

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:  
07 - 13 May 2017

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

When it comes to life, the Bible is clear that we can only be most fully alive when we are deeply and meaningfully connected with others. Although it can sometimes feel like the demands of others, the restriction of our freedom that comes from living with others, and the constant struggle to maintain strong relationships with others are too painful and exhausting for what they cost us, the alternative, which is to isolate ourselves, is far worse.

That's why, as we explore the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, the Lectionary leads us to consider what it means to follow the Good Shepherd, and to be part of God's "flock". It is not just that Jesus brings life to us as individuals, but that, through the resurrection, he gives life to our relationships and communities as well. And, when we welcome God's life into our lives, we are also welcoming God's family.

This week our focus is on learning to share resurrection life with one another.

### **Sunday 07 May 2017**

**Reading:** John 10:1-10

**Reflection:** The writer of John's Gospel starkly depicts the difference between the callous legalism of the religious leaders and Jesus' compassion. Then, as Jesus draws on the well-known good shepherd metaphor of the prophets, he seems to mix his metaphors, referring to himself as both the shepherd and the gate through which the shepherd leads the sheep to pasture. There is a good reason for these two images. As the door, Jesus both protects the sheep from thieves and predators, and provides a way to shelter and food. The religious leaders, on the other hand, were keeping the sheep away from God's presence, and were leaving them vulnerable to the evil and oppressive forces of the world. As shepherd, Jesus was willing to give his life for the sheep, and was concerned for their welfare.

The religious leaders, however, were exploiting the sheep and were focussed on their own wellbeing. To speak in this way was a dangerous thing for Jesus to do, but he was more concerned to challenge the evil systems of his day than to preserve his own life.

Jesus' example raises some important considerations for us as we seek to follow him. As we interact with others - both our companions in the faith and those who are outside of faith communities - we have to choose how we will treat them. We can either act as gatekeepers who block their way to God's grace and love, or we can be doorways that make it easy for others to connect with God's life. We can either be bad shepherds who are more concerned for our own "purity" and religious rightness, or we can be good shepherds who put compassion and care for others before our own comfort and security. This is a tough call, but Jesus promises that when we follow him he leads us to abundant life.

How can you trust Jesus' example and live as he did in the hopes of the life it brings to you and through you?

**Practice for Today:** So much of our religious lives are built on preserving our group, doctrines, or ways of doing things. But, if we seek to live the Gospel call to compassion and care, we will need to learn to step into the shoes of other people and release our preferences and our need to be right. One of the best ways to learn to do this is to pray for those to whom we wish to extend God's love, but with an attitude of listening and understanding, not of trying to change them. Try to pray with this kind of openness today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I pray for those around me, O God, teach me to care for them as you do.

### **Monday 08 May 2017**

**Reading:** Ezekiel 34:17-23

**Reflection:** Today's reading is one of the Old Testament prophecies that Jesus, and his hearers, would have had in mind when he spoke about being the good shepherd. Ezekiel refers to the leaders of Israel and reflects on how they have exploited the people in order to benefit themselves. The prophet is most offended because their sin was not just selfishness and negligence. It was actively hurting and oppressing others for their own gain. Nevertheless, God promises

that judgement will come, oppression will end, and God will bring a good leader, reminiscent of David, to care for God's people.

When Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd, he was proclaiming that he had come to be the leader that Ezekiel had spoken about. He had come to care for those who were being neglected and oppressed, and to challenge the systems that caused their suffering. As followers of Jesus, we are called to hold our leaders accountable to the standards of Jesus. This means that our faith is not just a personal thing. Our faith must impact how we engage with the structures of our society. We do this through careful use of our vote, through engaging in protest action when necessary, and through communicating with those in power as we are able. But, as we follow Jesus, we are also called to follow his example of leadership. This means that, wherever we have influence over others, we are to use our power to liberate and bring life, whether to our children, our friends, or our colleagues.

How can you hold your leaders accountable to the justice of Jesus today? And how you can be a good shepherd to others?

**Practice for Today:** The Bible constantly repeats the call to serve. Our faith in Jesus is less about ensuring that we are right with God, than it is about becoming those who carry God's grace and justice into our world. This means that, in whatever sphere we may live and work, we are called to seek opportunities to serve others. Today, keep your eyes open for chances to bring life to those around you, and then do your best to touch them with grace and kindness.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** May my relationship with you, O God, make me someone who brings life to others.

