

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
12 - 18 November 2017

Thought for the Week:

Hope has tremendous power to sustain and strengthen us, especially in the most difficult of times. But when our hope is not realised, or when we discover that we have placed our hope in the wrong things, it can be devastating. This is why the Bible calls hope one of the big three characteristics of those who follow Jesus, but it also teaches that we must be careful where we place our hope.

If our hope is in other human beings, or in social and political structures, or in our bank accounts, we will usually be disappointed. These things are not necessarily bad, but they are incapable of sustaining true hope because they do not last and they are fickle. What we need is an object of hope that can remain firm and that can strengthen us even if we know that we may not see our hope fulfilled. When our hope is in something so compelling, so true and good and beautiful, so obviously worthy, our lives find a source of meaning and strength that can carry us for a lifetime. This is because we know that every small step toward that hope is significant, even the full realisation of our hope may only be seen in future generations. This is what God's Reign is like. It offers a vision of a world that is healed and just, and while we may not experience such a world in our lifetimes, it is worth giving our lives to help humanity make a few small steps toward it.

This week we explore the power of hope, and the vision of God which is the only thing that is truly worthy of our hope.

Sunday 12 November 2017

Reading: Matthew 25:1-13

Reflection: The parable of the ten bridesmaids (or virgins, as some translations put it) follows on from Jesus' teaching in Chapter 24 about a coming time of strife. His call is for his followers to be ready for his coming in the midst of their suffering. But, the essence of readiness is being prepared to wait for as long as it takes. Five of

the bridesmaids did not bring sufficient oil to keep their lamps burning until the groom arrived, and so missed the groom's arrival as they went off to buy more oil. The other five did bring extra oil, and so when the groom arrived they were able to enter the wedding feast. In the terms of Jesus' parable, the five prepared bridesmaids illustrate those who have what it takes to remain strong and faithful no matter what. And what they have that sustains them is hope.

In Christian terms our hope is always based in God's dream. The Bible teaches that God is working in the world to bring about justice and love, and to bring the entire cosmos into unity and wholeness in Christ. This is a profound and exciting vision, and it is the only source of hope that is strong enough to sustain us in the face of this world's struggles. But, if we allow the brokenness of this world to loom larger in our hearts than God's Reign, our hope will fade, and we will be unable to remain faithful to Jesus' way of living. That's why we need the extra oil of nurturing our hope in God's Reign.

How can you nurture your hope today?

Practice for Today: While we trust that life does not end with death, our Christian hope is far bigger than merely a personal escape to some otherworldly heaven. Our hope is in a universe that is healed and united in the grace and love of God, and that has become so transformed as to be eternal. The name we give this is "the kingdom of God", and it is the central message of the Bible. Today, spend time reflecting on the Scriptures and their vision of God's Reign.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I read the Bible, O God, open my heart to your vision of a healed and united universe.

Monday 13 November 2017

Reading: Psalm 63

Reflection: Our Christian hope is not just personal, but the vision of God's Reign in which we trust does touch each of us individually. When we each nurture our own individual hope, this raises the "hope quotient" of our community. And, when our communities become more collectively hopeful, this strengthens the hope in each of our individual hearts. So, the work of nurturing hope becomes a virtuous spiral leading to ever-greater degrees of hope and positive action. This is a helpful context in which to read today's Psalm.

Many of the Psalms, like this one, express despair and struggle because of some persecution or calamity. In today's reading the writer expresses great distress at feeling empty and separated from God. It seems that the cause is that the Psalmist's enemies have plotted to harm him. But, in spite of the difficult circumstances, this writer holds on to his hope in God, and in God's justice. He believes that love and life will ultimately prevail, and he remembers times when he knew deep intimacy with God in worship as a way to nurture his hope for a new sense of God's presence in the future. And, even though he is going through a traumatic time, he renews his commitment to praise God and to reflect on God's goodness, because he knows that these disciplines will fuel his hope and will strengthen him through his time of trial.

What memories of God's presence and love do you have? How can you use these to strengthen your hope today?

Practice for Today: The practice of praise has the powerful effect of lifting our eyes above the immediate struggles of our circumstances and reminding us of the greater reality of God's presence and grace. This doesn't mean that we don't grieve or express distress at times. It means that even in the midst of our struggle we know that there is another, larger reality at work - God's Reign. Today allow your praises to remind you of God's presence and to strengthen your hope.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I praise you, O God, because, no matter what I'm going through, your Reign is always present and working.

