

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:  
06 - 12 March 2016

### **Thought for the Week:**

The parable of the Prodigal Son is so well known that we may easily skim over the surface of it thinking we already know everything it has to tell us. However, the central teaching – of forgiveness and reconciliation – is never easy to learn. We need to review what repentance and restored relationships mean many times before we really learn to put these basic principles into practice in a real way.

One of the problems with our approach to this passage is that we have almost forgotten the brother of the Prodigal. We focus on the forgiveness of the father, and the restoration of the son, but we miss the fact that the two brothers had to learn to find each other again. This was not an easy task, since the brother who had remained at home would now have to split some of his inheritance with his returned brother who had lost everything. His resentment is natural and understandable. But, the question he needed to face was how much he valued his brother, how much he was willing to sacrifice for reconciliation, and how much he would rather be right than be in relationship. It must have been a tough choice, and the Gospel does not tell us what he finally decided to do. We are left to decide for ourselves the appropriate response in such a situation.

This week we will explore both the costs and the benefits of repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness.

### **Sunday 06 March 2016**

**Reading:** Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Reflection:** The Prodigal Son started out as a man who had little time for reflection. Life was waiting for him, and he wanted to experience every bit of it as intensely as he could. But, the result of his choice to forgo planning and thinking is that he ended up with nothing – no money and no friends. At this point, he could have chosen to ignore his shame and lose himself in the struggle to survive. Jesus' story does seem to imply that at first this is what he

did, choosing to work as a labourer on a pig farm – some of the lowest work that people of his culture could do. But, eventually he saw himself honestly, and made the decision to change. He took the first step in seeking forgiveness by confessing his fault, repenting (working to change), and reaching out to his family without waiting for them to make the first move. Notice that, when the older brother tried to reject his returned sibling, the father invited him to do similar work – to reflect on his own life, to change his attitudes and actions, and to make the first move to reconcile with his brother.

This is always how reconciliation works. When we wait for others to make the first move, or when we refuse to forgive unless the other person jumps through some hoop of our choosing, we will never truly find healing. But, when we are willing to acknowledge our own part in bringing reconciliation into being, and when we make the courageous choice to reach out first, then relationships can be healed and restored, and we can find life together. Who needs you to do this work today?

**Practice for Today:** The practice of speaking forgiveness is harder than just saying the words. We easily come up with all sorts of justifications for harbouring our grudges and hurts and withholding forgiveness. But, the cost of unforgiveness is too high – for us and for our world. Today, try, in small ways, to practice speaking forgiveness over others – and yourself – as quickly and freely as you can.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As you have forgiven me, O God, so I choose to forgive others in your name.

### **Monday 07 March 2016**

**Reading:** Leviticus 23:26-41

**Reflection:** When the people of Israel were learning how to become a cohesive nation, God gave them a number of tools to help them with this work – among them, the law and the festivals. Today we read of two of the important festivals that formed part of the religious and national life of the Israelites. Notice how, whenever they were instructed to observe one of these holy festivals, they were instructed to do no work for at least one day. This is because these moments were intended to be times of reflection, of taking stock

personally and collectively. It is impossible to do this work when our days are filled with busyness. We need to stop and focus in order to do the work of transformation.

The first festival we read about today was the Day of Atonement. This was a moment of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. At its heart was the recognition that we all fail, we all hurt God and others, and we all need to change to become our best selves. This festival gave the assurance that forgiveness, reconciliation and change were all possible if the people were willing to do the work. The second festival was the Feast of Tabernacles or Tents. This was a moment of remembering where the people had come from. By living for a week in makeshift shelters, the people remembered the pain of their own enslavement and displacement, in order that they should resist the urge to become oppressors. Both festivals sought to teach God's people to be gracious, forgiving, hospitable, and generous.

This Lenten season seeks to teach us the same lessons – forgiveness, reconciliation, hospitality, and generosity. How are you growing in these characteristics this year?

**Practice for Today:** A key to reconciliation and hospitality is an attitude of welcome – of letting others into our hearts. This is not to pretend that they won't hurt us – they will. But, it's recognising that life is found beyond the hurt when we forgive and heal each other through reconciliation. Today try to practice this welcoming, reconciling attitude in everything you do.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** O God, you have welcomed me, even when I hurt you, and you call me to do the same for others.