## **Tuesday 09 May 2017**

**Reading:** Hebrews 13:20-21

**Reflection:** The writer of the book of Hebrews does a profound job of describing the work of Jesus through the language of the Israelite sacrificial system. He speaks of Jesus as both the great high priest and the sacrifice. In doing this work, Jesus reveals God's availability to us, and our belonging in God's covenant family. But, in his final comments, the writer draws on a different metaphor – the great shepherd of the sheep. Through God's raising of Jesus from the

dead, God confirmed God's covenant with us, and assured us that not even death could break it. But, God also called us to participate in God's saving, restoring work. That's why the writer prays that God may equip the believers with everything they need for doing God's will, and give them the power to please God - which, as we know from the Gospels, is all about loving God and neighbour. As shepherd, then, Jesus has protected us from death, has ensured that nothing can separate us from God's love, and has shown us how to live lives that please God. Everything Jesus did was not for his own sake, but for ours. What a great shepherd, indeed!

If this is what Jesus did for our sakes, the least we can do is respond by making use of all that he has given us. Now that we know that death cannot harm us, we no longer need to live in fear of it. Now that we know that we belong in God's covenant family, we can live with the freedom and joy that comes from knowing we are loved and accepted just as we are. And, now that we have seen, in Jesus, how to please God, we can follow his example and ensure that our lives do the same. It's all about embracing our "belovedness" and sharing that same love with those around us.

How can you embrace Jesus' gifts today, by allowing them to liberate and empower your life?

**Practice for Today:** It's easy to forget all that Jesus has given us and made possible for us. But, if we make praise a habit, we become far less forgetful. Our praises constantly remind us of all that we enjoy in Christ. Today allow your praises to remind you of the great shepherd's gifts and then allow the power of these blessings to inspire your life and service.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Thank you, Jesus, my Shepherd, for all the gifts you have given me and for the power they bring me.

## **Wednesday 10 May 2017**

**Reading:** Matthew 20:17-28

**Reflection:** The Gospel of Matthew does not make it clear whether the mother of James and John approached Jesus immediately after his teaching about his death, or if there was some time between the two events. Either way, her request for her sons to be honoured shows the extent to which Jesus' disciples had still not understood

his mission, or the values to which he had called them. In Jesus' reply to this proud Mom, he described how power games work in human systems. Most of our world is driven by the desire to get to "the top", and we all get drawn into the games that promise us security, freedom, and the ability to control others and our circumstances. But, these power games do not bring the healing and security they offer. They only lead us into conflict, corruption, and deception where the only rule is winning.

The way of Jesus is the exact opposite of all this. Instead of trying to be in charge, or to control people and circumstances, Jesus calls his followers to give up their power games, to serve one another, and to seek the peace, joy, collaboration, and justice that comes from journeying downward rather than upward. This is not a way that is free from pain, but then, neither is the quest for the top. However, it is a way that brings healing and connection to the world - and it is the way that leads to unquenchable life.

How can you embrace the journey downward today?

**Practice for Today:** There are many ways we can serve others and turn our backs on the quest for power. But, one of the simplest and most effective is the act of giving. Our power games are usually about protecting ourselves, but when we give, whether it's our time, talents or treasures, we give of ourselves. When we are willing to lower our defences enough to do this, we find a deeper connection with others, and power games become less important. Allow your giving to set you free from the quest for power today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Teach me, Jesus, to give of myself as you did so that I may find and share your unquenchable life.

#### **Thursday 11 May 2017**

**Reading:** Acts 6:8-15

**Reflection:** Once again we are faced with the truth that following the Good Shepherd does not guarantee a life free from suffering. In today's reading, the young deacon, Stephen, found himself being persecuted for his wisdom and his willingness to share the life he had found in Christ. When a group of men started a debate with him, they were unable to refute his arguments. They grew angry and persuaded other people to lie about Stephen in order to get him into

trouble, which led to Stephen's execution. He lost his life because of the arrogance of a few heartless people. In the midst of his trial, though, Stephen remained faithful to the message and mission of Jesus, and he made an impact. The writer describes Stephen's face as radiant, and, in the end, Stephen's martyrdom was a significant part of the process that brought the apostle Paul to faith.

Jesus didn't promise us a life of health, wealth and happiness. But, he did promise that we could know God through him, that he would always be with us, and that God's Spirit would always inspire and empower us, as it did for Stephen. Life is not easy, and faith is not an escape from life's difficulties. But, what faith does give us is the wisdom to navigate life more effectively, the strength to endure suffering with grace and gentleness, and the assurance of God's presence to carry us through whatever we may have to face.

How can you, like Stephen, draw on the resources of God's Spirit as you journey through today?

