

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
31 January – 06 February 2016

Thought for the Week:

When Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown of Nazareth, the people listened attentively. When he claimed that he was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, they were amazed and questioned how it could be, but they were still open to Jesus' message. It was only when Jesus began to challenge their sense of entitlement, and when he pointed out God's concern for outsiders, that they got murderously angry. The radical inclusivity of Jesus was scandalous and offensive to these people. They wanted to believe that they were "in" with God, and that meant there had to be others who were "out". But, when Jesus suggested that outsiders were really the true insiders, they refused to let go of their stereotypes, their sense of privilege, and their need for exclusivity.

It's tragic when God's people are more like the people of Nazareth than Jesus. We love to talk about Jesus the Messiah, and to hear how God's Reign has come to us. But, sometimes, when we are challenged by the Gospel to welcome those whom we believe are "sinners" or "outside" of God's "chosen ones," we may prefer to attack the messenger rather than do the difficult work of opening our hearts. We all have those we struggle to love. We all have those whom we believe are undeserving of God's grace. But, if God's favour could be earned – even by praying a "sinner's" prayer – it wouldn't be grace. The challenge of the Gospel is the way it calls us constantly to expand our welcome and inclusion until all people discover that they are actually "in" with God. This challenging journey into radical, inclusive grace is the focus of this week.

Sunday 31 January 2016

Reading: Luke 4:21-30

Reflection: When we read the story of how Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, we can't miss the fact that Jesus brought the anger on himself. As the people wondered how one of their neighbours could

possibly be the Messiah, Jesus changed the agenda. It's like he went out of his way to be confrontational and argumentative. He declared God's acceptance of outcasts apparently knowing that the reaction would be negative. In many churches, if such a message were preached, we would tell the person that they had not been gentle enough, or considerate enough. We would ask why he or she had not viewed the congregation with grace, and worked slowly with them to lead them into a more inclusive view. It's almost as if the worst sin for us now is to cause offense.

But, consider the cost to Jesus' mission and integrity had he not confronted the people. If he had stayed away from these controversial topics those who heard about his inclusive behaviour later would have felt betrayed. They would have felt that he was inconsistent and changed his tune depending on whom he was with. Also, imagine how it would have felt for the outcasts when they heard that yet another religious leader had sold out to the status quo, and had written them off as undeserving of God's attention. Jesus was confrontational, but his integrity and mission, required it.

Are there any confrontations that you've been avoiding? Are there any issues on which you need to take a stand? How can you embrace the inclusive mission of Jesus more strongly today?

Practice for Today: It can be disturbing to see how confrontational the New Testament disciples could be. They confronted the religious leaders of their day, they confronted each other, and they confronted themselves with the Gospel challenge. Sometimes the most powerful witness is when we refuse to stay silent in the face of injustice. Can you try a little "Gospel confrontation" today?

Breath-Prayer for Today: Teach me, O God, to stand strong for the values of your Reign.

Monday 01 February 2016

Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Reflection: On first reading, today's passage sounds exclusive – like Christians are somehow better than others because we have God's Spirit and Christ's mind. But, if we look a little deeper, we discover that the opposite is actually the case. The "world's" wisdom

is to separate – to create boundaries between nations, races, genders, generations, sexualities and any other characteristic we can think of. But, this is not the wisdom of Paul. It was Jesus' confrontation of systems of oppression, inequality and exclusion that got him crucified. That's why Paul says that the rulers of this world cannot understand God's plan – inclusivity and grace make no sense against the exclusive and meritocratic values upon which our world is built. But, once we have been captured by Jesus' vision of God's Reign, once we have "bought in" to the quest for a more just, peaceful and equitable world, the sacrifice of Jesus makes the best sense. It stands to reason that, in order to confront the evil of human empire, Jesus would allow himself to be destroyed publicly by empire – and then would show that even death could not quench the power of love, grace, and justice.

The quote from Isaiah 64:4 that Paul references (rather freely) is actually part of a prayer of confession in which the people acknowledge how they have failed to live by God's values. Yet, here Paul reveals that in God's Spirit, God has given us the power we need to live the Jesus way. Because of this, we have Christ's mind, which means that we are able to live from Jesus' gracious perspective and values.

How can you open your mind to receive more of God's Spirit and of Jesus' mind, today?

