

Speaking to all conditions

Robert Jeffery pays tribute to a classic

SAMUEL JOHNSON said of *The Imitation of Christ*: "It must be a good book, as the whole world has opened its arms to it."

What is it about the book that has made it so attractive over nearly five centuries? Allowing for its 15th-century assumptions, it has a deep understanding of human nature and what it means to be a Christian.

It reveals a faith that has a deep sense of devotion and priorities for living. It understands the costliness of faith, and inspires those with a pioneering spirit who do not take easily to institutional religion. It is a good read for today.

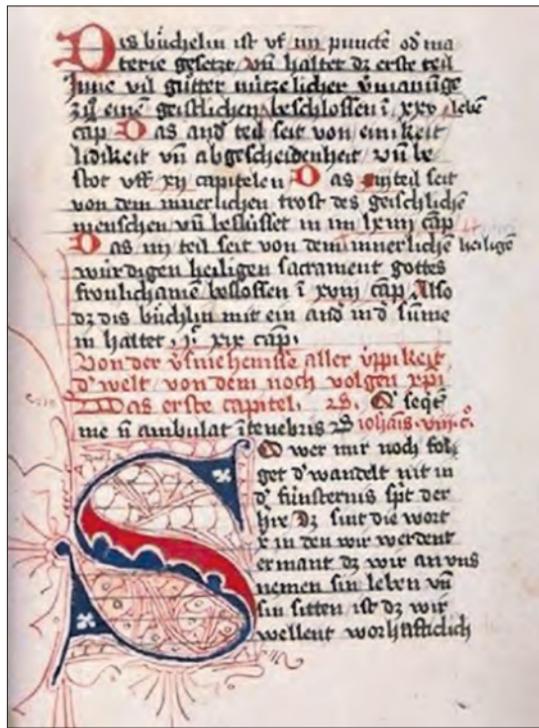
The book was originally four separate volumes, and was completed by 1427. It has never been out of print since its first printing at Augsburg in 1471. Its author, Thomas à Kempis (1379-1471), an Augustinian canon, was a member of a movement in the Low Countries known as "the Modern Devotion", which called mainly lay people into serious discipleship.

Soon after it was written, it was circulated in England by the Carthusians. The English translation made by Richard Whytford (1478-1542) became very popular, and by 1860 had been through 446 editions. There have been many other English translations, as well as those into other languages, including Hebrew.

The influence of the book over the centuries has been vast. Luther, Calvin, and St Ignatius Loyola all came under its sway. We see its influence in many Jesuit writers, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Teilhard de Chardin.

In the 17th century, Jeremy Taylor wrote his own version, *The Great Exemplar*. William Laud was another devotee, and we find John Wesley deeply influenced by it. He required every Methodist home to have copy.

It was popular among Evangelicals and Catholics, and some trans-



Guide: a page from *The Imitation of Christ*

lators gave the text various slants to suit their own presuppositions. The Evangelical preacher John Newton was converted when he came across a copy. Many great Victorian figures read it, including General Gordon and William Gladstone. It became a frequent confirmation gift, although the pseudo-Jacobean language of some translations was not helpful. George Eliot wrote powerfully about it in *The Mill on the Floss*.

Among the Tractarians, we find its being read aloud in religious communities, as well as by individuals. In 1890, Henry Parry Liddon published a translation in blank verse. St Thérèse of Lisieux described it as "Dear *Imitation*", and wrote that "Nothing would part me from my little book." Pope John XXIII read it every year in retreat.

In India, Gandhi valued it, and the Hindu philosopher Vivekananda (1863-1902) translated chapters into Bengali. Three great Irish writers — Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and James Joyce — acknowledged

its influence. Billy Graham encouraged his converts to read it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* is his version. He left his own Latin edition to Bishop Bell, and in a letter commented: "In *The Imitation of Christ*, I read 'Take good care of your cell and it will take good care of you.'"

The latest reference I have found is in the *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (2001).

It is 60 years since Penguin Classics published its last new edition. I was honoured to provide what I hope is a 21st-century text that is faithful to the original. This book has done more than almost any other to encourage Christians to be faithful — and that was its original intention.

The Very Revd Robert Jeffery is Dean Emeritus of Worcester Cathedral.

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis, newly translated by Robert Jeffery, is published by Penguin Classics at £9.99 (CT Bookshop £9); 978-0-14-119176-8.

Life is a voyage, and this prayer for those in peril on the sea can help us all, suggests Patrick Irwin

prayer for the week

O Almighty God, whose way is in the sea and whose paths are in the great waters; Be present, we beseech thee, with our brethren in the manifold dangers of the deep; protect them from all perils; prosper them in their course; and bring them in safety to the haven where they would be, with a grateful sense of thy mercies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of Ireland (1926)

THE sea and those who travel on it are always important to islanders, and Great Britain and Ireland are no exceptions. From Drake's circumnavigation of the globe and the Battle of Trafalgar, to the culinary staple of fish and chips, the sea has always played a central part in our history. So it is only right that we should remember seafarers in our prayers.

Maritime disasters and sudden bereavement at sea remind us of the dangers. The New Testament stories of the disciples caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and St Paul's being wrecked on the coast of Malta reveal that the earliest Christians, too, were aware of the risks of travelling by water.

