

HIDDEN RIVER CIRCUIT DEVOTIONAL ARTICLES

Edition 22: JUNE 2026

Welcome to the June edition of Circuit reflections, to celebrate the Good News of the Holy Spirit, as Friend, Guide, Comforter, Helper, Giver of Good gifts, always wanting to be involved in our lives.

Take your Bible and ponder on the stories and the words in the passages.

Take your hymn book and sing to the God who made us and can do amazing things.

Take your time and wait for God to speak to you and bless you.

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WEEK 1: 7th June “Love your neighbour as yourself”

Scripture: Genesis 12.1-9 , Leviticus 19.34, Luke 10. 25-37

Today's story in Genesis Chapter 12 is of the request of God to Abram to leave his country - at the age of 75 !! - and start afresh elsewhere. In fact, much of the Old Testament is about people moving and migrating, and living either under slavery, roaming in the desert, in exile and having to challenge the norms of another country (Daniel), fighting giants of another nation (David), leaving your home to go with your mother in law (Ruth), sitting by the rivers of Babylon and wondering how to keep up your faith and your singing.... There are many more examples, starting with the deportation of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The New Testament similarly talks of Jews and Gentiles – otherwise described as the stranger or the foreigner – and moves on to spreading the Gospel in the Roman and Greek worlds of the time. Revelation reminds us that the vision of the end of times is a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne of God, worshipping Him.

The Bible is full of people living in countries not their own. Leviticus 19.34 states instructions from God – “Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Love the foreigner living in your midst as you love yourself, and treat them as one who was born here. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

Immigration is a big subject in the UK at present, with a polarisation of opinions coming to the forefront. So we do well to remember the origins of our island country – we all have been foreigners here at some point – with the pain of not belonging, of loss, of struggle to know whether to fit in with the world's values, or stick to what we know is true.

Our current phase of immigration stems from after the second world war, the Windrush generation, when we requested help to build up our NHS and transport systems. There are many sad and depressing stories of how the Christians who took us up on our invitation were not welcomed here, despite their sacrifice in coming here, leaving their friends and families and culture behind. Study from Pew Research states that 57% of immigrants now coming into our country are Christian, and we are at risk of also not welcoming them. The UK is now no longer a majority Christian country, and we would be even less of a Christian country without these incomers.

Jesus tells the well known story of the Good Samaritan, one of our favourite stories. To the question of “Who is my neighbour? (that I should love as I love myself?)” from a clever expert in Jewish Law, the answer was - the one who helped the beaten up unfortunate man. This man was a foreigner, a Samaritan, one of the most hated categories of people the Jews had created.

In other words, we need to be ready to receive help from unexpected quarters. We need to recognise the gifts that others bring. We need to create space for them to share their gifts, and to listen to their stories, of life and faith.

We like to think of Christianity as a western religion yet for many years it grew in the Middle East, spreading out after Jesus' death to North Africa through Mark – producing great theologians there such as Clement of Alexandria, St Augustine, Tertullian and many other giants upon whose shoulders we stand. Thomas took Christianity to Iran and India. In the 6th and 7th centuries the Bishop of Rome, Gregory the Great commenced a mission to convert the Barbarians of Anglo Saxon Britain, and at the same time Christianity reached China. 100 years ago 80% of Christians were in Western Countries, now 2/3rds are in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The gospel has surely gone throughout the world as Jesus requested in Matthew chapter 28v 19. We have become a global church, with a diverse way of worshipping God, of living life in His Way. Just as we offer a cup of tea to those who visit us, tea that comes from China or India, let us rejoice in all that we have received from others, and share the Good News of Jesus. Let us make sure we are always ready to receive the gifts of others, to be humble in knowing that our way is not always the only Way, that our ways have not always brought fruits of the Spirit to the church or to the world.

I am excited to be watching a production of the life of Jesus, called The Chosen, available freely to watch on TV (there is a chosen station) and on line. It has been so lovely to see the likely way Jesus' followers came to be his disciples, and the society that they lived in. The oppression of the Jews by the Romans meant that collaborators such as Matthew the tax collector was seen as someone beyond the pale, someone the other disciples would not want to hang around with at all, or even to be seen speaking to them. And for an academic to work alongside rough fishermen was also difficult. Some knew a lot about the Jewish faith, and some knew nothing, despite being Jews. It really was so hard for the disciples to learn to bond together to live and eat and work together, even right from the beginning. They didn't like each other, yet Jesus brought them together and expected them to learn from him. Jesus would work hard all day healing people, speaking to them, hearing their stories, having his power drawn out from him, meanwhile his disciples were bickering and being mean to each other..... it makes you feel how Jesus' heart is broken every time we behave in a less than kind way.

