

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
24 – 30 April 2016

Thought for the Week:

What defines a "Christian" for you? What are the most important qualities that reflect true faith in Jesus? Is it believing that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible Word of God? Is it maintaining complete and absolute sexual purity? Is it refraining from using bad language? Is it regular attendance at worship? Is it being consistent in daily prayer and Bible reading? It may surprise you that none of these things seemed to be important to Jesus when it comes to identifying his followers. Jesus had only one thing that defined his disciples – love. In the Gospel reading that is set for today, Jesus says, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." Our capacity to love others practically and sacrificially, as Jesus did, is the only defining quality of being a follower of Jesus. The world does not know that we are Jesus' disciples through our doctrine, our church attendance, our modesty in dress, or our rejection of those whom we consider to be sinners. The world can only know that we follow Jesus through our love.

Part of the problem we have with Jesus' "new commandment" is to identify who the "one another" that we should love is. Is Jesus referring only to those who are in our group, our church, or our denomination? Is he referring only to those in the Christian faith? If we look only at today's passage in isolation from the rest of the New Testament, we may be tempted to view this "one another" this way. But, when we place these words in context we discover that we are instructed to love our neighbours, which includes those who are very different from us (see the Parable of the Good Samaritan, for example). We are also instructed to love our enemies – which is what Jesus did. So, this "one another" seems to keep expanding to include all people. Whenever we encounter another person, in whatever circumstance, we are called to love them. This alone reveals to others that we are followers of Jesus.

This call to love will be the focus of our meditations this week.

Sunday 24 April 2016

Reading: John 13:31-35

Reflection: What would your last words be if you knew you were facing your death? If you knew you had only a few moments left with your closest friends, and you wanted to leave them with one last word to live by, what would you say? What words would you want to be remembered by?

This is the situation Jesus finds himself in, in today's reading. He knows that Judas is going out to betray him, and that he will soon be arrested and executed. He has only a few moments left to summarise his message and get it into the heads and hearts of his friends. So, he prepares them for his coming death, helping them to reframe what it means. Instead of calling death a failure, a regrettable, but unavoidable reality, or an enemy, Jesus refers to his death as a moment of glory. He wants them to know that what is about to happen is not because God has rejected Jesus, or that he has failed in his task as Messiah. Rather, he wants them to see that his death is what brings glory to God, and is the way God will glorify him.

Then he gives them one last commandment – the word that will summarise what they have learned from him, and that is to guide how they continue to follow him after he has gone. That word is love. This is so important for Jesus that he keeps coming back to love throughout his final discourse in John 13-16. He tells his disciples that if they love him they will obey his commandments (and he has just commanded them to love – 14:15-30). Then, he repeats his commandment in 15:12, making it even stronger by teaching that the greatest love is to lay down one's life. When we are faced with these verses we cannot help but recognise that the only thing Jesus wanted to teach us was how to really love – sacrificially and all-inclusively. Then, as he went to his death, and as he rose, he demonstrated this love in every moment and with every person.

How can you allow love to be the primary mark of your faith today?

Practice for Today: The Bible is not an end in itself. It is simply a signpost pointing beyond itself to Jesus. Jesus is at the centre of the entire Bible, with the Old Testament pointing forward to him, and the

New Testament pointing backward to his life, death and resurrection. If we are to obey Jesus, then, we need the Bible to teach us, and to remind us of what the love of Jesus looks like. Today, make some time to read the Scriptures, and seek for reflections of Jesus' love as you read.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May the Scriptures you have given, O God, teach me to love as Jesus loves me.

Monday 25 April 2016

Reading: Acts 11:19-26

Reflection: One of my favourite characters in the Bible is Barnabas. His real name was Joseph, but the early believers had given him the nickname Barnabas, which meant "Son of Encouragement". When Saul (who became the apostle Paul) returned to Jerusalem after his Damascus Road experience, the believers were afraid of him and kept their distance, because they knew of his persecution of the church and distrusted his conversion. But, Barnabas came alongside Paul, and brought him into the community of faith. When Paul refused to work with the young Mark because he had let Paul down on a mission trip, Barnabas continued to show faith in him, and kept him on as his traveling companion. And, in today's reading, when some of the believers began to preach the Gospel to Gentiles – which was still a new thing for these Jewish believers – it is Barnabas who is sent to encourage them.

