

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:

23 – 29 April 2017

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

Faith and doubt are often seen as opposites. But the Scriptures make it clear that they are two sides of one coin. When faced with the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus often struggled with questions, uncertainties, and doubt. This wrestling was not viewed by Jesus as a problem. Rather it was accepted as part of their development in faith. There's a difference between doubt and unbelief. Unbelief is a choice not to believe. Doubt, on the other hand, is an honest wrestling with belief. This means that our doubts are a path to ever deepening faith.

Any set of beliefs that cannot endure questions and doubts is useless for navigating the challenges of our world. But when we embrace our faith struggles as natural, and as part of the process, our doubts and questions strengthen and deepen our faith, because they drive us back to God, back to prayer, and into deeper reflection. Once we have resolved, and made peace with, our doubts, we are able to go forward in faith with greater confidence.

This week we explore how doubts and questions can deepen our relationship with God.

### **Sunday 23 April 2017**

**Reading:** John 20:19-31

**Reflection:** We often focus on Thomas's doubting of Jesus in this passage. But that's not the focus of the writer of John's gospel. Nor is it the focus of Jesus. Both the Gospel writer and Jesus focus on Thomas's journey to faith. We may be tempted to consider Jesus' last words to Thomas as a rebuke, but rather than making a negative statement about the disciple, the writer is celebrating his readers – those who have believed without having seen. This does not mean Thomas was bad because he had seen. It just means his journey was different.

What Thomas wanted was nothing more than the other disciples

had already experienced. They had encountered the risen Christ and he longed for the same. He yearned for a faith that was real and living and honest, and Jesus gave him what he sought. But notice that Thomas's story is placed between two resurrection responses. In the first encounter with the disciples Jesus sends them to spread the news of God's grace. Then in the last few verses of today's reading the writer calls his readers to respond in faith. An encounter with the risen Christ always calls us to deeper belief and to share life with others.

How can you open yourself to a new encounter with the risen Jesus today?

**Practice for Today:** The resurrection appearances in the Gospels are all unexpected events. Encounters with Christ are always like this. We can never know when Jesus will make himself known, but we can live with an openness and mindfulness that ensure we recognise divine encounters when they happen. The practice of invocation, when used regularly, prepares our hearts for those moments when God's life breaks in. Go through today with a constant prayer of invocation on your lips.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Holy Spirit, open my eyes to God's life, lead me deeper into faith, and send me to share life with others.

### **Monday 24 April 2017**

**Reading:** Judges 6:36-40

**Reflection:** Gideon was an unimportant young man, from an insignificant family and clan, yet God had called him to rescue God's people. Feeling rather uncertain of himself, Gideon asked God to prove that God had called him. And so he came up with the idea of placing a fleece on the ground and testing whether dew could fall on the fleece and not on the ground, and vice versa. According to the story, God honoured his request and gave him the proof he needed. Gideon's questions were not wrong. He simply needed to be sure that he had heard God correctly.

Both Gideon today, and Thomas yesterday, asked for assurances to overcome their doubts, and both received what they asked. This can be both a comfort and a caution to us. The comfort comes because we do not have to be ashamed of our need for reassurance. We will

all face times of uncertainty when we desire signs to confirm the path we are on. But, the caution is that we cannot always expect that we will receive the kind of assurances we desire. Sometimes God speaks in unexpected ways, and sometimes God does not seem to speak at all. But, even so, we need to make the choice to remain faithful even in the midst of our doubts. When we can do this, we know that we are maturing in faith, and our need for signs grows less. Yet, paradoxically, as we trust in the midst of doubt, we become a sign that strengthens the faith of others.

What signs are you seeking today? How can you commit to faith whether you receive them or not?

**Practice for Today:** When we pray, we affirm our faith in God's care and God's ways. We know that the answers we receive may be unexpected, surprising or very different from what we desire, but we continue to pray anyway, because we need this discipline. Today, offer your prayers for yourself and others in faith and trust that, whatever the answer, God is working in and through you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** I offer you my prayers, O God, trusting in your grace and compassion.

### **Tuesday 25 April 2017**

**Reading:** Jonah 1:1-17

**Reflection:** As we read Jonah's famous story, we can easily get bogged down in peripherals – like why God would threaten a whole ship of innocent sailors because of one disobedient prophet, or how a man can be swallowed by a big fish and live under water for three days. But, these were not the concerns of this account. This story was not written as history or science, and was written out of a particular, primitive view of God and of the world. This does not stop it from being authoritative for us. It just means we shouldn't draw scientific or historical conclusions from this passage. Rather, we should focus on the message it seeks to proclaim about God's mission and our part in it.