Let's be kind to everyone! Thoughtful about what others are going through, where they have come from, what they have learned of God and life, and together we will truly be living the Kingdom of God. Just as Abram received everything God promised him, so we too will be blessed beyond measure, by walking in God's way of living.

Prayer: Lord help us to recognise who our neighbour is, to appreciate what they need from us, and to love them as we love ourselves. Amen.

STF 691 Let's take to heart this hymn by Fred Pratt Green

1. What shall our greeting be
Sign of our unity?

May we no more defend,
Barriers he died to end:
Give me your hand my friend –

One church! One Lord!

2. What is our mission here?
He makes his purpose clear:

One world One Lord!

Spirit of Truth descend;

All our confusions end

Give me your hand my friend – Jesus is Lord!

3. He comes to save us now:
to serve him is to know

Life's true reward.

May he our lives amend

All our betrayals end;

Give me your hand, my friend –

Jesus in Lord!

WEEK 2. JUNE 14th 2026 Master Speak! Your servant heareth!

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3. 1-21

They say God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason – we should listen twice as much as we speak. How are we doing with this do you think?!

Our recent Circuit Service took the theme of Listening to God, with our reading focussed on the boy Samuel who was sleeping and felt that Eli kept calling him in the night, when it was actually God calling him. God called an 8 year old boy!! Do we ever listen to 8 year old children as if they have something to teach us? Do we believe that God speaks through young people? In fact, do we believe that God actually speaks to us?

In the opening verses to this chapter, it states – “this was at a time when the revelation of God was rarely heard or seen”. Is this what we believe of our world today, or are we overawed by the amount that we hear and see of God's hand working in the world?

When I lived in Rotherham, and worked at the local hospital, I met a young 18 year old girl from the Congo, who was all alone and having a baby. She seemed to have no family to help her through this hard time, so I kept an eye on her, and visited her after her caesarean section, as she lived at the bottom of my road. Her wound had split open so she was in pain, and as it healed and we spent more time together, we became friends. She said she was a Christian, so I invited her to church, and for the last 21 years she has been a regular attender at the church, always there to help with events, make coffee, wash up and bringing her daughter Qetia with her. Throughout her time there she has always brought many people to the church, knowing they would be welcomed and find a place there.

Recently I was invited to preach at this church, and as I was thinking about what message to share, Qetia, now 21, texted me to say hello. I said I was coming to Clifton and would she like to help me in the service? She agreed, and I asked what part of the service she would like to do? Jokingly I said she could do the sermon if she liked. She replied to say that she had never preached before, but she would like to try. She was truly brilliant – she had prepared well, spoke off the cuff, she obviously knew her

Bible inside out, she gave her testimony, she made people laugh and she moved them to tears. She said she had always been a Christian, but at 16 she had had an experience that had made her fully and deeply committed to Christ, and she had applied herself to reading the Bible and studying it in depth since then. She said God had given her a prophecy of her preaching to thousands of people! So the 40 or so in Clifton church was surely a start. It was surely affirming that God is so obviously at work in our world, and with young people today. I for one am overawed by all that God is doing in the world today. Despite the bad news, the evidence to the contrary, God continues to reveal himself to those who apply themselves to listen to his voice.

There are many voices we can listen to in the world. We can fill our days with sound or even busy silence - the radio, TV, phone conversations, chatting, we can meet up with friends and spend more time talking than listening. Even when we pray we can be so busy asking for help, or world peace, or healing for others, that we don't listen. Isn't it a bit impolite to just be asking God for things without letting him have a part in the conversations? Especially God who actually knows everything that is in our hearts already? Is he sad because we are always asking rather than sitting at his feet and hearing him?