If there is anyone in the Bible who reflects obedience to Jesus' command to "love one another" it's Barnabas, with his recklessly inclusivity, and his constant encouragement of others.

How can you follow Barnabas' example of love in action today?

Practice for Today: Kind words cost us nothing, but they make a huge impact on others. That's why most worship services end with a "benediction" – a "good word". As we speak these words of blessing over one another, we learn to be people whose mouths are filled with words of kindness and encouragement. Today, take every opportunity to speak a good word to those you meet.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May the words of my mouth be always kind and encouraging, to reflect your love, Jesus.

Tuesday 26 April 2016

Reading: 2 Samuel 1:4-27

Reflection: In a week in which we explore what it means to love one another, it may seem strange to read a story of war and death. However, there are a number of lessons in this account that should not be missed. The setting is a fierce battle between the Israelites and their long time enemies, the Philistines. In this instance, the Philistines soundly defeated the armies of Israel, and both Saul and Jonathan were killed. It is interesting that in the chapter immediately before today's reading the account of Saul's death is very different from the one that is delivered by the Amalekite messenger in today's passage. Nevertheless, David's response to the news is tremendous grief, which quickly turns to violent anger – causing him to have the Amalekite killed for ending Saul's suffering. It's a moment that reveals how exclusive and "tribal" the love of David was. He had no compassion for the man whom he had killed, or for that man's family. His only love was for "his" people. But, then, out of his love and grief he writes a beautiful song of lament, remembering especially his beloved friend Jonathan.

In the Old Testament worldview, you loved your friends and hated your enemies. This is what David demonstrates so clearly here. In Jesus' view of the world, though, things are very different. When we follow Jesus we are called to learn to love not just our friends, but also our enemies. There is no place for retaliation, or for using our grief as an excuse to inflict pain and violence on others. Rather, the seemingly contradictory truth that Jesus teaches is that it is in loving our enemies that our grief is healed.

What anger and violence have you been tempted to as a result of grief or suffering? How can you reject this in favour of love today?

Practice for Today: Loving enemies can be really hard, but God has given us a simple and powerful gift that can start us on the road to forgiveness and love – prayer. It is hard to continue hating someone when we pray for him or her. Today, think of those who have hurt you, and take time to pray for them.

Breath-Prayer for Today: O God, bless and heal those who have

hurt me, I pray – and heal my heart.

Wednesday 27 April 2016

Reading: Leviticus 19:9-18

Reflection: The Scriptures have always called God's people to love for others – especially those who are the most vulnerable. It took centuries, though, for the radical extent of God's love to be seen – and it took the death of Jesus to make it known. Even now, we're still struggling to really embrace the implications of Christ's call to love.

Today's reading is a section of the Israelite law. It takes us back to the earliest days of Israel's life as a newly liberated nation. Here, right at the foundation of their life together, the people are called to love for one another. This love, though, is not just a feeling – it's a very practical way of living. The final words of this passage are the ones Jesus used in the second part of his Great Commandment – love your neighbour as you love yourself. The preceding verses all give practical guidelines for how this love actually works out.

Notice how those who have much are instructed to deliberately leave some of their wealth for the poor to enjoy. But, then, there are also the basic instructions to reject lying, stealing, fraud and injustice. In truth, these instructions are really just a call to common sense and kindness. Imagine, if we put these simple words into practice, how different our world would be!

Which of these instructions do you need to implement today?

Practice for Today: Many of the instructions in today's reading relate to giving in some way. It may be giving of our wealth, or giving of our attention and kindness, or giving of our time and assistance to those in need, but whatever the case, love always expresses itself in giving. Today, whenever you come across someone who needs a touch of love, try to give him or her a small gift of some kind.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you showed your love by giving yourself for me, Jesus, so I express my love for others in gifts of kindness.

Thursday 28 April 2016

Reading: Acts 15:36-41

Reflection: On Monday we mentioned Barnabas' kindness to the young man, Mark, when Paul refused to work with him. Today we read the story of this dispute between Paul and Barnabas. It must have been difficult for Barnabas to part ways with his friend, but he knew that Paul was strong enough to continue on his own. Mark, on the other hand, was young and needed support. So, Barnabas stood with the weaker of the two and ensured that Mark knew he had a friend. Obviously this act of kindness and hospitality had a big impact on Mark's life, because when Paul was in prison many years later, he asked Timothy to bring Mark to him, and mentioned that Mark had been helpful to him in ministry. In the end Mark became a strong disciple of Christ and a respected companion of Paul's.

