

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
17 - 23 December 2017

Thought for the Week:

Our lives feel so very real and large to us that it can be very difficult to imagine being part of anything bigger than ourselves. Our daily needs and struggles can feel overwhelming and the call to think about - let alone act in service of - anything beyond our daily survival can feel like more than we can manage. When we couple this with the constant call from motivational gurus to make ourselves the centre of our own universes, we may begin to think that the solution to our problems is to become more self-centred, not less.

But, the example that is set for us by the great heroes of faith – not least, John the Baptist who is the focus of this week’s readings – is that life is not found by focussing on ourselves, but by giving ourselves for the sake of others. When we allow our hearts and desires to be captured by God’s vision of a world of love and justice, and when we allow this vision to lead us beyond ourselves into a much bigger world, we discover a new sense of abundance, purpose and meaning to our lives. It is not self-protection but self-giving that opens us to the best possible human life. The challenge is for us to really believe this.

This week we allow John the Baptist to teach us to focus not on ourselves, but on God’s mission, and to find life there.

Sunday 17 December 2017

Reading: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Reflection: The Pharisees who had been sent to question John wanted a simple answer that would clarify his identity so they could work out how to respond. But, John refused to be distracted by questions that focussed attention on him. He never lost sight of the fact that his ministry was simply a preparation for the more important ministry (of Jesus) that would follow. Even when he was asked why he felt he had the right to baptise, he simply redirected attention to the one who would come after him.

There are so many voices in our world telling us that our first priority should be ourselves. We are constantly trained to focus on our own pleasure, or security, or health, or beauty. The implied promise is that if we put ourselves first we will find our greatest happiness and fulfilment. Yet, our generation is one of the least fulfilled and the most miserable in history. The idea of giving ourselves for something bigger than ourselves has largely become lost, but with it, we have lost our souls and any real sense of meaning in our lives. John’s story reminds us that abundant life is found not when we focus on ourselves, but when we give ourselves to something bigger, and when we use our lives as signposts to point beyond ourselves to God’s Reign of love and justice.

How can you live as a signpost that points beyond your own concerns and dreams to those of Christ today?

Practice for Today: Perhaps the biggest shift that most of us need to make in order to become signposts for God’s Reign is to use our energy more for the sake of others than for ourselves. It is tempting to make our lives about our own goals and desires. But, when we give our lives in service of others, we not only contribute to the healing of our world, we also find the richest, most fulfilling life possible. Today, find one way that you can give yourself for others and make a commitment to practice this as a daily discipline.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May my life not be about my own dreams and desires, O God, but about yours.

Monday 18 December 2017

Reading: Psalm 125

Reflection: Psalm 125 is a song of ascent that would have been sung by pilgrims as they processed up to the Temple. It speaks of what life is like when it is lived in trustful communion with God. While it seems to proclaim that “wicked” people will not rule over “godly” people, Israel’s history – and our own – reveals that this is not a guarantee. Not only are corrupt and self-serving leaders common, but the lines between the “wicked” and the “godly” often become blurred. The writer’s point is that those who follow God’s ways are not to allow themselves to be “ruled” by those who ignore God’s ways, for then they too become corrupt and destructive.

The last words of the Psalm reveal the true desire of this Psalmist – for Israel to have peace. That’s why he reminds his people that God surrounds them, just as the mountains surround Jerusalem. That’s why he prays in a way that reminds the people that goodness comes to those who do good - simply as a consequence. And that’s why he calls the people to trust in God’s presence and care. We are most likely to be drawn away from God’s ways when we become focussed on ourselves, or believe that finding abundant life is up to us. We can only find peace and life when we are willing to let go of our need to control things, and allow ourselves to fall into a life that is bigger than us. And this takes faith in God more than in ourselves.

How can you release your need to be in control and give yourself over to God’s much bigger life today?

Practice for Today: The practice of giving is often thought of only in terms of generosity and the sharing of material possessions. But, we are called to give just as much because it takes faith, and it teaches us to release our reliance on our own abilities and resources. As we learn to give, so we learn to trust in God’s abundant life to sustain and empower us. Today, allow your giving to lead you into a deeper sense of trust in God’s grace.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I give of myself and my resources, O God, so I learn to trust in your grace to sustain me.