As we pray for those who venture on the water, however, we may well pause to reflect on how the imagery of the sea is appropriate for us all. All of us are travelling on a voyage through life. We will sometimes be buffeted by events as if by stormy winds, and at other times seem to be making no progress, as if becalmed.

As Christians, we are travelling through life to God, to that heavenly Jerusalem which is our destination, and we could well appropriate this prayer for ourselves, and pray that God will prosper us in our course and bring us in safety to the haven where we would be.

Sometimes, the maritime imagery may come unexpectedly close. Once, I attended the Orthodox celebration of Epiphany in Sibiu, Romania. A ten-foot-high stage had been erected in the main square for the Blessing of the Waters. On to it climbed the Metropolitan and other clergy, a choir, and various local worthies, such as the chief of police.

About 100 of us were on the stage. Unfortunately, the edifice had

not been put up properly, and it began to sway ominously. Below the stage, photographers prepared enthusiastically to capture on film the moment when the whole contraption would collapse.

It was my first time on this stage in Sibiu, but it was obvious from the anxious faces of the local clergy that something was seriously wrong. We rocked to and fro, as if at sea in a storm. The water awaiting blessing in a grand receptacle splashed out, as if being agitated by an invisible spoon.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan conducted the full ceremony of blessing, as we struggled to retain our footing and not succumb to seasickness in the middle of a city square. But the stage did not collapse, and we all descended gratefully at the end of the service. We had been reminded that the metaphor of life as a voyage could suddenly take literal form.

As we chart our course through life, we will certainly encounter manifold dangers. May we clasp this prayer to our hearts, with its memorable depiction of God's almighty presence in a dangerous world. Like a life jacket, this prayer will give us confidence and spiritual help at those times when the waters seem poised to overwhelm us.

The Revd Patrick Irwin was until recently Anglican Chaplain in Bucharest and Sofia.

LUKE makes women far more visible than was normal in his culture, where they counted for little. More than 25 times, Luke pairs stories of men and women, showing them in similar circumstances, beginning with the angel who appeared to Zechariah and then to Mary. So he pairs the story of the centurion's slave (Faith, 31 May) with the widow's son. Radically, what Jesus did for a man, he did for a woman; how he taught about a man, he taught about a woman.

Luke models his telling of this story on that of Elijah and the widow. Two young men had died, both the only sons of widowed mothers. A situation tragic in any setting, this was devastating in the cultures of their day, since the death of an only son condemned a widowed mother to poverty and privation. Miraculously, however, both stories culminate with "He gave him back to his mother." Incidentally, Shumen and Nain may have been in similar locations.

In the Old Testament, the context was a severe famine, in which the three people were surviving only thanks to God's miraculous provision. In the Gospel, Jesus turned up just as a funeral procession was leaving town. Motivated purely by compassion for the widow's plight, he interrupted the mourning, made himself ritually unclean by touching

Compassion and transformation

Sunday's readings



Rosalind Brown

2nd Sunday after Trinity

Proper 5: 1 Kings 17.17-end; Galatians 1.11-end; Luke 7.11-17

Lord, you have taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth: send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whoever lives is counted dead before you. Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

the bier, and told the young man to get up.

As far as we know, Jesus was a complete stranger, who had not introduced himself or offered his condolences; he simply brought the dead man back to life. Imagine this happening at a funeral today, and we understand why fear gripped the people, and word spread fast.

These two stories embody God's compassion for people in need, particularly vulnerable people. They ask us to explore what it means to embody God's compassion for the world, even when, as in Elijah's case, our own survival is precarious, or, as in Jesus's case, we sacrifice our religious good standing for the sake of a social nobody.

Serendipitously, given that the epistle is a course reading and not specially chosen, the lectionary places these two stories alongside the story of another young man whose life was transformed instantaneously, this time through a revelation that overturned his whole way of life.

Paul had seen it as his religious duty to persecute Christians, not

flinching even when watching Stephen, the first martyr, being stoned to death. While Acts records what happened to him, what we have in the epistle is Paul's admission to his history, and his theological understanding of its extraordinary events. He ascribed it all to God's grace, which called him to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles — the very people whom he had once despised in his fanatical religion.

The people who observed these three events responded in similar ways, realising that God was at work in the unlikely context of their own situations. So the woman recognised Elijah as a man of God; the people around Jesus recognised that a prophet had arisen among them; the churches that heard about Paul glorified God that he was proclaiming the faith that he had tried to destroy.

This has to raise questions about our response, when we see signs of God at work in the familiarity of our lives. These stories challenge us to allow space for the possibility that God will act, and will breathe

new life into situations that seem hopeless. They remind us that God up-ends situations and ways of life that feel immutable.

The famine was cruel and long, and (maps show us) Elijah had previously walked more than 100 miles through countryside devastated by it, enough to sap anyone's faith. Yet God not only provided food: he restored life.

The widow faced the brutal loneliness of being on her own, in a culture where family was vital for support, when suddenly Jesus acted as her son to provide for her — in this case, by restoring her own son.

The Church faced persecution and death from Saul, and God broke in audaciously, and commissioned him to proclaim the gospel that he had once despised.

These stories remind us that God delights in acting with unprovoked compassion, bringing life in situations locked into death, startling us with unlikely recipients of his mercy.

The Revd Rosalind Brown is Canon Librarian of Durham Cathedral.