

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
14 - 20 February 2016

Thought for the Week:

On the first Sunday in Lent we always meditate on the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness. Even as we read, though, we may find ourselves being tempted as well. We may prefer not to examine the content of the temptations too closely. We may find ourselves wanting to move on to how Jesus overcame the temptations with little thought for what he actually overcame. Perhaps this is because we know, in some part of ourselves, that we are wrestling with the same temptations on a daily basis, yet we may be less effective at overcoming them than Jesus was. If we would prefer not to do the painful work of honest self-examination, we might turn repentance into a "spiritual" exercise that deals only with little outward "sins" that hardly matter, while avoiding the truly destructive sins of the heart, the attitude, and the mind. But, the truth is that what Jesus faced in the wilderness was no different from the great temptations that all human beings must confront.

Jesus was tempted by his physical lusts, and the desire for immediate gratification with no thought for the consequences. Jesus was tempted by the quest for power and the ability to influence and manipulate others to do his bidding, while using God's power for his own ends. Jesus was tempted by the wealth and glory of the world, and the quest to find security and influence through easy accumulation. Lust, wealth, and power – these are the true temptations from which all others flow, and which bring really destructive consequences on the world. Yet, through his willingness to deny himself, his commitment to servanthood, and his embrace of simplicity and generosity, Jesus rejected these temptations and brought life to the world.

This week we will be challenged to confront our worst tendencies and follow Jesus into a way of being that brings life and justice to the world.

Sunday 14 February 2016

Reading: Luke 4:1-13

Reflection: This short account of Jesus' temptation is so full of meaning that it could take books to unpack it all. The first startling feature is that this time of testing came immediately after the euphoric and affirming baptism experience where God's Spirit had descended on Jesus, and he had heard God's declaration of praise. You would expect, after such an encounter, that Jesus would immediately have gone out to change the world. But, instead, he retreats into the wilderness and experiences one of the toughest times of his life (up to that point). Where God has proclaimed him as God's son, now he finds his relationship with God questioned. Yet without this trial, Jesus would not have had the confidence to fulfil his task in spite of all the questions and persecutions he faced.

Notice how none of these temptations were "sinful" in themselves. Each of them would feature in Jesus' ministry at some point – he did miraculously create food for the crowds; he did receive all authority in heaven and earth; and he did defy death. It was not what he did that was the temptation; it was how and why. God's first call is on our hearts, on the values and attitudes we will embrace to form the foundation of our lives. We may do great good, but if it's for our own selfish gain, we have failed to embody God's Reign. Yet, the smallest things, done in love, service, and generosity, have great value for God's Reign.

How can you embrace the values and attitudes of God's Reign more completely in your life today?

Practice for Today: It can be tough to know our own motives sometimes. It can be hard to acknowledge when our hearts are more filled with our own desires than with the justice and love of God's Reign. The only way to be sure, and to change our hearts, is to take time to examine ourselves. Today, make time to reflect on your life and actions and identify the motives of your heart. You may find writing in a journal helps you as you do this.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you know my heart, O God, reveal it to me and change my motivations to align with yours.

Monday 15 February 2016

Reading: 1 John 2:1-6

Reflection: What does it mean when John says that Jesus is God's way of dealing with our sins? Sometimes we make it seem that if we just ask for God's forgiveness, it doesn't matter what we do. But, the Scriptures make it clear that there is more to it than that. Jesus is not a Saviour in the sense that he swoops in and rescues us with no contribution on our part. Rather, Jesus saves us by showing us the best way to live and then making God's power available to us to live this way. That's why John writes, on the one hand, that Jesus is our advocate with God, and then, on the other hand, that we must live in love as Jesus did. If we claim to know Jesus we must keep his commands – of which there is really only one: to love. As we live in love, we overcome the worst of ourselves, and as more and more people embrace the way of love, we overcome the worst in the world. In this way, our sins, and those of the world, are dealt with.

It is unfortunate that we have become so good at avoiding the call to love. We use all sorts of noble and spiritual sounding words to cover up our struggle to love – truth, conviction, obedience. But, without love, none of these things matters to God. Rather, John calls us to allow Jesus to be our standard. If we claim to live in him, we must live as he did. And Jesus' life was one of complete, unconditional, self-sacrificial, gracious, and forgiving love.

How can you embrace the way of love more fully today?

