> July  | Monday   | 2.00-4.00pm                                      | Not So Young Club                                                                       |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> July  | Thursday | 10.00-12.00<br>7.15pm                            | Coffee in the hall church open<br>Elders Meeting                                        |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> July  | Sunday   | 7.00-9.00pm                                      | Family BBQ* 82 High Street                                                              |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> July | Tuesday  | 1.00pm                                           | Lunch Club 2                                                                            |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> July | Sunday   | 8.00am                                           | Meditation & Prayer Breakfast                                                           |
| 16 <sup>th</sup> July | Monday   | 2.00-4.00pm                                      | Not So Young Club                                                                       |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> July | Tuesday  | 1.00pm                                           | Lunch Club                                                                              |
| 22 <sup>nd</sup> July | Sunday   | 7.30pm                                           | Taizè 3 Barns Close                                                                     |
| 24 <sup>th</sup> July | Tuesday  | 2.00-4.00pm                                      | St. Mary's Guild meet in the URC hall                                                   |
| 30 <sup>th</sup> July | Monday   | 2.00-4.00pm                                      | Not So young Club                                                                       |

*\* All the family and next autumn's members welcome to BBQ*

For more details, contact Mark or Phyllis Williams on 01865 876288

### **OCCASIONAL EVENTS IN AUGUST 2018**

|                       |          |                                    |                                                                   |
|-----------------------|----------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Aug.  | Thursday | 10.00-12.00                        | Coffee in the hall church open                                    |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> Aug.  | Sunday   | 10.00am<br>12.30pm<br>2.30 -4.30pm | Foodbank<br>Shared lunch in the hall<br>Afternoon Tea in the hall |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> Aug. | Monday   | 2.00-4.00pm                        | Not So Young Club                                                 |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> Aug. | Tuesday  | 1.00pm                             | Lunch Club 2                                                      |
| 19 <sup>th</sup> Aug. | Sunday   | 8.00am                             | Meditation & Prayer Breakfast                                     |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> Aug. | Tuesday  | 1.00pm                             | Lunch Club                                                        |
| 28 <sup>th</sup> Aug. | Tuesday  | 2.00-4.00pm                        | St. Mary's Guild in the URC hall.                                 |

## WEEKLY EVENTS

(NB Youth activities, Choir around the Piano and Wheatley Singers are term-time only)

|                                            |                                      |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Brownies &amp; Rainbows (Term time)</i> | <i>Monday 5.30pm to 7pm</i>          |
| <i>Choir Around the Piano (Term Time)</i>  | <i>Monday 7.30pm to 9 pm</i>         |
| <i>Wheatley Singers (Term Time)</i>        | <i>Tuesday 7.10pm to 9pm</i>         |
| <i>Pre-School Music Group (Term time)</i>  | <i>Wednesday 9.30am and 10.30 am</i> |
| <i>Guides (Term time)</i>                  | <i>Wednesday 7pm to 8.30pm</i>       |
| <i>Prayers and Breakfast</i>               | <i>Thursday 8.00am</i>               |
| <i>Mindfulness Sitting Group</i>           | <i>Thursday 8.50am to 9.40am</i>     |
| <i>Table Tennis</i>                        | <i>Friday 10.00 – 12.00 Noon.</i>    |
| <i>Hymn Practice</i>                       | <i>Sunday 9.30-9.45am</i>            |

### Sunday Dates for your Diary

**5<sup>th</sup> August**      Shared lunch after morning worship

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Flower Rota Allison Towner

I am now making a list of those who have offered to provide flowers for the church on a Sunday in the next year starting in August. We would be very pleased to have more volunteers. Someone will always help if required, and a special date can usually be made available if requested. Please contact me if you are interested to join us.

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### Results for Christian Aid Week

"Thanks to all who helped to run the new style Christian Aid Week in Wheatley and Holton, this year. The Royal Wedding, All Day Tea Party Event at The Merry Bells proved to be both enjoyable and profitable, enhanced by the heatwave weather, with a good number of visitors and helpers around during the morning and early afternoon.

Some 68 Christian Aid envelopes were returned during the day and a further £142 was received in cash donations. The total number of envelopes returned during the week itself and over the following week (including 17 from the Primary School), was 155, contributing to a **grand total of £2,371.83**. Almost half of that total was gift aided, which should produce a further £293 for

Christian Aid. So many thanks on behalf of all those who benefit worldwide from the work of Christian Aid, to all of you who gave so generously of your time and money to enable that essential work to continue."