God is not a pushy God. He doesn't generally shout. He waits patiently for us to listen to him. To focus, to get rid of our distractions, to really listen. To listen we need to put ourselves in the right place, to be open to hearing, to expect to hear something. And to stop asking. In listening to the prayers we tend to pray in church, I have realised that often we ask for specific things as if we know the solution and can see the whole picture, but "Thy Will be done" is a much better prayer and allows us to place our problems and concerns with God, without assuming we know the answer.

Let's take time everyday to listen. To young people. To really hear them and listen to what they are saying without brushing them off. To others who might be waiting for a kind and listening ear. To God who may want to offer us words of reassurance – do not be afraid! You are never alone! All will be well! – or challenge – listen more! Trust in me! Look for the lost and outcast, Feed the hungry.

Prayer: Lord, help us to listen to your words. To make time and space for you. To spend time waiting by your side.

And help us to listen to others we meet and speak to, caring for them with our words. Amen

666 Master Speak thy Servant heareth is a good hymn but we have used that recently, so let's consider **STF 161**, perhaps a new hymn (Psalm 96 encourages us to sing a new song unto the Lord!) by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty.

1. Speak, O Lord as we come to you
To receive the food of your Holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us,
Shape and fashion us in your likeness;
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak O Lord, and fulfil in us
All your purposes, for your glory.

2. Teach us, Lord full obedience
Holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
Let their truth prevail over unbelief.

3. Speak O Lord and renew our minds,
Help us grasp the height of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
And by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak O Lord, till your church is built
And your earth is filled with your glory.

Week 3 JUNE 21st A time to give and a time to receive

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3. 1-22

As we all get older, we maybe become more and more concerned about how our lives are going to end, who will look after us, how we will cope with a gradual reduction of our faculties. Most of us hate the thought of being dependent on others, for our daily care. Yet it will surely come to the majority of us, to accept the care of others, as we find it increasingly difficult to manage independently.

The time of giving care changes to a time of receiving care.

The writer of Ecclesiastes states it poetically and helpfully: God sets a time for birth and the time for death, for planting and for pulling up, the time for sorrow and the time for joy, the time for mourning and for dancing. As we go through life, there are different times for opposing activities and feelings. I find this helpful, as in the world there are people going through horrible times, and others enjoying peace and stability. We need to appreciate the good times, when we have them, and be accepting of the bad, for every life will not feel good all the time. We can be content in every circumstance by being philosophical and accepting that life and circumstances are always changing.

Paul, in Acts 20 verse 35 says that "It is necessary to work hard to help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said that "there is more happiness in giving than receiving.""

But there is a time for giving and a time for receiving.

Giving too much can spoil children, and create people who feel they are entitled to everything.

Giving can create dependence and stunting growth. Giving can be patronising – we might think "only I have something to give, but you have nothing we would want to receive from you." Giving on a global scale creates aid dependency, and a sense of inferiority. There is a great joy in giving and offering of what you can, however small and insignificant. It gives us a sense of worth and self esteem. So shouldn't we allow others to feel like this? By not allowing people to give to us, we are preventing them from enjoying the gift of giving. In India, where I have been living, people are very generous in their offering of meals, as they love food, and want to share their tasty creations. When I left, they wanted to know if I had finished buying saris for all my female relatives here in the UK, and they gave me many beautiful saris, with stunning colours and patterns. I used to use a local seamstress to make my sari blouses, or to do any mending or alterations I had. She had started her own little business, and charged tiny amounts (to me - £3 to make a blouse?!) that I never understood how she could live on it,

and get her son through all his education as she was trying to do. And yet, when I left, she gave me a beautiful soft scarf, worth more than I ever gave her in work. She was so pleased to be able to give me something, It was humbling and lovely to see.

A time to give and a time to receive!

Blessed are those who give, and those who allow others to give and be blessed!

A Danish friend I met recently on Iona told me a story of him taking his grandsons to a theme park in Denmark. They enjoyed every minute, and on the second day were having lunch in the theme park restaurant. A lovely waitress originally from Namibia, where Germany had colonies, served them with a pleasant demeanour and they got talking in English. The 13 year old grandson, August, asked her if she loved her job. She believes loving your job is a must for her in order for her to give the visitors a really good experience of coming to the park. August wants to give her a tip out of his own money because she has been so lovely. Jorgen goes to pay the bill, and there are 3 Namibian girls there all smiling at him. Jorgen pays the bill, with August's tip, and then they ask if they will be coming back within the year? Jorgen says no, it is an expensive thing to do, and more than once a year would make the children spoilt. So the girls say – as part of our salary, we can invite one person each to one day free in the park, and we all would like to offer you our free passes. Jorgen and his family were stunned, and felt so grateful.

