

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:

23 - 29 August 2015

Thought for the Week:

Ultimately we all have to make a choice. We can choose to "do it my way", following only what our own hearts and desires dictate, hoping that this will bring us freedom, happiness, and fulfilment. Or we can choose to follow the way of Jesus, allowing our desires and actions to be shaped by God's Reign, and offering ourselves as part of God's saving purpose. It may seem like the first option is better, but Jesus clearly felt that seeking God's Reign first was the way to live the best life that is humanly possible (see Matthew 6:33). We all have to choose whether we will believe him or not.

This week, the Lectionary focuses on this choice. In this Sunday's Gospel reading we saw how, as Jesus taught that he was the Bread of Life, some of his disciples found this too much to take in and they began to drift away. Jesus then offered the twelve the freedom to leave, but they made the choice to stay with Jesus because he had "the words of eternal life." In the Old Testament you may have read about Solomon's dedication of the Temple. In this important moment in the life of God's people, Solomon remembers God's commitment to Israel and gives thanks. But, he also stresses the importance of following God's ways in wholehearted devotion. Then, in the light of God's commitment to God's people, and their response, Solomon asks for God to hear and answer the prayers that will be uttered in the new Temple. He makes a choice, on behalf of the people, to recognise that Israel is dependent on God, and to place the nation wholly in God's hands.

As we journey through this week, we will be called to choose where we will place our devotion and our faith. We will be invited to stay committed to the way of Jesus, and we will be called to stay faithful in prayer. And, as the foundation to this commitment, we will be called to believe that God's Reign really is the way to the best life that is humanly possible. How will you choose this week?

Sunday 23 August 2015

Reading: John 6:56-69

Reflection: The Bread of Life sermon continues in John 6, and it doesn't get any easier. Jesus still calls his hearers to eat his flesh and drink his blood - to take his life into themselves. His claim to be of divine origin feels like blasphemy to these people, and his insistence that he offers eternal life is hard for them to accept. So, they begin drifting away - including some of Jesus' disciples. In response, Jesus turns to his twelve apostles and asks them if they also want to leave. I have always found Peter's response very comforting: "Where would we go?" This is not a statement of confidence or even of joyful commitment. It's an acknowledgement

that what they're hearing is hard, but that they now know too much to abandon the way of Jesus. Jesus' words - Jesus' teaching - is the way to a life of fullness and meaning. They are the words of eternal life. So, much as the apostles may be tempted to leave, they can't. There is nowhere else that they could find the life they have discovered in Jesus.

Following Jesus isn't always easy. Sometimes it's the last thing we want to do because we know that the Gospel's standards of love are hard to reach. But, once we've tasted the life of Christ, there is nowhere else to go. Today, you may be finding it hard to follow Christ. Take comfort from Peter's words, and recognise that, even in the struggle, life is found by choosing to stay faithful to the way of Jesus.

Practice for Today: When we wrestle with doubts, fear, uncertainty or the pain of following Jesus, we can be tempted to bury these feelings and pretend we're doing fine. But, there is no healing or strength in this denial. Rather, as we confess our struggles, we are able to release them and receive God's strength and support. Take time today to confess whatever struggles you're facing.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Even when it's hard, I choose you, Jesus - you have the words of eternal life.

Monday 24 August 2015

Reading: Psalm 119:97-104

Reflection: Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It's a celebration of God's word and God's instructions. It is written in 22 sections each characterised by consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of each section starts with the letter attributed to that section. In this section, the Psalmist affirms the commitment he has made to God's laws. He meditates on them always, remaining obedient to them and refusing to turn away. This commitment flows from the assurance that God's words bring wisdom, understanding, and a life of integrity and truth.

It is the gift of life that makes God's ways so sweet. It isn't always easy to follow God's law, especially when our natural desires and inclinations want to lead us in a very different direction. But, as we allow God's ways to become part of us, we learn that they are the path to a life of wisdom, truth, and fulfilment. Then, when things get tough, or when we wrestle with the temptation to go our own way, God's ways call us back to life.

How have God's ways brought you life and wisdom? How can you allow them to become more fully a part of you?

Practice for Today: The practice that is celebrated in this Psalm is a good one for us, too. Meditating on God's word allows the ways of God to sink into our deepest selves. Perhaps today you can select one or two verses from this Psalm to carry with you through the day as a meditation.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I celebrate your ways, O God, and open my life to be formed by them.

Tuesday 25 August 2015

Reading: Ephesians 6:21-24

Reflection: Paul's letters contain many personal notes, like the one we read in Ephesians today. Traditionally this letter is believed to have been written while Paul was in prison, which is why messengers like Tychicus were necessary. The early Church was built as much by simple servants like this faithful man, as it was by the well-known apostles. Tychicus, it seems, had pretty much given his life to travelling around doing Paul's bidding, and carrying his messages to their intended recipients. It was not glamorous work, but it was crucial to the spread of the Gospel, and to supporting the new Christian communities that Paul had helped to establish. Faithful disciples like Tychicus embodied the "love with faithfulness" for which the apostle prays for the Ephesian Christians.

It's encouraging to realise, when we read about people like Tychicus, that choosing to follow Jesus doesn't always mean doing dramatic things. Most often, our choice to follow Jesus faithfully means doing the daily tasks of our lives with love. When we stay open in each moment to sharing God's grace, we are choosing to stay true to God's Reign, but we also help to bring life and love to others.

How can you allow your daily tasks to be filled, a little more, with grace and love?

Practice for Today: The practice of giving, while it involves money when we do it in church, is really about giving each moment of our lives to God. Today, try to offer every task, every interaction and every moment to be used by God for the sake of God's Reign.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Whatever I do today, O God, I give it to you as an act of service and worship.