Liz and Tony Barry, Angela and John Morrison, Chris and Pauline Shelley  
Sue and Mike McIlvenna, Jennifer Newton and Doris Pridmore

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Refugees

They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way

(now read from bottom to top)

Brian Bilston

CHURCH FETE RESULTS 2018

Net takings/donations from the stalls/games etc;

Gate	£181.80	Refreshments	£370.45
Ice Cream	£57.90	Kitchen Provisions	£280.00
Raffle	£149.00	Quoits	£15.20
Tombola	£120.00	Books	£48.55
Aunt Sally	£35.20	Hoopla	£39.28
Putting	£27.08	Plants	£260.00
Not So Young Club (Donation)			£20.00
			£1,604.46

For the Cogwheel Fund:

Cogwheel Stall	£231.00
Maureen Stayte's stall	£107.60
Grand Total	£1,943.06

Many thanks go to everyone involved with the Fete for this excellent result; the organisation, preparation and the manning of the stalls and games etc. on the day.

Chris Shelley

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## Bi-blog by Laurence Devlin

Last month, we had a look at the context in which the episode of Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11: 29-39) is to be found, i.e. in the strange Book of Judges when "*the sons of Israel did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD*" (Judg. 2:11 + 3:7 + 6:1 + 13:1). We also examined the vexed question of whether Jephthah *knowingly* put the life of his child in the balance to get what he wants. Before trying to understand the meaning of the whole episode, let's turn briefly our attention then, to the innocent victim, Jephthah's child, as there are puzzling questions worth looking at, that however, we won't necessarily be able to understand and resolve!

**First**, the girl is never named. In the ancient world and in the Bible, names communicated something about a person's character and carried much meaning with it. Anonymity therefore often meant lack of status and powerlessness. A lot of women in the Bible are not named: Lot's wife, Potiphar's wife, the Levite's concubine, the Witch of Endor, the women of Tekoa, to name but a few but there are many more. A lot of them do have power and influence but *they are not remembered for whom they were, but*

*only for what they did.* Same thing for Jephthah's daughter: she is not a person in her own right but only a daughter.

**Secondly**, why on earth, having secured a two-month stay of execution, does she come back of her own accord, only to be killed? Why doesn't she try to escape her fate and flee her father's execution? This is puzzling to a modern mind and according to the Feminist scholar, Esther Fuchs, the girl "is responsible for her own death as much as her father, if not more because to some extent she actively participates in the process leading to her own demise<sup>1</sup>." This is a harsh judgment as what choice does she have? The girl is young and inexperienced, has no family or mother to turn to and nowhere to run to safety. In fact she might epitomize what modern sociologists called "internalized oppression" (a process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to appropriate and live out the inaccurate stereotypes and behaviours applied to the group). This is still a very common feature in women living in authoritarian and patriarchal societies: You deserve the bad treatment you are getting because you are worth nothing. As her only identity is through her father, the girl "represents the perfect daughter whose loyalty and submissiveness knows no limits" adds Esther Fuchs. But is it really the case? Is she totally submissive or is her acceptance saying something important in moral terms? According to Donna Fewell, by accepting her fate she "passes judgment on her father's willingness to bargain for glory with the life of another human being. Perhaps her action condemns his priorities and probably those of all Israel<sup>2</sup>."

**A third question** remains however: what does she actually do during the only time she is free of her father's power, the two months when she "roams the hills and bewails her virginity" with her friends? Furthermore, why should she worry about *dying as a virgin* more than dying itself? There is a growing recognition among biblical scholars, that the Hebrew word "betula" translated by virginity does not in fact mean virginity but rather designates an age group, somewhat akin to the term "adolescent". That word is used in other passages, such as in Genesis 24:16 for example, to describe Rebekah "a

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Fuchs, *Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's daughter*, in *Biblical Daughters and the Biblical Narrative*, (Paper delivered at the S.B.L. Annual meeting, Chicago, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> Donna Fewell, *Commentary on Judges*, in *"The women's Bible Commentary*, (Westminster, John Knox press, 1992)



very attractive girl, a “betula” whom no man had known” If betula meant virgin, why would the narrator add the sentence “whom no man had known”? It could be then that Jephthah’s daughter is a girl aged 15 or 16 who has therefore reached puberty and is potentially fertile but is not yet married. So, when she is sacrificed by her father, it is her status as a betula, i.e. young unmarried woman and not her virginity that is the focus of attention when she and her companions go off to the hills. If it is the case, then her lament is a “ritual lament, a rite of passage lament which acknowledges the death of one stage of life in preparation for entry into a new stage<sup>3</sup>”. Still nowadays, in some cultures, young females of the tribe must spend several weeks together in isolation from their village and go through various secret rituals before they can be recognised as fully-fledged women and be given in marriage. What Jephthah’s daughter might be doing in the hills, is submitting to these rites of passage during the prescribed two months and hoping...