He summed up the experience by saying, **“we all have the right to a life that makes it possible for us to experience the joy of giving.”** Which I think its pretty profound.

We often feel we have the gifts and wealth and expertise and capability to give to others, but it is humbling and important to believe that we can receive from others. It enables us to see others in a better light, that they can offer things to us.

Let's allow people to give. Let's regard them as people with something to offer. Let's find something in everyone that we can receive and learn from. Let's receive in gratitude and humility. Let's be aware that there is a the time to give and the time to receive. Let's take some time to reflect on all we receive from others, and be grateful.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to receive the gifts of others, to discern the right time for grateful giving and graceful receiving. Teach us that you have given gifts to all people, not just us. Help us to see your hand in all the gifts we receive from others, your answers to prayer in the life of others. Amen.

STF 619 by Gary Hopkins speaks of our friends who help us along the way of life which can be so hard at times.

1. Thanks for friends who keep on loving
Finding ways to help us grow
Celebrating our achievements,
sharing in our pain and woe.
God is glimpsed where love is faithful:
mirrored here in time and space.
Thanks to God for friends who love us:
Christ revealed in every face.

2. Other people help to shape us
When they take the time to share
Words of wisdom, honest actions
Through our journey in God's care.
In our faithful, honest learning
We discover things unknown,
Thanks to God for friends who teach us;
Seeking talent yet ungrown.

3. When we find our friendships
challenged
Through mistakes and different views,
We discover deeper living
As the love of God renews.
For in Christ we see forgiveness
Know a strength still to embrace.
Thanks to God for friends who keep us:
Making real the gift of grace.

4. Praise to God for this great gifting
Of relationship and friend:
Imaging divine relating:
Found in heaven with no end.
Bless us Maker, Word and spirit,
as companions on the way.
Thanks to God for friends who help us
To fulfil our lives each day.

WEEK 4. JUNE 28th 2026 Promises, Patience and Pain

Scripture: Genesis 16. 1-16, Genesis 18. 1-15 Genesis 21. 1-21

Today we continue to reflect on the story of Abram in Genesis. Abram had been asked to leave his home place in Week 1 of our devotions, Genesis chapter 12, now he is settled in his new place Canaan and we are at Genesis chapter 16. God has not fulfilled the promise of his many descendants. He is now 85 and his wife decides not to wait for God's promises to be fulfilled (how impatient we all are!) She suggests Abram sleeps with Hagar, their slave girl - maybe this is how God will fulfil the promise he made over 10 years previously? Maybe this is the solution God has been waiting for? But Hagar is someone who has no choice, power, or control over her own life. She gets pregnant and has a child becoming proud - she looks down on Sarai who still has no children, and tensions in the family run high. Hagar in return is treated so cruelly by Sarai, with Abram's condoning the cruelty, that Hagar runs away into the desert (there is nowhere else to go - she is between a rock and a hard place). However, God asks her to go back to her home, her difficult situation. She is in awe that God actually spoke to her to give her a message, through an angel she met at a well. Let's hope that her encounter with God brought her to a place where both Hagar and Sarai could live together amicably in peace.

We move to Genesis chapter 18 - the story of three visitors passing through the desert, and being welcomed in to Abram and Sarai's tent. Abram and Sarai offer them great hospitality to them, even though they were strangers and they didn't know who they were. The ancient code of the desert meant that strangers were always welcomed. This story is probably the origin of the phrase in Hebrews 13.1 where we are commended to "offer hospitality to strangers, because some have entertained angels unaware". Our generosity of hospitality is never wasted as Abram and Sarai receive the long awaited knowledge of the timing of God's promise. After feasting, the strangers said that Sarai would finally get pregnant, which Sarai naturally found very amusing as she was well past child bearing age.