On Sunday the readings all speak about the call to be people of hospitality. The gift of hospitality is one of the best ways that love can be expressed, and it makes a big difference in people's lives – as Mark's experience shows. Barnabas is a great example of the impact that a life of hospitality can have on others.

Who needs you to show them hospitality today? Whose hospitality do you need to accept?

Practice for Today: The act of hospitality is not just about opening our homes to others. It's about opening our hearts and welcoming others in. Notice how Barnabas' hospitality was often extended to those who were rejected by others. Today, try and open your heart in a similar way, to the rejected ones.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you have welcomed me into your heart, O God, so I welcome others.

Friday 29 April 2016

Reading: Psalm 67

Reflection: A quick reading of today's Psalm shows that it is a communal prayer of blessing. The movement of this Psalm, though, reveals a central theme of the entire Old Testament – that Israel is blessed to be a blessing to the entire world. The structure of the Psalm follows a movement of thought that scholars call "chiastic"

(thought A, followed by thought B, followed by thought C, returning to B, and ending with a repeat of A).

The Psalm starts and ends with a prayer of blessing for "us" – the community which prays this prayer as part of its worship. But, it quickly moves on to embrace "the nations" – asking that God's ways would be known throughout the earth and that all nations would praise God (notice that verses 3 and 5 are identical). The centre of the Psalm is verse 4 in which God is praised because God governs and guides the entire world and all its nations.

The way the Psalmist holds together the particular blessing God gives to God's people and the universal blessing that God offers to the nations is beautiful and challenging. It manifests the truth that lies at the heart of God's call to hospitality. In order for us to be hospitable, to offer blessing to others, we need to recognise and receive the blessing God offers us. But, if we keep our blessings ourselves, we fail to be the people God calls us to be, and the nations suffer.

What blessing has God given you and how can you share this with others today?

Practice for Today: In order to receive and enjoy God's blessings we need to recognise them. In order to share the blessings we have received, we need to acknowledge them. The best way to remember and celebrate the many blessings God has given us is to practice thanksgiving. Today, take every opportunity to give thanks for the blessings you enjoy.

Breath-Prayer for Today: You have blessed me, O God, and I thank you.

Saturday 30 April 2016

Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Reflection: In preparation for tomorrow's Lectionary readings that focus on hospitality, today's story gives a "turned around" perspective on God's welcome of us. Zacchaeus, we are told, was a chief tax collector. He was in charge of a syndicate of tax collectors – which, when we realise how corrupt and greedy tax collectors of the day tended to be, made him the equivalent of an ancient

organised crime boss. Yet, something about Jesus fascinated him and so he went to investigate. The rest of the story – including his small stature and his rather undignified clamber up a tree to get a better view – is famous. But, the twist in the tale is in Jesus' response to Zacchaeus when he saw the little man. He invited himself to Zacchaeus' home – essentially forcing Zacchaeus to offer him hospitality. Yet, the truth was that Jesus was inviting this hated, sinful man to receive God's hospitality – God's acceptance, forgiveness and love. No wonder Zacchaeus found himself sharing the hospitality as far as he could as a result!

Our natural human tendency is to reject and exclude those who violate our values and standards of goodness and ethics. We believe that in punishing them, we show them the evil of their ways and that this should change them. If it doesn't we feel confirmed in our views, and become even more determined to shun them. Yet, the way of Jesus in this story is the exact opposite of this. While the people of the town may initially have been angry that Jesus chose to go to the house of such a "sinner" the result of Jesus' grace brought healing and restoration to the whole town. It seems that hospitality, acceptance and love may be far more effective in transforming us than we realise.

Who have you been shunning that may need your hospitality today?

Practice for Today: Forgiveness can be hard at the best of times, but, if those who have hurt us don't even ask for forgiveness, it can feel impossible to give it. Yet, if we seek healing – for ourselves and for others – we need to learn how to forgive regardless of how the other person may respond. This is the way of Jesus, and it is the way of liberation. Today, try to be as quick as you can be with your forgiveness.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you have welcomed and forgiven me, Jesus, so I welcome and forgive those around me.

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