## **Tuesday 08 March 2016**

**Reading:** Revelation 19:9-10

**Reflection:** Chapter Nineteen is a turning point in the Book of Revelation. Up to now, the book has focussed on the suffering of God's people, the power of the forces of evil, and the catastrophic events that result from the world's refusal to turn away from evil. (Remember that John was using the powerful symbolic language of the Old Testament prophets in his book, and he was writing to

Christians persecuted by the Roman Empire). In this chapter evil – depicted as a prostitute – is finally conquered, and there is great rejoicing. John's point is not that God will become as violent as human empires in order to conquer God's enemies. Rather, it is to reveal how, through the loving sacrifice and service of God's people, God's Reign finally fills the entire universe with grace and justice.

In today's reading, the angelic messenger instructs John to write that those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb are blessed. You may remember that in the Gospels, it is the outcasts, the poor and the "sinners" who are invited to the wedding feast – and, of course, that includes you and me! In awe at God's amazing grace, John falls down in worship, but this powerful angelic messenger reminds John that even he is just a servant of God. Then he proclaims that the essence of prophecy – of proclaiming God's message – is to give a clear witness for Jesus. This involves both our words and our actions. In Revelation it is those who have given a clear witness to Jesus who finally bring God's Reign into complete manifestation on the earth. This is our incredible hope as Christ followers.

How is your life giving a clear witness to Jesus and his mission of grace, justice and love?

**Practice for Today:** There is sense in which all of God's people are prophets. We are all called to give a clear witness to Jesus through our words and actions, and to allow our lives to manifest the Reign of God to the world. Today, embrace your prophetic calling and let your life – especially the way you treat others with patience, forgiveness and understanding – speak of the love and grace of Jesus.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Let my life proclaim your message and your mission, Jesus.

## **Wednesday 09 March 2016**

**Reading:** 2 Kings 4:1-7

**Reflection:** We may wish that turning to Jesus, like the Prodigal Son who returned to his father, would ensure that we would never know need or struggle. When stories like the one we read today are

taken out of the Bible without concern for the message of the whole book, this seems to be what they're saying – faith is a protection from lack, pain and doubt. But, much of the Bible says the opposite – many followers of Jesus got executed, beaten, and went without food and shelter for the sake of the Gospel.

So, what are we to make of the story of the poor widow whose debts were miraculously provided for? Firstly, whether we receive miraculous deliverance or not, God is always at work in our lives, and God cares for the suffering of the poorest and the least of us. If we can embrace this truth, we can resist the temptation to prescribe how God must care for us, and we can open ourselves to the strength and grace that comes to us even in the darkest times. Secondly, in order for this miracle to happen, the widow had to trust her neighbours. She had to ask them for empty jars to provide a container for God's provision. Even though the miracle is described as happening behind closed doors, the community was involved. God loves to work through relationships and communities. If we really want to see miracles, we need to be connected with others so that we can receive from them and give to them when need arises.

How can you receive God's miraculous grace through others today? And how can you be a channel of God's grace to others?

**Practice for Today:** One of the reasons the Bible makes such a big deal about reconciliation is because broken relationships bring suffering into the world. When our relationships are broken, we compete with others for resources and wealth, we seek to hurt others, we fail to trust them, and we are hurt by them. But, connection offers healing for all of this. Today allow your prayers for others to connect you more deeply with them and open the door to God's miraculous grace.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Teach me to stay connected with others, O God, so we may be channels of grace to each other.

#### **Thursday 10 March 2016**

**Reading:** Philippians 2:19-24

**Reflection:** The power of just standing with someone, being present with them and supporting them in their life and work cannot be over

stated. Sometimes all we need to face the tough times is someone to cheer us on and express his or her faith in us. On Sunday we will read about the way Mary did this for Jesus by anointing his feet. Today we see how much Paul appreciated the young Timothy for the same reason. When others were self-seeking, Timothy was Christ-focussed. When others been fickle, Timothy was faithful and committed. He served alongside Paul, and helped to ensure that Paul's ministry was as effective as possible. We will never know the extent to which people like Timothy contributed to the very significant work that Paul did.