Tuesday 19 December 2017

Reading: Acts 3:17-4:4

Reflection: After the healing of the lame beggar at the Temple gate, a crowd gathered and Peter saw an opportunity to witness to Jesus. He boldly told the people about Jesus’ death and resurrection, and called them to turn away from their old ways and embrace the new way of Jesus. Peter used people’s amazement at the healing to show them their own need for healing. But, he deliberately drew attention away from himself. He knew that it was not his own power that had healed the lame man, or that would draw people to Christ. It was only God’s power that could do that, and so Peter pointed beyond himself to the God who alone can save.

Peter’s preaching also got the attention of some of the religious leaders, and they were determined to stop him. But, they had not

recognised that it was God’s Spirit at work. If they had, they would have known that arresting Peter and John would not be sufficient to contain their influence. The final verse of today’s reading indicates that this attempt to silence the apostles had no impact, and many people came to faith anyway. So, in spite of the great opposition, the fledgling church continued to grow.

When we make our faith about our own efforts, or when we seek to be successful in human terms as we do the work of ministry, human power can stop us. But, when we point beyond ourselves and allow God’s power to be the focus, then no human strategy can ever stop our influence. How can you trust your life and work to God’s power?

Practice for Today: Pointing beyond ourselves to God is about more than just thanking Jesus in public, or looking skywards when we achieve anything. It’s about allowing our lives to radiate trust in God and to be an expression of praise. When we make praise a daily personal discipline, our focus shifts from ourselves to God, and our lives automatically reflect this change in orientation. Today, allow your praises to shift your priorities and trust.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I praise you, O God, so my gaze is fixed on you and my trust grows.

Wednesday 20 December 2017

Reading: Mark 9:9-13

Reflection: After the transfiguration, Peter, James and John were amazed and confused. Firstly, they didn’t understand what Jesus meant when he spoke about dying and being raised. Secondly, they had a nagging question about the prophecies that predicted the coming of Elijah before the Messiah would appear. They now believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they wondered why there had been no sign of Elijah. Jesus’ response made it clear that John the Baptist had fulfilled the Elijah prophecies, but he also taught them that, as John had been persecuted, so too would he.

This short conversation shows how well John did his work of shifting focus away from himself. He had pointed so strongly to Jesus that the disciples did not recognise what his role had been. And Jesus followed a similar pattern. He did not make his ministry about himself. He was constantly pointing beyond himself to the Reign of

God that would be most powerfully revealed in his death. That's why, as Richard Rohr says, Jesus never commanded anyone to worship him. He only invited us to follow him.

As for Jesus and John so for us. Our greatest purpose and fulfilment is not found by making our lives about ourselves, but about pointing beyond ourselves to God's Reign of love and justice. How can you point beyond yourself today?

Practice for Today: It is all too easy to make our lives only about ourselves. We may even find our prayers becoming focussed only on our own needs and desires. But, when we learn to expand our praying to include the people and circumstances that most need God's Reign to be revealed, our own priorities and values shift. We are no longer concerned only for ourselves, but our lives begin to connect with God's purposes and desires. Today, allow your prayers to shift your focus away from yourself alone.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I pray, O God, may my dreams and desires align with yours.

Thursday 21 December 2017

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4

Reflection: The letter to the Hebrews is a complex and challenging book. It requires knowledge of the Old Testament system of sacrifices and festivals, but it also seeks to offer a glorious revelation of who Jesus was and what he did. The book dives right into this purpose from the very first verses. It describes how God has reached out to humanity through God's own Son, who radiates God's glory and through whom all things were created. Along with all of the New Testament, the writer proclaims that in Jesus we get our best picture of God's character and mission. If any of our ideas about God contradict what we see in Jesus, they are not true understandings of God.

Notice, the lengths God is willing to go to in order to reach women and men with God's grace and love. The writer begins by pointing out how God has spoken through prophets in every time in history. But, in the end prophets were not enough for God, and so God came to us in Christ, sharing our life and death, our joys and griefs, in order to draw us into God's divine family. According to the writer,

what makes Jesus great is his sacrifice to cleanse us and reconcile us with God. It's amazing to think that even God is more concerned for others than for God's own self! It's amazing to think that God's greatest glory is revealed in the way God sacrificed to bring life and grace to human beings! This is why any God-talk that denies God's humble, self-giving nature is deeply mistaken. This is also why anyone who claims to follow Jesus but fails to reflect Christ's humility and self-giving is missing the point.