Practice for Today: When we meditate on Jesus' life, we slowly become more like him. As we invite Jesus to lead us into a life of love, we slowly reflect his life in our own. Today, allow the Scriptures to reveal Jesus' life of love to you more fully.

Breath-Prayer for Today: God of love, teach me to love as you do.

Tuesday 16 February 2016

Reading: Zechariah 3:1-10

Reflection: Zechariah exercised his prophetic ministry in the time after the people of God had returned from exile. Two characters feature strongly in his prophecies: Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest. These two men had a huge task to

accomplish together – the rebuilding of the Temple which had been destroyed, and the motivation of the people who had lost hope and were tempted to despair. In today's reading, Joshua stands in the presence of one of God's angels, and of the Adversary or accuser (which is what "Satan" means). As high priest, Joshua represents the people, and his filthy, tattered clothes symbolise their sin and rebellion. The Accuser is there to remind the people of God of what they have done wrong, and to convince them that there is now no hope for them. But, God's angel rebukes the Accuser, and pronounces forgiveness and restoration on Israel. The image of the restored high priest reveals that God is once again in communion with those who facilitate Israel's worship, and so God is available and the people are accepted once again.

Notice that Joshua and his companions are a sign that proclaims God's promise to send God's Messiah to heal, forgive, and restore God's people (Joshua is the Hebrew form of the name, Jesus). But notice also, that the result of the Messiah's coming is that "everyone will invite their neighbours to sit beneath their vines and fig trees". This is an image of peace, justice, well-being, and joy.

We will also experience times when "the Accuser" will try to remind us of our sins and rebellions, and try to convince us that we are beyond hope. But, like with Joshua, God promises restoration, forgiveness, peace, and justice that will heal us, and our communities. All we need to do is believe it and live from that promise. How can you do this today?

Practice for Today: The Church has always known how powerfully destructive guilt and regret can be. That's why one of the important practices of our worship is the pronouncement of forgiveness and restoration. Today, whenever you are tempted to dwell in your guilt, remind yourself of God's words of grace to Joshua, and receive them for yourself.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Thank you, O God, for removing my filthy clothes, and giving me new, clean ones – the sign of your grace.

Wednesday 17 February 2016

Reading: Luke 21:34-22:6

Reflection: Today's reading is split into two sections. In the first, Jesus teaches about the dangers of "dulled hearts." There are many things that can have a dulling effect on us. Addiction, worry, and the quest for pleasure all rob us of joy and passion, and make our hearts less vibrantly alive. Then, when tough times hit, we find that we do not have the resources to cope, and we end up falling deeper into despair and depression. To counter this tendency, Jesus instructs us to stay alert, and remain in prayer, drawing on God's strength to sustain us.

In the second section of this reading we are given a startling example of what happens when a person's heart gets dulled. The Gospels indicate that Judas was a man of contradictions. On one hand he seemed to be concerned about the oppression and poverty of his people. Tradition indicates that he may have sympathised with the cause of the zealots who sought to overthrow Rome. The cares of the world definitely dulled his heart, though. On the other hand, John's Gospel portrays Judas as a thief who embezzled money from the common purse shared by Jesus and his disciples. It seems that his desire for personal gain and pleasure also dulled his heart. Judas represents the kind of person Jesus was teaching about, and his dulled heart ultimately led him to betray Jesus.

What forces are at work in your life that threaten to dull your heart? How can you stay alert and pray so as to overcome these forces?

Practice for Today: Jesus offers the practice of prayer as a way to keep our hearts alert and open to God's life and strength. Today, whenever you feel your heart growing dull, offer a prayer for God to sustain you and awaken your heart.

Breath-Prayer for Today: When life threatens to dull my heart, O God, please awaken me.

Thursday 18 February 2016

Reading: Philippians 3:2-12

Reflection: Today's reading is one Paul's most profound and important teachings. The letter to the Philippians was written near the end of Paul's life while he was in prison. As he looks back over his life, the apostle notes how he had worked to become righteous

in his own strength. He had obeyed the law as perfectly as possible, and he had based his sense of worth on this "perfection". But, when he met Christ, he realised that all of his legal purity was worthless. Rather, in Christ we know a "righteousness that is not our own" – the forgiveness of God, and the life of trust in God's grace and strength. In this sense, our faith-filled life is a gift that we cannot earn or deserve.