We now come to the last and most awkward question of all, which has exercised commentators for centuries, i.e. why did God not intervene to release Jephthah of his vow, the same way he stopped Abraham? Most people don’t notice the sentence that starts the whole episode, “*then the spirit of Yahweh came upon Jephthah*”? But we should because it is that sentence which is the key to understanding God’s silence: Endowed with God’s spirit, Jephthah should go into battle with conviction and courage, without hesitation or another thought in his mind. Instead, he bargains and beseeches God directly with pressuring language. The Hebrew words are very strong and should be translated as “If you *really* give me victory over the Ammonites... *then* I will sacrifice the comer-forth who will come forth” (literally!). The identity of that “comer-forth” remains ambiguous but what the vow tells us about Jephthah is not: It demonstrates that Jephthah *does not trust Yahweh* and instead tries to bargain. In a way he tests God like another Judge, Gideon. Also, crucially, contrary to what God specifically asked Abraham, *God does not ask anything from Jephthah*. It is Jephthah’s unfortunate initiative which reveals his ambition and it is his profoundly flawed character which does the irredeemable damage. As Phyllis Trible points out in her famous book “Texts of Terror”: “In linking his private life with a public crisis, Jephthah has spoken on his own, for neither Yahweh nor the people of Gilead require the vow... The making of the vow is an *act of*

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<sup>3</sup> Peggy Day, “From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter” in “Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel” (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989)

*unfaithfulness as Jephthah desires to bind God rather than embrace the gift of the spirit. What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. The meaning of his words is doubt not faith, it is control, not courage. To such a vow, the deity makes no reply.*<sup>4</sup>

Jonathan Kirsch goes even further and wonders whether “God is testing Jephthah, by granting him victory in battle and then waiting to see if the father *as a private person*, is really willing to slay his only child in defiance of the words attributed to the Almighty by his own prophets<sup>5</sup>” (i.e. the ban on child sacrifice). The fact that the episode is framed by Jephthah’s two military successes would tend to prove Jonathan Kirsch right: through that switch from public victory to personal defeat, it links Jephthah’s character flaw and lack of honour with the general moral turpitude of Israel’s leaders during that period when “*there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes.*” Jephthah’s fatal mistake shows that he is not morally fit to be a leader, like many other so called “heroes” we encounter in the Book of Judges. And as Danna Fewell also points out, “the death of a daughter, the silence of God and the absence of the people” (*in contrast to what happens in 1 Samuel 14 when the people do not allow Saul to sacrifice his son Jonathan*) “are but signs of something rotten with the children of Israel.”<sup>6</sup> On the surface therefore that story which seems to be about religious integrity (showing a man who would spare nothing to honour a vow he has made to Yahweh) is in fact about the moral decadence of the whole nation. For the authors, only a proper monarchy can put an end to that decadence, a wish that will pitifully fail to come true!

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⁴ Phyllis Trible, “*The daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman sacrifice*” in “*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*” (SCM Press, 1984)

⁵ Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road*, (Rider, London, 1997)

You're never too old to be used by God! - from our friends in Wheatley Community Church

Jill & I were fortunate enough to spend a fascinating 3 weeks in South Africa in March, visiting John & Nona Baker, who have been based in Pretoria for almost 3 years now, working with the international Christian mission organisation Operation Mobilisation (OM <https://www.om.org/en/country-profile/south-africa>)

John & Nona have two roles supporting the mission teams there; overseeing pastoral care, mentoring and personal support for the office team and running, Bethany, a guest house for anyone seeking accommodation, rest, relaxation and renewal. Many of their guests work with or for OM, but not all. Together, their varied skills, experience and personal qualities have enabled them to create the most welcoming, relaxed and restoring family environment at their guest house, where God's renewing power is very tangible.

One of the mission teams that John & Nona work particularly closely with is based in a nearby, large and sprawling township called Mamelodi. OM refer to the project as AIDS Hope but locally it's known as 'Meetse a Bophelo' which means "fountain of life". Many vulnerable children and adults find new hope here through four very practical ministries - for children, teenagers, drug addicts and their families and an AIDS and Community ministry.

We were fortunate to spend a day in Mamelodi. It was a very moving experience and we were both hugely impressed by the commitment, gifts and vision of the team and the real, tangible impact they are having on the community and on individuals whose lives have been changed through their work and the restoring power of Jesus.

Starting out on such a new and different journey at their stage of life, as John and Nona have done, might be seen as foolhardy by some but God is definitely blessing them and many others through their gifts and ministry in South Africa. Please do just ask if you'd like more information – there's plenty more to tell!
Gordon & Jill Ewbank 07887 632471 Gordon.ewbank@gmail.com

John and Nona Baker lived in Wheatley for many years and are well known to many in Wheatley URC.

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