How can you reflect the humility and self-giving of Christ in your own life today?

Practice for Today: God's humility and self-giving is revealed, according to the writer of Hebrews, in the way God reached out to humanity in love and acceptance. If we seek to reflect God's character in our own lives, we will need to reach out to others with the same welcoming acceptance and grace. Today, welcome everyone you meet as if God had appointed you to represent God's gracious welcome - which, in fact, God has.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I welcome all people in your name, O God, and I offer them your grace and acceptance.

Friday 22 December 2017

Reading: 2 Samuel 6:12-19

Reflection: The Ark of God - the special box which contained the tablets of the law - was believed to be God's earthly throne. Where the Ark was, God's presence was made manifest. This is why the Israelites had taken the Ark into battle against the Philistines. But, to their dismay, the Philistines had captured the Ark. However, keeping this sacred artefact ended up being more trouble than it was worth for Israel's enemies, and so they returned the Ark. It only managed to get as far as the home of a man called Obed-edom, though, and there it stayed for three months. According to the story, this man and his family were blessed while the Ark was in their home. But, David became determined to bring the Ark into Jerusalem, the capital and spiritual centre of Israel. Today's reading describes the joyous procession as the Ark was brought into the city.

Notice the different responses to this moment. David was so overjoyed, he stripped down to his underwear and danced in a

frenzy. The people with him seemed to share his joy, and they shouted and blew horns. But, David's wife, Michal, had a different response. She was the daughter of David's predecessor, Saul, so perhaps she still harboured some enmity for the man who had become her husband. Perhaps she had fallen into cynicism. Or perhaps she just felt that such extravagant displays of emotion were inappropriate. All we know is that she felt contempt for David. It is easy to judge the worship experiences and expressions of others. It is easy to reject others when they don't practice their faith and worship as we do. But, to do this only cuts us off from a possible new encounter with God.

Toward whose worship expression do you feel contemptuous today? How can you open yourself to learn more about God from these worshippers?

Practice for Today: It takes great humility to learn to release precious ideas and practices in our relationship with God. It takes grace to learn to respect and celebrate the different ideas and practices of others. But, when we make the time to listen to those who are different from us and learn from their experiences, we discover new depth to our own worship. Today, make time to listen to those who worship and pray differently from you - perhaps even those of another religion.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I listen to those who pray differently than I, O God, so I grow in my understanding and experience of you.

Saturday 23 December 2017

Reading: John 7:40-52

Reflection: When Jesus taught that his ministry would bring division he wasn't joking. Today we see what that meant in the real experience of Jesus' contemporaries. Some members of the crowd were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, but others didn't believe it because they thought Jesus came from the wrong place. Even the Temple guards who had been sent to arrest Jesus couldn't make up their minds about him. But, the religious leaders were adamant that they knew how the whole Messiah thing was supposed to work, and Jesus didn't fit their presumptions. So, they rejected him without further investigation. Furthermore, they

dismissed those who did believe in Jesus as foolish, ignorant and cursed by God! This is the arrogance and evil of those who believe that they have the only truth about God. Yet, all their aggression and pride did not change the fact that Jesus was the Promised One, and they missed the opportunity to experience God's Reign through him.

But, not all of the religious leaders fell into this trap. Nicodemus had taken the time to investigate and to talk to Jesus directly (in John 3). He gently tried to open the others to the possibility that there might be more to Jesus than they were willing to see, but they simply dismissed him as well. They believed they had understood the Scriptures clearly, and that there was no discussion necessary. Even today, there are still many religious people who adopt this dismissive, arrogant attitude, and who believe that they know the only way to interpret the Bible. Yet, even today, these closed-minded people miss God's new movement, and fail to follow Jesus' way of creative, surprising grace and love.

Who are you tempted to dismiss? How can you be more open to learning about God's mission through those with whom you disagree?

Practice for Today: Many of us read the Bible in order to gain certainty and answers. This is how the religious leaders read it, too. But, when we think we've got the Bible all worked out, and when we use the Bible to silence questions, we are not using the Scriptures the way Jesus did. Jesus loved questions, and he constantly called people to question their assumptions and be open to God's new and surprising ways. Today, try to read the Bible as a book that guides you to ask the right the questions, and that opens you to new discoveries.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I read your word, God, so you teach me to ask new questions and make new discoveries about you.

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