So, what is that message? Jonah was running away from God's call for him to confront the sinful city of Nineveh. But, Jonah knew that they would repent and God would be merciful. Since he hated the people of Nineveh, he did not want to give them the chance to

repent. But, God was not going to allow Jonah to prevent other people from receiving God's grace and mercy. The story of the big fish highlights that God is willing to go to great lengths to bring salvation, healing and restoration to people, and not even the bad attitudes, disobedience or doubts of God's people can stop God from fulfilling God's plan.

How have you seen God's determined grace at work in your world? How can you cooperate with sharing God's grace with others, rather than trying to keep grace from certain people?

**Practice for Today:** We often make sharing God's grace far more complicated than it needs to be. We don't need lessons in how to evangelise. We simply need to treat others as Jesus would - with kindness, grace and compassion. And, when our bad attitudes get in the way, we need to be quick to apologise and make things right. Today, allow your life to witness to God's determined grace.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** May the way I live be a witness to your determined grace, O God.

### **Wednesday 26 April 2017**

**Reading:** Matthew 12:38-42

**Reflection:** When the religious leaders asked Jesus for a sign, they were giving Jesus a chance to convince them that he was the Messiah. Yet, if Jesus had done what they asked, he would have been bowing to public pressure, and he would have been acting according to their wishes, not God's. Jesus knew that no sign he could give would ever be enough to convince them. The journey of the Israelites in the wilderness proved that. So, Jesus promised only one sign: the sign of Jonah, the meaning of which was not clear.

The most common interpretation is that Jesus was speaking of the resurrection – as Jonah was in the fish for three days, so Jesus would rise from the dead on the third day. The timing is not exact, but signs don't have to be. This may well have been part of what Jesus meant.

But, Jesus went on to speak about how Nineveh responded to Jonah's message and was saved, and how the Queen of the South travelled a long distance to hear Solomon's wisdom. Yet, the

generation listening to Jesus did not receive his message, even though he was greater than Jonah or Solomon. So, it seems that part of the sign of Jonah was how bad attitudes of unbelief and cynicism and pride could keep people from receiving God's grace, while humility and repentance open us to God's gift. The sign was in the response to Jesus' message, and in who responded. Both of Jesus' examples are about people who were outside of God's chosen people. In the same way, Jesus was saying, "outsiders" were receiving his message, while "insiders" were rejecting it.

Who are the "outsiders" in your world? How can you allow them to be a sign to you today, and open you to receive God's message of radical grace?

**Practice for Today:** It takes humility and repentance to be able to learn from those whom we consider "outsiders" or "unworthy". This is why the religious leaders could not receive Jesus' teaching. But, when we are willing to release our pride and the feeling that we know all we need to know, we open ourselves to learn from children, the poor, the marginalised, and the suffering. Today, use the practice of repentance to turn from pride and certainty and become open to learning from others.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Forgive me when my pride keeps me from learning more about your grace, O God, and teach me to learn from others.

#### **Thursday 27 April 2017**

**Reading:** 1 Peter 1:8b-12

**Reflection:** Today's reading, in a very mysterious way, offers us two important truths. The first is that the death and resurrection of Jesus were not unexpected events. Jesus' sacrifice was not God's "Plan B" when things went wrong with the world God had created. Rather, God knew that for the cosmos to become one and whole, and for human beings to become mature bearers of God's image, it would be necessary for God to take on flesh, and then to live and die in a way that undermined the worst tendencies of humanity and that would show the power of love, grace, justice and sacrifice. That is why the Old Testament prophets, who, according to Peter, often did not understand what they were saying, spoke of a dying and rising

Messiah long before the time. This makes it clear that God's plan never was, and never will be, to destroy the world. Rather God has always been at work to heal and beautify creation and everyone in it.