But, then Paul explains that part of this new life is about sharing both in the power of Christ's resurrection and in the pain of Christ's suffering. It's not about "arriving" at a legal purity. It's about pursuing life and goodness with passion and determination so that we embody Christ's life and mission a little more each day. In this sense, our life of faith is one of striving and hard work. The point is that we do not gain Christ's life through our striving. Rather, once we have received Christ's life through grace, we are empowered to strive to become like Jesus. This is the work of Lent – accepting God's grace, and committing to the journey of becoming Christlike.

Today, how can you open yourself to God's grace, and commit to striving to be faithful to God?

Practice for Today: Legalistic striving always flows out of a sense of need and scarcity. When we believe that we are not enough – not good enough, pure enough, strong enough, courageous enough, or perfect enough – we try to impose "enoughness" on ourselves through law. The practice of thanksgiving counters this, and reminds us that the gift of God's grace and life makes us enough. Why not allow thanksgiving to liberate you from legalism today?

Breath-Prayer for Today: For your grace that heals me, and your strength that inspires and sustains me, I give you thanks, O God.

Friday 19 February 2016

Reading: Psalm 27

Reflection: On Sunday the Gospel reading tells of how Herod wanted to kill Jesus. Some Pharisees tried to warn him, but Jesus, knowing his purpose, insisted on going to Jerusalem anyway, even though he knew it would mean his death. In today's Psalm, the writer (which the heading identifies as David) experiences a similar

situation. Enemies are persecuting him and accusing him of wrongs that he has not done. Yet, in spite of his suffering, the Psalmist seeks refuge in God's presence, and in the assurance that, no matter what happens, God will never abandon him.

One of the big and difficult questions we must face as people of faith is the extent to which our faith offers us protection from life's struggles. Some preachers make it seem like, if we just have enough faith, we should never experience any pain of any kind. But, this was not what Jesus preached and experienced. Nor was it the case with any of the prophets or apostles. Yet, all of these great examples of faith trusted in God's grace and protection even in the midst of their suffering. Somehow they knew, like David, that even in the darkest times, God was still present and working.

Suffering is a great challenge to faith, and it has caused more than one Christ-follower to give up. But, if we can learn to find a refuge in God's presence, even the toughest times are filled with grace, growth, and even joy. How can you hide in God's presence today?

Practice for Today: Notice how, even in the midst of his trials, the Psalmist continues to express his praise of, and trust in, God. Notice also how aware he is of God's availability. This is what praise can do. Today, whenever you find yourself struggling, allow praise to remind you of God's presence.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Even in the darkest times, O God, I praise you, for you never leave me.

Saturday 20 February 2016

Reading: Matthew 23:37-39

Reflection: You will read these same words again tomorrow as part of the Luke reading that is set for this week. Today we read Matthew's version – which is almost exactly the same. The difference, though, between Matthew's version and Luke's is the context. In Luke, these words are a response to Pharisees who try to warn Jesus, and they come immediately before Jesus shares a meal with a Pharisee and teaches about humility. It's almost like Luke is trying to say that not all religious leaders are evil. Matthew, on the other hand, places these words directly after a long sermon

of Jesus in which he speaks out against the corruption of the religious leaders. Then, after these words, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. For Matthew, the religious leaders represent all that is oppressive, corrupt, and unjust in the world.

One thing they both agree on, though, is that Jesus says the people of Jerusalem will not see him again until they cry, "Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord" – which they did at the triumphal entry. For Jesus this song, which celebrated that he was God's Sent One, began the last stage of his journey to the cross.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that, whether it was Herod, or the religious leaders, or the people who celebrated Jesus one moment and called for his death the next, Jesus died for them all – refusing to allow their hatred and anger to change his commitment to love. And it means that, if we seek to follow Jesus, we must be equally committed to love even those who persecute and harm us. This is the challenging call of the Gospel. How can you obey this call today?

Practice for Today: When it comes to love, it can be easy to say the words. But, without actions, the words are meaningless. Sometimes we even need to do the actions before we know the feelings or can say the words honestly. One way to act lovingly, even if we don't feel it, is to give. When we give to those around us – even those who have hurt us – we open the door for love to heal and restore us.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you so willingly gave yourself to me, Jesus, so I seek to give generously to those around me.

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