Practice for Today: The Bible is often used to justify exclusivity, but, when we listen to the whole Bible, and not just a few selected verses, we cannot help but see God's inclusive grace shining through. Today, spend time reading as much of the Bible as you can, and allow its message of grace to touch your heart.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Give me the mind of Christ, O God, so that I may understand your gracious and loving mission.

Tuesday 02 February 2016

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Reflection: Today's story of Naaman's healing is almost comical in the way it is told. To begin with, there is the cryptic note sent from the king of Aram to the king of Israel, which seemed to imply that

Israel's king was supposed to do the healing. This results in confusion, panic, and all sorts of assumptions that could have led to very serious consequences if Elisha had not intervened. Then, there is Naaman's national pride and personal arrogance which almost prevented him from following Elisha's instructions and receiving his healing. Fortunately this military commander had servants who were wiser than he was, who convinced him to choose healing over his offense at Elisha's dismissiveness. Notice again how it is Naaman's assumptions about how he should have been treated, and how his healing should have been preformed, that got in his way here.

It was similar assumptions about who the Messiah should be and how he should behave that tripped up the people of Nazareth, as we saw on Sunday. It was these same kinds of assumptions that prevented many people in Israel, including the religious leaders, from recognising who Jesus was. And, if we're honest, it is our tendency to make assumptions about God that keeps us from a truly transforming faith. It is our assumptions about other people and their motives that keep us from deep and intimate relationships. It is even assumptions about ourselves that keep us from truly knowing ourselves and doing the work of transformation and growth. One of the most powerful spiritual choices we can make is to distrust our assumptions, and to approach God and others with an open heart and mind, curious to know what they really feel, think, and desire.

How can you let go of your assumptions today?

Practice for Today: When we become aware of habits of thought and behaviour that are unhelpful, it can be tempting to deny what we see, and pretend that we're doing just fine. But, this only drives our worst selves into the shadows, where our brokenness continues to hurt us and others. Today, use confession to acknowledge your assumptions and their negative influence in your life, and then ask God to help you to release them and be healed.

Breath-Prayer for Today: When my assumptions keep me from truth and life, O God, forgive me and heal me, I pray.

Wednesday 03 February 2016

Reading: Luke 19:41-44

Reflection: In Luke's Gospel, as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was nearing its destination, Jesus paused, looked over the city and wept because he knew that his people were refusing to see the truth about the world and about God's desire for them. Then, he continued into the city, cleansed the Temple, and got into a debate with the religious leaders which finally sealed their intention to have him executed. But, the lament in today's reading reveals both Jesus' deep compassion for his people, and his willingness to confront them strongly.

We should read this passage carefully so that we don't fall into thinking that the disaster Jesus foretold was an act of punishment by God. It was more likely that Jesus recognised that rebellion was brewing, and that Rome would respond with violent brutality, that caused him to speak about the trouble that would come if God's people refused to embrace the way of peace, justice, love, mercy, service, and simplicity. They had not heard his message that God's Reign was completely different from human empires, and so Jesus knew that they would attempt to use the same violent strategies to overthrow Rome that Rome had used on them, and they would fail dismally. History shows that Jesus was correct.

We too are faced with a choice between the Way of God's Reign and the way of power, wealth, dominance, and violence. Both ways will lead us into suffering, but the first helps to make the world more just, peaceful and loving, and leads us through the struggle to life. In the second way suffering is the result of the violence and manipulation of human empires seeking to grab hold of or hang on to power – and it creates a never-ending cycle of pain and violence.

Are there any power struggles in your life where you've failed to heed the call of God's Reign? How can you respond now?

Practice for Today: The act of giving is less about money, than about learning to let go of all that keeps us from following the simple, sacrificial ways of God's Reign. Today, whenever you find yourself trying to build an empire – for yourself or any other human person or organisation – try to give a little power and love away.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I embrace the call of your Reign, O God, to serve, give, and love sacrificially.

Thursday 04 February 2016

Reading: Deuteronomy 9:1-5

Reflection: This Sunday is the last of the season after the Epiphany, and, as always, we will read the story of Jesus' transfiguration – a profound moment in which God's glory shone through this very human man. It may seem strange, then, to be reading about the conquest of Canaan – especially when it appears that God allowed violence and bloodshed because of the "wickedness" of those who lived there. Passages like this have often been used to justify military conflicts, occupations, and invasions, and so we need to read carefully. Remember that this passage reflects a primitive understanding of God. But, remember also that, in this era, material blessing and military success were interpreted as God's blessing. This means that both Moses and the writer who recorded his words were ahead of their times.