The second truth in today's reading is about the nature of inspiration. Sometimes we think the Bible was created through a kind of "automatic writing" where the hands and minds of people were controlled by God's Spirit. But, the writer of this letter shows a different process. He speaks of the prophets wrestling with what they believed God was saying, and trying to understand it. Their minds and hearts were engaged in trying to grasp what God's Spirit was saying. But, God's Spirit was at work within them and in the world around them, and as they saw it, they wrote, as best they could, what they understood. On some level, they knew things would only become clear as history unfolded. This is a much more human and realistic view of inspiration. It teaches us that the Bible is the product of a collaboration between God and human beings – which is what gives it its power and its ability to connect with the reality of our lives.

How can you allow the Bible's inspiration to teach you to collaborate with God, and to trust in God's eternal plan of salvation?

**Practice for Today:** When we realise that God works in and through imperfect human beings, we begin to understand that God can use us as well, no matter how imperfect we may be. As we read the Bible and listen for God's Spirit to speak, we can also begin to trust God's Spirit to guide us through our days, even when we don't see the plan clearly or understand what the Spirit is saying. Today, allow your reading of the Bible to open you to the inspiration of God's Spirit in a new way.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Inspire and lead me, Holy Spirit, even as you inspired the writers of Scripture.

#### **Friday 28 April 2017**

**Reading:** Isaiah 26:1-4

**Reflection:** After a devastating vision of judgement on the whole earth, the prophet Isaiah began to speak about God's salvation and restoration. He envisioned God spreading a feast for all the earth's people on God's Holy Mountain, and then he proclaimed that death

would be swallowed up and removed from the earth. Today's short reading is the response to these events which the prophet saw God's people would express. The heart of the song is a statement of trust in God. God is the one who surrounds the dwelling place of God's people and makes their city strong. God is the one who brings peace to those who trust in God. God's people are encouraged, therefore, to trust in God as their eternal Rock - a sure foundation on which to build their lives.

As we meditate on the resurrection, we should not be surprised if our response is the same as Isaiah's song. The resurrection reminds us that death does not have the final word, and that God surrounds us with life and strength. When we learn to trust in God's resurrection life, God keeps us in peace, and our thinking and living is shaped by God's unquenchable life. If we live with cynicism and negativity, this is probably a sign that we have not yet truly believed in resurrection. But, as the reality of resurrection takes hold of us we inevitably grow in trust and in hope.

How can you deepen your faith in resurrection a little more today?

**Practice for Today:** When the reality of resurrection life begins to take hold of us, we cannot help but respond in thanksgiving. But, giving thanks also strengthens our faith in resurrection even more, as we remember the ways that God's life has already sustained and strengthened us. Today let the practice of thanksgiving strengthen your faith and inspire your hope.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Thank you, God, for your gift of life that cannot be quenched.

### **Saturday 29 April 2017**

**Reading:** Luke 14:12-14

**Reflection:** It cannot be repeated too often that faith in Jesus' resurrection is more than just an amazing idea. If we really believe in the resurrection, it has to impact how we live - how we treat others, what we value, and how we behave. Jesus didn't teach that we have to accept certain ideas in order to go to heaven. He taught that we need to follow him into a new way of being and living - what he called the Kingdom of God. A sign of our citizenship in this divine realm is our compassion and generosity to others, especially the

least and most vulnerable in our world. This is why, when teaching about hospitality, Jesus goes beyond the custom of reciprocity in which hospitality is shown to those from whom we can expect hospitality in return. In Jesus' way, hospitality is to be given to those from whom we can expect nothing back. It is to be extended to those whom society has rejected and marginalised.

When we learn to share hospitality, we are really sharing everything that makes life vibrant and alive - food, shelter, companionship and care. Jesus says that when we live like this, we will be rewarded at the resurrection. The reward Jesus speaks of is more like a repayment, a wage that is given for work done, or a consequence of our actions. In other words, when we share life, we will experience more of life. When we withhold life from others, our own lives are diminished, but when we seek to bring life to those around us, our own lives are enriched, expanded and inspired. There is no such thing as resurrection that is experienced alone in isolation from others. God's life always leads us into deeper contact and sharing with our neighbours.

How can you share life with your neighbours today?

**Practice for Today:** As today's reading suggests, one of the most powerful ways we can share God's life with others is through the practice of hospitality. This is not just about inviting people into our homes. It's about inviting people into our hearts. When we open our hearts to others we automatically see them as people who are loved by God, and then the most natural thing is to share life, and the things that make life meaningful, with them. Today, find one person who needs a touch of God's life, open your heart to them, and see where that leads you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As you have welcomed me into your heart, O God, teach me to welcome my neighbours into my heart.

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