Tuesday 14 November 2017

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Reflection: In today's passage we read about how longing and hope work together in the lives of believers. The church and the apostles longed to see each other, and they had hope that they would get the chance to meet again. The apostles longed for the church to grow in faith and love, and they prayed for God to work in the believers to deepen their relationship with Christ. They also had hope that God would do what they asked. Finally, these early Christians longed and hoped for the time when Jesus would return to establish God's Reign in fullness on the earth. They even hoped

that it would happen soon – although that was not to be. From this passage it is clear to see how this longing was a constant part of the faith experience of the early believers. It is also clear to see how their hope sustained them in their most difficult times.

We live in a world where longing is not popular. We strive for immediate gratification of all our desires, and we want our hopes to be fulfilled right away. But, this world can never fulfil the deepest longings of our hearts. Instead of denying our longing to avoid disappointment, we are called to embrace and nurture our longing for, and our hope in, a future of love and justice in Christ. And we are called to allow the longing to motivate us to act in ways that work toward the fulfilment of our hope, and to allow our hope to sustain and strengthen us, even when our longing remains unfulfilled.

How can you nurture this longing in your heart today, and draw strength from your hope in God's Reign?

Practice for Today: The biblical practice of lament is often neglected in our spiritual disciplines. This is because we struggle to feel and express a longing that we aren't sure will be fulfilled. But, when we allow ourselves to feel the longing, acknowledge our sadness that it may not be fulfilled, and cry out in lament to God, we find a measure of healing. It also strengthens our resolve to do what we can to experience God's Reign in our own lives here and now. Today, allow yourself to cry out to God in lament.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I long for a world of peace and justice, O God, and I hold on to my hope that it will one day become real.

Wednesday 15 November 2017

Reading: Joel 3:9-21

Reflection: It should have been startling to read Joel's call to beat ploughshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears. We are used to hearing Isaiah's and Micah's prophecies that use the exact opposite of this metaphor (See Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3). Why, then, would Joel, who probably wrote after Isaiah and Micah (and may have known their writings), speak of creating weapons of war?

The answer is that the prophet is using the image of war to speak about God's restoration of Israel. This prophecy was written after the

time of exile, when God's people were trying to recover from years of oppression and war with strong nations that had ultimately devastated them. Now, the prophet describes God calling the nations to arm themselves as strongly as they possibly can. Then God declares that all their strength cannot withstand God's power. Finally God promises that God's people will never be conquered again. It's a bit like a prophetic version of a big brother confronting the bullies who are hurting his little brother. The purpose of this prophecy is not to advocate for war, but to show the futility of it, and to encourage God's people by giving them a vision of a time when they will no longer be at the mercy of other nations. The point is that, even in our weakest, most vulnerable moments we still have hope that God will protect, restore and heal God's people.

Where do you need to remember that God is standing with you in your life? How can you hold on to the hope of God's restoration?

Practice for Today: Although it may be tempting at times to adopt an attitude of "God will get you" toward those who hurt us, Jesus calls us to a different way of finding healing – the way of forgiveness and praying for our enemies. The cross is the example that proves that evil is only defeated by love, forgiveness and self-giving. Today, allow God to heal and restore you through the practice of praying for those who hurt and curse you.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I pray for those who cause me pain, O God, you heal and restore me.

Thursday 16 November 2017

Reading: Revelation 16:1-7

Reflection: We must be careful to read prophecies of violent judgement, like those in today's reading, literally. It is important to remember that the writer of this book is using the apocalyptic style of the Old Testament prophets. As we've seen before, apocalyptic language uses images, metaphors and symbols to reveal truths that are hard to explain in normal language. We also need to remember that what the Bible refers to as reward and punishment is more like our concept of consequence.

In today's reading we read of judgements being poured out on the earth from bowls. The bowls are held by angels – messengers –

who, in Revelation, often symbolise real things on earth. So, here the angels represent the earth, the sea, and the rivers. The plagues that are poured out of the bowls represent the damage that is done to the natural world because of human sin. You don't have to look far to see the truth of this vision. Human greed, materialism and carelessness, are turning our earth toxic in many places, and it is damaging life in the rivers and seas. We have ignored the warnings of God's prophets to live simply and to care for the earth, and we are reaping the consequences.