Moses strongly warned the people not to think of themselves as better than those they were to fight. God was not rewarding them for some goodness or integrity they may have claimed to have – they were not actually good at all. But, from their understanding as a nation who had been called to be faithful to God, and to be a blessing to the world, it was important that they stayed pure, and so the idolatrous religion of the land, and the people who practiced it, had to be destroyed. This would prove that God was supreme, and would remove any temptations the people might face.

Today we would understand God's call very differently, but the basic principle remains the same. God comes to us, loves us, and is revealed in us not because we are good, but because God is good. And, like Israel was called to, and like Jesus actually did, we are to reveal God's goodness and grace (God's glory) to the world. What a privilege to be called to follow and know such a good God!

Practice for Today: As followers of Christ one of the most important words in our vocabulary is "grace". This word means, essentially, that everything is a gift. Whatever joy, wealth, love, and peace we experience is not because we deserve it, or have earned it. It is because we live in a universe that is benevolent, and in which goodness can be experienced by those who don't deserve it. May this truth lead us to make today a day of thanksgiving.

Breath-Prayer for Today: For your goodness, and the goodness in my life that I enjoy but do not deserve, I thank you, O God.

Friday 05 February 2016

Reading: Acts 10:1-8

Reflection: The story of how the Gospel spread to the Gentile community begins with one man: Cornelius. He was a Roman officer, but also a devout and generous believer in God. In a vision he received the instruction to invite Peter to his home, which he obeyed. Meanwhile God was also giving Peter a vision which ensured that, when the invitation came, he was ready and willing to spend time in the home of a Gentile. What makes this whole story so important is that, at every step, it is God who takes the initiative. God sends the visions and prepares the hearts of those involved. And, at the end of the story, it is God who dramatically encounters the people who gather in Cornelius' house. While Peter is still speaking, God's Spirit falls on the Gentile worshippers. It's like God can't even wait for Peter to finish before revealing God's Self.

Sometimes we make it seem like God is hard to find, and exclusive. We may be tempted to frame our faith as if God is our property, and no one else has access. But, this passage shows the opposite. God's glory, goodness and grace, are always being revealed to all people. Encounters with God are often surprising, and happen in the midst of our daily routines. But, sometimes we are so self-absorbed, or so consumed by worry, ambition or lethargy that we wouldn't recognise God's revelation if it hit us in the face.

How can you create space in your life for God's revelation? And how can you help those around you to recognise God's self-disclosure?

Practice for Today: The Jewish practice of Sabbath was about maintaining the health of bodies and souls by slowing down for one day a week. This helped to keep God's people more mindful and open to moments of God's self-disclosure. Today try to create small "Sabbath-moments" to help you open your heart to God.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I open my heart to any ways you may reveal yourself to me today, O God.

Saturday 06 February 2016

Reading: Psalm 99

Reflection: Psalm 99 is the last of the "enthronement Psalms" in the fourth book of the Psalter. These songs reminded the people, who had endured the failure of their human kings and leaders, that their ultimate king was God. The images here reveal God's glory and majesty. The "cherubim" between which God was enthroned were angelic creatures carved on to the Ark of the Covenant (believed to be God's throne on earth). These strange beings were usually described as having human faces, the wings of eagles, and the bodies and legs of either lions or oxen. They were the defenders of God's throne, and were awesome to see (as some prophets did in their visions). So, this whole Psalm offers a picture of a God who is glorious, exalted over all creation, and majestic.

There is an interesting additional thread running through this vision. Notice how often God is depicted as revealing God's Self to people. God's justice and righteousness toward Israel are celebrated. God's answers to prayer, God's forgiveness of wrongdoing, and the way God spoke through priests and prophets are all proclaimed. This glorious God clearly wants relationship with human beings, and God is always reaching out to us. This is part of the meaning of tomorrow's Transfiguration celebration as well.

How is God reaching out to you today? How will you respond?

Practice for Today: Like this Psalmist, one the best ways to recognise God's presence and activity in our lives is through the practice of praise. Praise is also a great way to respond to God's self-giving. Make today a day of constant praise.

Breath-Prayer for Today: For your awesome glory, and your presence in my life, O God, I praise you.

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