Wednesday 26 August 2015

Reading: John 15:16-25

Reflection: The setting for Jesus' teaching in John 15 is the Upper Room just before his death. The chapters from John 13 to 17 are like a final manifesto from Jesus to his disciples. He speaks a lot about the Holy Spirit here, and prepares them for the time when he will no longer be with them. It is clear that the way Jesus expects his followers to live is very different from the "world's" ways. Jesus calls his disciples to bear fruit and sums up what this fruit is in one word: love. In contrast with the hate that Jesus and his followers will often face from others, he challenges the disciples to choose love.

It's not that Christ-followers should just try to "get along" with everyone. It's not about conforming to the world's ways in order to avoid conflict. Rather, it's about responding completely differently to whatever we may face. Rather than being participants in the hate-filled customs around us, we are called to be different - to

risk refusing to be comfortable with anything that breeds hatred, rejection, and injustice. This is the tough choice we are all called to make daily - to refuse to have our reactions to the evil and suffering in the world dictated by the world, but to face both goodness and evil with the surprising and transforming choice to love.

How can you bear fruit by embracing love a little more today?

Practice for Today: Jesus really gave us no escape hatch through which we can go to avoid loving others. We are called to love one another, to love our neighbours, and even to love our enemies. One simple way to learn to live like this is to pray for those around us, irrespective of how they may treat us. Make the practice of prayer the rhythm of your day.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As an act of love, O God, I pray for my friends and my enemies in Jesus' name.

Thursday 27 August 2015

Reading: James 1:1-8

Reflection: The Epistle of James is sometimes criticised for being too legalistic or "works oriented." It can seem to contradict Paul's emphasis on grace, but if we read more carefully we discover that this isn't the case. There is a lot of passion and whole-hearted commitment in James' letter, which is something the Lectionary will pick up on Sunday.

In today's section from the start of the letter we find the surprising call to rejoice when we face trouble. In contrast to the usual response - which is to lose faith when we endure pain - James suggests that our suffering is an opportunity to grow in faith and endurance, which he sees as a tremendous gift. But, beneath it all is the assurance that God is always willing to sustain, strengthen and help us. It takes passion and commitment to rejoice in our struggles, but when we can do this, instead of striving to avoid pain, we discover a life that is unquenchable - and that is certainly something to celebrate.

Perhaps today you may be facing circumstances that are a challenge to your faith. Perhaps rejoicing is the last thing on your mind. If so, perhaps James' call to rejoice may feel unrealistic and insensitive. However, if you can open yourself to the possibility that there are gifts hidden in your struggle, and if you can allow God's grasp of you to sustain and protect you, perhaps in the midst of your pain you will be able to discern the spark of hope and even of joy. Are you willing to try this today?

Practice for Today: The Scriptures often encourage us to give thanks in everything. This does not mean we necessarily give thanks *for* everything, but that no matter what we may face, there will always be something for which we can express gratitude. It is this thanksgiving that keeps us mindful of God's presence and sustaining grace. Whatever you're facing today, try and find something for which to give thanks.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Thank you, O God, that even in my deepest struggles you remain faithful and you sustain me.

Friday 28 August 2015

Reading: Song of Solomon 2:1-7

Reflection: A few years ago a woman told me that when she was growing up her mother allowed her to read any book in the Bible except the Song of Solomon. The mother felt that this book was too explicitly sexual for her young daughter to read! There is no question that this book is a celebration of human sexuality and love. It has also been interpreted, through the ages, as an allegory of God's love for God's people. The Bible is definitely very comfortable using sexual language to describe our intimacy with God - not just here, but in many other books as well.

On Sunday the verses just after today's reading are set in the Lectionary. Today, though, we get a glimpse into the love that is shared between these two young lovers. The woman celebrates the beauty of her lover, relishes spending time with him, and delights at his intimate touch. It's a beautiful picture of passionate love.

It's a pity that Christian faith has sometimes been seen as passionless. It's easy either to get too caught up in our heads or to get caught up in a shallow emotionalism. Neither connects us with God in deep and transforming ways. Rather, when we allow our love for God to be reasonable *and* emotional, deep *and* passionate, that's when our faith becomes both transforming and attractive.

How can you nurture a passionate love for God today?

Practice for Today: The woman in the Song of Solomon easily and passionately praises her lover. It's not possible to love someone - including God - without celebrating and praising him or her. Why not allow your passion to overflow into heartfelt praise throughout today?

Breath-Prayer for Today: O, Divine Lover, I praise you, for your love is better than wine!

Saturday 29 August 2015

Reading: Hosea 3:1-5

Reflection: The prophet Hosea had a tough calling. He had married a prostitute who repeatedly committed adultery. Yet, he continued to love her and welcome her back. This very painful personal experience became the basis for his prophetic message. It is another case of the Bible using human sexuality as a metaphor for God's love.

What is amazing in this passage is God's determination to proclaim God's love to God's people - even though they keep turning away from God. The image of adultery is often used for the idolatry of God's people, but in spite of their sin, God continues to love them and call them back to God's Self. It's important to remember this amazing grace whenever we are tempted to judge ourselves or others harshly. God is not concerned with punishment, but with restoration.

Are there any places in your life that you feel are beyond God's grace? Are there any people that you believe cannot be loved by God? How do God's unfailing love and grace, as demonstrated in Hosea's prophecy, challenge you? Can you receive and share God's gracious invitation of love today?

Practice for Today: Whether we mean it or not, our lives are always proclaiming a message. It may be a message of judgment and condemnation, or it could be one of grace and love. Today, why not try to allow your life to proclaim God's gracious invitation to everyone you encounter.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Make my life an invitation to your grace and love, O God.

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