

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:  
20-26 November 2016

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

This is the last Sunday of the Church Year! As usual, before we begin the next cycle of seasons beginning with Advent's vision of God's glorious future, we end the year by remembering the sovereignty of the One who makes that future possible - Jesus Christ, God's righteous Monarch. But, the Reign of Christ must never be viewed through the lens of human empires. The throne of Christ is unlike that of any human ruler, and the values of Christ's Reign are completely different from those of our human societies.

This raises two fundamental questions for us. The first is whether we will really place our lives under the authority of Jesus. It's easy to call Jesus "Lord", but to really live as a disciple means our lives must reflect the same values, attitudes, and behaviours that Jesus' did. Only then are we really living with Christ as our authority. The second question is to understand what Christ's authority looks like. Unlike our world, where authority means dominance or greater control over others, the authority of Jesus is about serving others, collaborating with others and setting others free.

This week we end the year by placing our lives firmly under the authority of Jesus again.

### **Sunday 20 November 2016**

**Reading:** Luke 23:33-43

**Reflection:** In Luke's version of the crucifixion story, we see an intriguing contrast in the way different people respond to Jesus' death. On the one hand there are women, religious leaders, soldiers and criminals who mock Jesus and view his death as God's curse. This comes through clearly in today's reading. But, on the other hand, we see all these same groups - women, religious leaders, soldiers and criminals - recognising God's hand in Jesus' death and turning to Jesus for hope and salvation even as he died. In today's reading we see this in the thief who repents, but if you read the

whole passion narrative you would see the other groups as well. This shows us that it doesn't matter who we are, or what our station is in life - we all have the opportunity to come under the Reign of Christ or to choose to reject his invitation.

It seems strange to focus on the cross when speaking of the Reign of Christ, but this is the way the Gospels do it. The cross is the primary way that God's Reign is revealed in our world, and so, even though they were mocking him, Jesus' detractors were right when they called him king. But, the cross reveals that God's Reign is very different from human power games. Instead of revenge, Jesus speaks forgiveness. Instead of rebuking the repentant criminal because of his past, Jesus welcomes him. And instead of anger at his suffering, Jesus dies with dignity, humility, grace and love - even toward his enemies.

Ultimately we must all choose which realm we will live in - God's Reign or the empires of humanity. Which realm do you choose?

**Practice for Today:** It is easy to use mockery and cynicism to protect ourselves from the influence of God's Reign - and many people do. But, if we want to live as true citizens of God's Reign, we will need to appreciate and value the alternative way of living that Jesus teaches. This appreciation is best expressed in praise - like the penitent thief. Today, constantly submit yourself to Christ's Reign through the practice of praise.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** I praise you, Jesus, for your Reign which welcomes and saves me and all people.

### **Monday 21 November 2016**

**Reading:** Revelation 21:5-27

**Reflection:** John's Revelation draws to its conclusion with an amazing vision of the New Jerusalem. It's important to remember that John is using prophetic (apocalyptic) language - which is language that is meant to reveal deep truths, not literal facts. So, everything he writes here is symbolic. The twelve gates and twelve foundations, named for the tribes of Israel and the apostles respectively, represent God's new community - the new nation established by God's Messiah - which is why this city is called the

Bride of the Lamb. The precious stones (which reflect the light in different colours) speak of how God's glory is reflected by those who have become God's new people – God's dwelling place. The thickness of the walls speaks of a firmness that cannot easily be destroyed, offering security to those who live within. And the only light that is needed is God's glory, meaning that the people of this new community are guided by God's wisdom and presence.

But notice two important features of this city. Firstly, this city is not seen by John to be in some far off heaven. It is established here on earth. It is here that God's Reign must be experienced and revealed. Secondly, notice how the gates are never closed. Although those who destroy others and themselves (which is what the list in verse 8 is about) stay outside, the gates remain open, which means that, at any point, anyone can change their heart and life, leave behind their destructive ways, and enter into God's new community. This is what the Reign of Jesus looks like - secure, glorious, welcoming, filled with God's presence, and experienced right here on this earth!

How can you open yourself to experience this Reign of Christ in your life today?

**Practice for Today:** John's vision of Christ's Reign was written to believers who were being persecuted for their faith. It was meant to strengthen and comfort them, but they were also encouraged to ask for God's living water - God's Spirit - to sustain them until this vision became a reality in their world. Today, as you seek to experience a glimpse of God's Reign, invoke God's Spirit to sustain you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Let me drink deep of your living waters, O God, that I may experience your Reign in my life.