But, if we wait long enough, God's time happens, and his promises come true. In Genesis Chapter 21 we hear that Sarai bore a child well into her old age, and I am sure she had many more times of laughter and delight with her longed for son Isaac. But being human, and selfish, she didn't want to share her huge wealth with the slave girl Hagar's son Ishmael. Sarah is worried about inheritance, status, future and security. Those are recognisable fears. They are fears people still live with now - the fear that there will not be enough, that someone else's presence threatens our place, that our safety depends on drawing a harder line around who belongs and who doesn't. Fear like that can make us justify things we would once have thought unthinkable.

That is why this story feels so painfully current. We still live in a world where vulnerable people are sent away for the sake of someone else's comfort or security. We still live in a world where children are caught in adult conflict, where displaced people are treated as problems to be managed, where survival can depend on whether anyone is willing to hear a cry from someone in the wilderness.

Even though they were thrown out into the desert (nothing had changed) with insufficient means of sustenance, Hagar and Ishamel survive and do receive the promise of God to have a long line of descendants too – in Genesis 25 Ishamel is said to have twelve sons who became “princes according to their tribes.” And so the population of many nations in the Middle East can be traced back to Abram, continuing to this day. Jewish tradition traces descent from Isaac, while Mohammed is traditionally understood by Arab Muslims to descend from Ishmael through the tribe of Quraysh. The long history of division between Israel and Palestine begins, as many Arab Palestinians, see themselves spiritually or ancestrally linked to Ishmael. (Though the ancient Philistines, from whom the word Palestine ultimately derives – were a different people entirely from the Israelites and the Ishmaelites.)

At the heart of the passage, Hagar has reached the point where she cannot see a way forward. The child is crying. Death feels close. And in that place – beyond family protection, beyond human fairness, beyond easy answers – God hears their cries.

God does not only hear the powerful, the settled, the socially approved. God hears the cry from outside the camp. God hears those who have been treated as disposable. God hears those whose suffering is inconvenient to other people's plans.

And then the text says that God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water.

The well does not seem to appear by magic. It sounds like it was there already. But grief and exhaustion can make the world feel so narrow that we cannot see what might keep us going. Hagar does not need a lecture. She does not need blame. She needs water. She needs the chance of tomorrow. She needs enough hope for the next step.

There is something deeply tender here. God's response is not abstract. It is not a slogan.

It is not, “Everything happens for a reason.” It is water in the wilderness. It is survival. It is accompaniment. It is the reminder that the cast-out are not forgotten.

As disciples of Jesus, we need to ask ourselves honestly – who are we pushing away? Who are we welcoming and sustaining? How can we listen to voices in the wilderness, and help them see the well of life-giving water in front of them? Who gets pushed out so that others can feel secure? Who is treated as an inconvenience, a threat, an embarrassment, or an afterthought? Whose survival is left to charity rather than justice? Who is expected to carry exclusion quietly so that more comfortable people do not have to change?

These are not abstract questions. They are about migrants and refugees. They are about poor families. They are about people made unwelcome in churches because of who they are. They are about those whose lives are not like ours. They are about anyone who has sat down in the dust in despair and wondered whether anyone sees or cares. Jesus tells us that “ even the hairs on

our head are counted". It's a way of saying: you matter, even when things feel uncertain or difficult or you feel small. We do matter to Jesus. All people matter to Jesus.

Prayer: Thankyou for hearing the cry of the outcast and downtrodden, help us to hear it too.

Help us to believe in your life giving water that we may offer it to others in the desert of life.

Thankyou that you hear us in our distress, and accept our heart felt gratitude for all the ways we receive help.

Amen.

The beautiful hymn by Horatius Bonar comes to mind, with its change from sombre minor key to cheerful major key, lifting our spirits from being downcast to knowing where we can find hope and sustenance.

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1. I heard the voice of Jesus say
"Come unto me and rest

Lay down, O weary one, lay down,

Your head upon my breast."

I came to Jesus as I was

Weary and worn and sad,

I found in him my resting place,

And he has made me glad.

2. I heard the voice of Jesus say:
Behold I freely give

The living water, thirsty one,

Stoop down and drink and live."

I came to Jesus and I drank

Of that life giving stream;

My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,

And now I live in him.

3. I heard the voice of Jesus say:
"I am this dark world's light;

Look unto me, your morn shall rise,

And all your day be bright."

I looked to Jesus and I found

In him, my star my sun;

And in that light of life I'll walk,

till travelling days are done.