**Practice for Today:** Although God's Spirit is always present to us and at work within us, we often forget this wonderful gift of grace. When things get hard, or life gets busy, it is easy to forget that God's presence is with us, and that we have resources beyond ourselves on which to draw. This is why the practice of invocation is such a powerful and inspiring discipline. Today, invite God's Spirit to be with you and to inspire you no matter what you may have to navigate.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Wherever I go, whatever I do, and whomever I meet, be with me, O Spirit of God.

#### **Friday 12 May 2017**

**Reading:** Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

**Reflection:** One of the reasons that the Psalms are so well-loved is that they echo all the different seasons and experiences of our lives. Some of the Psalms resonate with our joy and celebration, and others reflect our pain and doubt. Some of the Psalms use words of great confidence and faith, and others display fear and uncertainty. But, throughout these songs of Israel runs a thread of trust in God's care and presence, and a childlike freedom to express our longing for God to intervene on our behalf.

In today's reading the Psalmist is clearly under some kind of threat. It seems that this writer is being persecuted by enemies who refuse to leave him alone. This is a frightening and difficult place to be in, yet the Psalmist manages to hold firm in his faith. He affirms all the ways that God cares for him - God's righteousness and strength, the love and favour of God that is poured out on him, and the presence of God's Spirit. Then, he asks for God's protection and deliverance.

As resurrection people we are called to this same faith. Although it is good to seek understanding, and to be aware of the needs of other people for justice and compassion, sometimes we just need to throw ourselves on God's grace and mercy. Sometimes we need to come to God as children, with the freedom to express whatever we fear, whatever we need, or whatever we long for. And, while we know that God's answers to our cries may be different from what we expect, we can rest in the assurance that God's presence is always with us, and that God's grace is always working to liberate and heal us.

What longing or need do you need to express to God today?

**Practice for Today:** When we speak of confession we usually think about admitting our sin and asking for God's forgiveness. But, the heart of confession is about being honest with God about what's going on in our hearts and lives. This means that sometimes we need to confess longings and needs that have nothing to do with sin, but that invite God into the truth of our innermost being. Today allow this kind of honest confession to open you to God's grace.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Hear my cry, O God, for I pour out my needs and longings to you.

### **Saturday 13 May 2017**

**Reading:** John 8:48-59

**Reflection:** Today's reading describes a sharp conflict between Jesus and "those who believed in him" (see verse 31). Jesus had been calling the people to believe in the truth of his teaching, and to allow it to free them. But, this was more than they could handle, since they took great pride in their lineage as descendants of Abraham who considered themselves to be free. This is ironic, since they were an occupied people under the oppression of the Roman Empire. This demonstrates the level of denial and self-deception

that these people were living with, which may explain why Jesus insisted that they needed truth to liberate them. However, as Jesus continued to challenge them, the people turned against him calling him a "Samaritan devil" (perhaps one of the worst racist insults that could be used in that time) and "demon possessed". And, when Jesus finally gave them a hint of who he was, using a divine name (I Am) in verse 58, the people could no longer tolerate what they were hearing and they picked up stones, as they would for any blasphemer.

It can be very difficult to face unwelcome or inconvenient truths. This is why denial has become so common in our world, stretching from personal issues of honesty and brokenness, to the global challenge of climate change. But, when we retreat into denial, we rob ourselves of the healing and liberation that truth offers. Like Jesus' hearers we often prefer to demonise those who confront us with truth than to allow the truth to change us. But, until we are willing to be honest with ourselves we cannot deal with what imprisons and harms us. We need to be willing to face the tough truths about our world, and our own hearts, in order to find God's wisdom and liberation. But, when we do the hard work of truth we will journey through the pain and shame to real healing and freedom.

What tough truths do you need to face and deal with today?

**Practice for Today:** St. Ignatius taught his disciples to be intentional about facing the truth in their hearts and in their world. The tool he gave them to do this work was called the prayer of examen and it involved a simple discipline of reflecting each morning on the day ahead, and each evening on the day gone by. The purpose was to identify places of brokenness and goodness in order to grow in wholeness and freedom. Today make some time for your own prayer of examen.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Search my heart, O God, and show me any truths that I need to face and deal with in order to find freedom.

---

Written by John van de Laar © Copyright 2017 Sacredise.

Readings "Reprinted from *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings*, copyright © 2005  
Consultation on Common Texts ([www.commontexts.org](http://www.commontexts.org))

*If you would like to receive these devotions for yourself, please go to [sacredise.com/daily](http://sacredise.com/daily)*