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Contents

Christian Today Website Articles ..	5
‘One life is all we have’: The surprising sainthood of Joan of Arc.....	5
Jesus said the disciples would do ‘greater works’ than he did. He didn’t mention walking on water	8
Is the government using vulnerable refugees to score political points?	16
Christianity reasserts itself across former Communist Eastern Europe	20
Theresa May lives on after promoting Gove and Green: divided over Brexit, united by Christian faith	24



Christian Today Website Articles

Sometimes Christian Today also includes an article of interest, which is not necessarily a good-news item but rather one that has been included for readers to pray about.

Unless otherwise stated, articles in this magazine are transcriptions of material selected by the editor at Christian Today and were first published recently on www.christiantoday.com.

‘One life is all we have’: The surprising sainthood of Joan of Arc

By Joseph Hartropp

On 16 May 1920, the woman known as Joan of Arc was canonized as a saint in

the Catholic Church. The move might have surprised Joan, since 500 years earlier, the Church had burned her at the stake.

The setting for Joan's story is the 15th century, in the intense conflict between England France known as the Hundred Years War. England's king, Henry V had claimed the French crown and conquered some of the country.

When he died, his young son Henry VI was the supposed king of England and France. The resident French king Charles VII was reluctant to take a stand against the English population.

So Joan, a 13-year-old peasant girl raised on a farm, went to the French court with a mighty claim. She said voices and visions from heaven had told her to dress as a knight and lead the French into battle. It was decided she was telling the truth. Joan rallied the

nation, led the French into battle and defeated the English.

Unfortunately, she was eventually captured by the English, who put her on trial as a witch. They said the voices she'd heard were not from God, but Satan. In 1431 at age 19 she was burned at the stake for heresy, several times over so that only ashes and no relics would remain.

Over time however, it was determined that Joan's trial had been unjust, and she became an icon to the French and the Church – and showed that grace and greatness could be shown by anyone of any class. The young woman known as 'The Maid of Orléans' would also become to Catholics the patroness of soldiers and France.

She was beatified in 1909, and further canonised, making her officially a saint, in 1920. She is also venerated in the

Anglican Communion as a visionary, and her feast day is on May 30.

This quote is ascribed to Joan, and captures her dynamic legacy: ‘One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it.

‘But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.’

Jesus said the disciples would do ‘greater works’ than he did. He didn’t mention walking on water

By Joseph Hartropp

It turns out that the tragic news that a Zimbabwe pastor was eaten alive by crocodiles in front of his congregation is a classic example of fake news.

Many people were taken in by the story, and this is perhaps because it had an element of plausibility to it.

And that is because it would not have been the first time Christians have been killed attempting to imitate Christ's miraculous deeds. Some have died from extreme fasting, while others have been bitten by deadly snakes in their attempt to live out the Jesus' alleged promise: 'They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all' (Mark 16:18).

For those wondering if they're faithless for not handling pythons, there's a good explanation for the Mark 16 passage – many scholars believe it to be inauthentic, at least not part of Mark's original Gospel.

But if there's one verse that really captures the radical Christian

enthusiasm of this kind, it's Jesus' words to his disciples in John 14:12-14: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.'

Jesus, who performed lots of miracles in his ministry, told his followers that they would do 'greater works' than he. For some, this is a commission to exceed the powers that even Jesus displayed. It's a call to be bigger and better in ministering the miraculous.

But what did Jesus really mean? These are words that have puzzled readers for millennia. As we've seen, the stakes of interpretation are high. Either some are gravely misunderstanding Jesus, or

others are ignoring one of his greatest promises.

Some interpreters say the emphasis is not in quality but in extent: Jesus' followers wouldn't exceed his power – walking on water, raising the dead etc – but they would exceed his reach.

Reaching out beyond Israel and 'to the ends of the earth', and over 2,000 years of global Church history, Jesus' followers would certainly reach wider than he did in his short ministry.

Another popular interpretation sees the 'greater work' as witness to Jesus' gospel, only fully unveiled after his death, resurrection and ascension. John Piper suggests that since the function of Jesus' works is to witness to him, so the disciples will now have the greater power to witness to Christ, in fuller knowledge of his ministry.

The witness need not be miraculous (it may simply be love and good deeds that glorify God), but it still points to the Father. The ‘greater things’ come because never before have the disciples been able to share a Spirit-filled message of complete forgiveness for all.

As Piper suggests: ‘What’s new and greater is that never before in the history of the world had anyone ever been forgiven by faith in the ALREADY crucified, ALREADY risen, ALREADY reigning, ALREADY indwelling Christ.’

That reading actually makes good sense in the context of the story of Scripture. But what of the truly miraculous? There clearly is a miraculous ministry in the early Church, seen through the Spirit-filled disciples in the book of Acts.