But, these prophetic visions must be read in the context of the whole book of Revelation which reminds us that God's Reign will ultimately prevail. In the end the world and its peoples will be healed. This is our hope. But, in the meantime, we need to hear the challenging word that confronts how our failure to live Jesus' way brings harm to us, to others and to the world. What can you do to become a participant in God's healing of the world today, and, in doing so, bring hope to your corner of the world?

Practice for Today: It is tragic that one of the most important disciplines in the teaching of Jesus is so easily overlooked in much Christian practice today. This is the discipline of simplicity. When we hear the challenge of Jesus to live simply, asking for only what we need each day, then we contribute, in a small but meaningful way, to the healing of the world. Today make a commitment to live more simply in one practical way.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I simplify my life, O God, I contribute to healing the world and I become a messenger of hope.

Friday 17 November 2017

Reading: Psalm 90:1-12

Reflection: This Psalm reflects an ancient understanding of God in which all things are under the direct control of God's will. At first reading it feels like a pessimistic view of life along with a rather harsh view of God. For this writer God is in control of everything, and God's anger at our sin causes God to judge us and destroy us. Therefore, life is brief and a burden in which we are weighed down by God's wrath. The God of this Psalm is to be feared. Yet, this bleak picture is placed in a surprisingly contradictory context. The

Psalm opens with a proclamation that the eternal God who created the earth is a home to God's people. This reveals that there is more going on here than a despairing and hopeless faith.

If we were to read the whole Psalm we would see that the context is an experience of trial in which God seems to have abandoned God's people. But, even in the midst of this dark time, two important truths sustain the writer. Firstly, the writer has recognised that wisdom comes when we acknowledge the brevity of life. Once we have accepted how quickly life flies past, we learn to value each moment as precious and rare. And, as we value life, so we learn to live it in the fullest, most meaningful way. Secondly, the final verses (which we did not read today) express great hope in God's unfailing love. So, although the writer was feeling overwhelmed by pain and judgement, God's love and comfort were still present to him. He continued to trust that God's people would be restored. This hope gave him the strength to endure through the difficulties.

How can you value your life even more today? And how can you allow this to guide you deeper into wisdom and hope?

Practice for Today: When we confess our fear, sin, and insecurity, to God, honestly and vulnerably, we experience a renewed sense of God's peace and reassurance. God is not afraid of our pain, even when it comes in doubts and questions. Honest confession opens a way through our struggles for God's Spirit to reach us. Today allow honest confession of your feelings to open you to God.

Breath-Prayer for Today: When I am afraid and insecure, O God, I confess it to you and receive the comfort of your presence.

Saturday 18 November 2017

Reading: Matthew 12:43-45

Reflection: Like faith, if hope has no impact on what we actually do, it is meaningless. It makes no sense to claim that our hope is in God's Reign, and in Jesus who brought it into being among us, and then to live by values and priorities that contradict those of God. If we truly seek to overcome the temptations that destroy us and our world, we need to replace destructively self-centred values and behaviours with others that are contribute to the healing of ourselves and our communities. And we can only do that if we have a real

hope that God's way can deliver the restoration it promises. This is what today's reading is about.

It is important to remember that today's reading is a parable. This means that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, not literally. Just prior to this, Jesus was in a dispute with the religious leaders. Some were claiming that Jesus drove out demons by the power of demons, and others were asking for a sign to prove that Jesus really was sent by God. Jesus confronted the evil motives behind these questions and accusations, and told the parable we read today. Then he went on to describe those who listened to his teaching as his family and as good seed that bears a great harvest.

So, Jesus was not trying to give a teaching about evil spirits. He was describing, metaphorically, what it's like if we claim to listen to God's word but fail to put it into practice. Unless we actually live the way Jesus did, our words count for nothing. Rather, it's like we have done a quick spring-clean of our hearts, but quickly fall back into the old, destructive ways - even worse than before. But, if we really do place our hope and trust in God's Reign, we must do the work to make our lives a reflection of God's love and justice.

How can you put your faith and hope in Jesus' words into practice today?

Practice for Today: Following Jesus, as we have noted many times before, is not just about what we say, but about what we do. If we hope in God's Reign, we cannot help but let that hope guide our choices and decisions. This means that followers of Jesus act in hopeful, faithful ways - always seeking for the signs of God's presence and grace, always seeking to treat others as Jesus would, and always aligning our desires with God's will. Today, let your actions and interactions be driven by hope and faith.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I hope and trust in your words and your ways, Jesus, and so I seek to practice what you preach.

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