But it was more than just Timothy's character and faithfulness that encouraged Paul. It was also the connection that Timothy gave him to the community of faith while he was in prison. Paul speaks about how much it will cheer him up to hear from Timothy how the believers are getting along. He also yearns for the opportunity to visit them himself. It's easy to underestimate the power of these connections between us, but as we seek to follow Jesus we cannot do it alone. We need companions to encourage us, inspire us and support us, and we need to be cheerleaders for others. This is why we do the work of Lent together as much as we do it alone.

Who needs you to support them and cheer them on today?

**Practice for Today:** Often, when people are facing a big challenge or a time of struggle, all they need is someone to stand with them. This "ministry of presence" is a loving and healing practice. Today, whenever you see someone in need of comfort or support, let them know by your presence, or by a phone call or email, that you are with them.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As your presence is always with me, O God, so I stand with those who need support and comfort.

#### **Friday 11 March 2016**

**Reading:** Isaiah 43:8-15

**Reflection:** It may feel strange to us now to read a passage like this in which God seems, rather boastfully, to be trying to prove God's greatness. This is consistent with the worldview of the time in which people believed that there were many gods which all competed for

dominance and for worshippers. Throughout their history, the Israelites had abandoned their worship of God and had turned to the idols of the nations around them. Then, with the conquest of Israel and the exile of the people to Babylon, the people would have been tempted to think that God had been defeated and that other gods were more powerful. And so, as the time came for the people to be liberated, Isaiah speaks to remind the people that everything that happened to them was predicted. Isaiah's hope would probably have been that the people would turn back to God and remain faithful once they had returned home.

In contrast to the Israelites' idolatrous attitude, on Sunday we will read of Mary who took a bottle of very expensive perfume – probably her life savings – and anointed Jesus' feet. For Mary, nothing deserved her devotion more than Jesus. No idol was going to steal her heart.

We all deal with attractions and temptations every day that could draw us away from our devotion to Christ and our commitment to walk in his ways. We all face the temptation to doubt whether God's Reign really is the best way to live, and we are all drawn to try alternative ways of living. Yet, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, the life-giving way of Jesus really is the way to abundant life.

What idols are calling to your heart today? How can you renew your commitment to the way of Jesus?

**Practice for Today:** Until we acknowledge the hold that our "idols" have over our hearts, we cannot break free from them. This is why confession is such an important discipline – what we acknowledge can be healed. Today, whenever you feel your heart being drawn away from God, confess it and reaffirm your commitment to Christ.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** When my heart is captured by what draws me away from you, Jesus, forgive me and call me back.

### **Saturday 12 March 2016**

**Reading:** Exodus 12:21-27

**Reflection:** Today's reading is one of the key moments in the entire Old Testament. The Exodus is the central, defining event in the life of the Israelites. At this point they were just a ragtag group of slaves

with no hope and no identity. Yet, after this, they became a nation, chosen by God to be a blessing to the world. But, for that transformation to occur, the people had to be liberated from slavery in Egypt, and from the enslavement in their own hearts. They had to know that they had been chosen, and that their future could be different. As Moses led the people out of Egypt, these truths began to settle into their hearts – although it would take years before they really believed it.

The account of the Passover is shocking to read, though. That God would kill the children of the Egyptians while sparing the children of the Israelites makes God sound evil. But, this is probably more a reflection of the worldview of the writer than a true reflection of the character of God. What is important here is that the people were given a memory, and a ritual by which to remember it, that affirmed their identity as God's Called Ones. It is these collective memories and rituals that keep us connected with who we are. And who we are – as for the Israelites – is a people who are called by, and connected with, God. When this sinks into our hearts, we cannot help but respond like Mary in acts of devotion and love.

How can you remember your identity in Christ today? How can you respond?

**Practice for Today:** The sacrament of baptism is all about knowing that we are part of God's people and that our identity is based in our relationship with God in Christ. Although we are usually only baptised once, we can nevertheless remind ourselves of our baptism on a regular basis. Today, whenever you engage in an act of washing – whether it's your dishes or your hands – remember who you are in Jesus.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Today, O God, I remember that I am your child.

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