Paul too refers to the gift of working miracles, but calls it one gift among

many that not all will have. As he asks in 1 Corinthians 12:29-30: ‘Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?’

Since Jesus’ promise is addressed to all believers (‘whoever believes in me’) but miraculous gifts are not promised to all by Paul, there’s reason to conclude that Jesus’ words aren’t exclusively about working wonders.

None of this is to say that Jesus didn’t want his followers do work miracles of healing or other intervention through the Holy Spirit, but it’s also not a blank cheque for blind and life-threatening faith.

The tragedy of people who died through taking this promise literally is that ‘faith’, in Scriptural terms, is meant to stir life and hope, but here it has only brought death and despair. Ironically, these ill-fated demonstrations of faith

may well have crushed the faith of many.

A wise pastor of mine once said: ‘You can’t trust God for things he hasn’t promised’. It’s dangerous and foolish to test God in that way.

There are some ambiguous verses in Scripture, but a brief look at Church tradition, the lived experience of believers – and a healthy dose of reason – offers wise direction for understanding them.

The disciples faced death as a cost of radical witness, which is different. The New Testament talks much about faith as a profound gift in a dark world – it doesn’t tell people they’re invincible.

No church seriously invested in studying the Bible could think that Jesus called his followers to be daredevil stunt artists. The call is radical servanthood, a ministry for others which may involve

the miraculous, or the more mundane. It's a life that takes deep trust (faith), but doesn't live to drastically prove its commitment to others.

Lastly, we live in a broken world where humans are fragile and death is real. Only a fool bets against such powers to make a point.

In a fallen world, promises offer hope, and faith offers life. But in a fallen world, it matters what you trust. Faith in fake promises can only spell despair – just as trust in what turns out to be fake news only brings embarrassment. We can all learn lessons from these episodes – both when they happen, and when they turn out not to have happened at all.

Is the government using vulnerable refugees to score political points?

By Krish Kandiah

Revelations that the UK government ignored offers from local authorities to accommodate 1572 asylum-seeking children hit the news this weekend.

This came as no surprise to me as the charity I founded, Home for Good, has had a similar response from the government. We have regularly informed it that since 2015 we have received nearly 15,000 registrations of interest from members of the public who are interested in offering themselves to start the process to foster unaccompanied refugee children.

Despite this huge commitment from UK citizens to offer practical help and

hospitality in the global refugee crisis, the government claimed it could not proceed because local authorities were too stretched.

However, despite pressure on councils to reduce budgets, cost save and cut back on services, we have found many local authorities who are very keen to welcome refugee children from Europe. This is reflected in the 1,572 places offered by councils and ignored by the government.

Working together with Lord Dubs, a former child refugee himself, Save the Children originally argued that the UK should take 3,000 refugee children in. This was calculated to be the UK's fair share of the total number of at-risk asylum-seeking children in Europe. But after receiving only 480 refugee children, in February the government controversially chose to close this 'Dubs' route. One of the reasons it cited

was that it had not received enough offers of places from local authorities. The new evidence shows this was not true.

The decision to close the Dubs route remains a mystery to many of the MPs from different parties I have spoken to. Some have suggested to me that the decision comes from a political desire to look tougher on immigration, possibly in light of the Brexit conversation. This would explain why the government went public on its plans to close the Dubs route when it could have instead quietly moth-balled the scheme.

It seems that some of our politicians are using the plight of vulnerable refugee children as a political football for point-scoring against one another.

I do not believe that this decision reflects the feeling in Britain accurately. I have been very impressed by the

quality and dedication of the civil servants I have dealt with in departments that relate to refugee resettlement and the care that we provide for refugee children that arrive in the UK. I cannot believe that these civil servants would have misread the numbers when it came to the offers from the local authority.

Similarly, I cannot believe that all those who voted for us to leave the European Union expected us to turn our backs on the vulnerable children of the world as a result.

Our nation has a long and proud tradition of offering refuge and hospitality to the most vulnerable people in our world. Thousands of members of the public have shown they are keen to help. Church leaders and charities have called on the government to help. And now there is empirical evidence of the offers made by the

councils of our nation that they have the capacity and desire to help too.

In light of this, I would ask the next government of the UK to pledge to help children who have lost their families while fleeing war and terror. With the election campaign in full swing, it is important that the plight of refugee children remains on the agenda, not for political point-scoring, but for the sake of compassion and justice.

Christianity reasserts itself across former Communist Eastern Europe

By Harry Farley

Religion is reasserting itself as a major part of national life in Eastern Europe 28

years after the communist regime was suppressing faith and instilling atheism.

A major new survey reveals most adults across the region say they believe in God with a majority identifying with a particular religion.

The study by the US-based Pew Research Center finds in former communist states such as the Russian Federation and Poland most people say that being Orthodox or Catholic is a crucial part of being ‘truly Russian’ or ‘truly Polish’.

But despite the close ties to national identity, relatively few regularly attend church or see religion as central to their day-to-day lives.

The trend is particularly stark among Orthodox Christians in Eastern Europe, where just 10 per cent say they go to church on a weekly basis.

Although Catholics in Eastern Europe tend to be more observant than their Orthodox compatriots, with 45 per cent of Polish Catholics saying they go to church weekly, the proportion of those identifying as Catholics has fallen overall.

The ties between religion and national identity are also weaker in Catholic-majority countries with an average 70 per cent of Orthodox Christians saying their faith was important in order to be truly part of that country compared to an average 57 per cent of Catholics.

The researchers at Pew note this may be because Catholic countries such as Hungary and Poland largely retained their Catholic identity during the communist era, leaving less of a religious void than, for example, in Russia.

The contrast is also seen in support for Church-state relations with those in Orthodox countries more inclined to support close ties than in Catholic majority countries.

Michael Lipka and Neha Sahgal, religious researchers at Pew, say the disparity could be related to the divergent politics.

‘The differing trends in predominantly Orthodox and Catholic countries may be, at least in part, a reflection of political geography,’ they write.

‘The Orthodox countries in the region are further toward the east, and many were part of the Soviet Union. The Catholic countries are further toward the west, and only Lithuania was part of the USSR.’

The influence of Russia still weighs heavily on the region, in particular with Orthodox Christians, who have strong

Church-state ties between their faith and the Kremlin.

But the loyalty is not just among Russian Orthodox Christians. The majority of all Orthodox Christians, including Greek, have pro-Russia views and see Moscow as having a special duty to protect not just Russians but all Orthodox Christians in different countries.

Theresa May lives on after promoting Gove and Green: divided over Brexit, united by Christian faith

By James Macintyre

They were the appointments that changed everything for Theresa May

and, in the short term at least, for the country.

Until yesterday afternoon (June 11), May looked, to quote a vengeful George Osborne, like a ‘dead woman walking’. She had failed to regain momentum since the disastrous collapse in Conservative support in Thursday’s general election, and the internal Tory firing squad was assembling. The influential back-bench Tory 1922 Committee had just brought forward its meeting with May from Tuesday to Monday, and it appeared that the centre of gravity in the party was against her. The Tory hierarchy, so ruthless, usually, when it comes to ridding themselves of failed leaders, had processed the result and was making its move. Many journalists, including this one, thought she would be gone in 24-hours.

Damian Green, a ‘birth Catholic’ who has been appointed First Secretary of State

**and Minister for the Cabinet Office
leaves Downing Street in London,
Britain June 11, 2017.Reuters**

**And then May delivered her
masterstroke. Much of the country, and
a good proportion of Westminster
watchers, were probably taking a break
from politics on Sunday afternoon when
May began what some called a ‘shuffle’
rather than a ‘reshuffle’: she had
already confirmed that the top six jobs
would remain occupied by the same
people.**

**She appointed Damian Green as First
Secretary of State and Minister for the
Cabinet Office: deputy prime minister in
all but name. Green, a 61-year-old
former journalist for the BBC, Channel 4
and The Times, is a highly able
moderate who left journalism to work
for John Major’s policy unit in 1992. His
former colleagues in the press reacted
positively, despite the lambasted May’s**

premiership remaining until minutes earlier on a knife edge. 'He's one of the good guys,' said one senior FT journalist. But what remained unclear is how the Daily Mail and the Sun would react. For Green is one of the most pro-European Conservative MPs in the House of Commons. An old ally and backer of the most pro-EU Tory, Kenneth Clarke, Green cut his parliamentary teeth after entering into the Commons in 1997 in the Tory Reform Group, a highly pro-European pressure group on the far left of the party. Green was sacked as a middle-ranking immigration minister by David Cameron, though brought back to be Work and Pensions Secretary by May. Nonetheless, to appoint what the rightwing press could call a 'Euro-fanatic' to such a powerful position was a risky move.

Then came the surprise Cabinet return of Michael Gove, who had languished on

the back-benches since his spectacular, abortive bid to be Tory leader last summer. Though not in the top six, Gove was given one of the few remaining substantial positions, that of Environment Secretary. Gove said he was ‘flattered’ and ‘surprised’ to be given the job, which some green campaigners are already saying he is unsuited to. They pointed to a report by the Guardian in 2013 claiming that the then Education Secretary was blocked in an attempt to drop climate change from the geography national curriculum. Some suspect him to be a climate change skeptic. In fact, Gove has long taken an interest in environmental matters, and helped shape Cameron’s apparently pro-green agenda while the Tories were seeking to ‘modernise’ in Opposition.