## **Tuesday 22 November 2016**

**Reading:** Isaiah 33:17-22

**Reflection:** The big temptation for the people of Judah, who were facing conquest and exile, was to lose faith in God's rulership. In a world where military victory was often seen as proof of the superiority of a nation's god, the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple could easily have been interpreted as a failure on God's part. But, Isaiah gives the people a very different

perspective. This setback was a temporary consequence of the people's lack of justice and faithfulness, and the time would come when restoration would happen. The promise of God's salvation included images of peace and security, of divine order for their society, and of divine care for the people. And all of this would be accomplished through God's king, the true shepherd of God's people who would reign with justice and grace and lead the people back to worship of God.

As we celebrate the Reign of Christ this week, we may also find ourselves tempted at times to doubt the authority of Jesus. When evil and injustice seem to triumph and when our lives are threatened by everything from crime and corruption to economic collapse or joblessness, we may begin to wonder whether the Reign of Christ really can make a difference in our world. Yet, like the prophet who proclaimed hope to a people who were facing despair, so the Scriptures speak to us today of God's hope and God's promise in the face of our struggles. Whatever setbacks we may face are ultimately temporary, and God's life, grace and peace will be revealed in the world in the end. The challenge is for us to hold on to this hope and allow it to guide our attitudes and actions each day.

How can you nurture hope in Christ's Reign in your heart today?

**Practice for Today:** Even in the toughest times there are always things to be thankful for – companions who walk with us, God's presence that sustains us, our ability to imagine a better future. As you seek to nurture hope and optimism in your heart, allow the practice of thanksgiving to inspire and strengthen you today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** In the midst of a turbulent world I thank you, O God, for the hope you inspire in my heart.

## **Wednesday 23 November 2016**

**Reading:** Jeremiah 31:1-6

**Reflection:** In the darkest times, we need imagination and courage to hold on to a vision of a better world. If we lose heart, we inevitably become destructive and things get even worse. But, if we can keep hope alive, we find the necessary inspiration to act creatively, faithfully, and graciously. Jeremiah proclaimed hope and a promise

of restoration to God's people. Even though they were tempted to believe that God had abandoned them, Jeremiah reminded the people that God's love was eternal, and that nothing could separate them from God's presence and care – not even their own sin and injustice. Even though the Temple had been destroyed, Jeremiah painted a picture of people whose worship was restored and vibrant because of God's salvation.

The only requirement for the people to experience this new, restored world was for them to survive the time of turmoil. This hopeful vision was meant to strengthen and encourage the people, enabling them to survive whatever difficulties they had to face. The same is true for us. As we face the various crises of our world, we may be tempted to give up hope, and stop living fully and courageously. But, if we can resist this temptation, stay strong and allow our hope to carry us through, we will find our way to the restoration we seek.

How can you resist the pull of cynicism and pessimism today?

**Practice for Today:** Staying strong in tough times does not keep us expressing our fears and grief. When we cry out to God, that is when we discover God's presence and support. This is why lament is such a powerful practice. Today offer your cries of fear, grief and doubt to God and let God's comforting presence strengthen you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** The world is a broken and painful place, O God, but I place my trust in your Reign.

### **Thursday 24 November 2016**

**Reading:** Daniel 9:15-19

**Reflection:** One of the things that sustained servants of God like Daniel during the time of exile was their belief in God's dream for a new world of justice and peace that would be ushered in by God's Messiah. These ancient believers often looked back to the Exodus to remember how God had liberated God's people from slavery. These memories gave them hope and boldness to expect that God would do it again. Even though their country was desolate and their Temple was in ruins, the people believed that God could restore them again and they prayed for this salvation to come.

In the time before Christ's birth, God's people were in a similar place. Once again they had been conquered, and they longed for liberation, and so again they turned to the Exodus story for hope.

The prayer of Daniel takes note of the harsh realities of the world, but looks back to God's past work of salvation, and then looks forward to God's future saving work. As we begin our preparation for Advent, we do a similar thing. We take note of the struggles facing our world, and the huge gap between our current reality and the dream of God's Reign. Then, we remember how God has rescued God's people in the past, while looking forward to the time when God's Reign will be fully revealed among us. If there is anything that can renew our faith and hope in the Reign of Christ it is Advent.

Today renew your commitment to remember God's saving work and to worship with faith and hope through Advent.

**Practice for Today:** Notice how much of Daniel's prayer is focused not on who God's people are, but on who God is. Daniel's hope lies in God's undeserved love and grace, and not on anything the people can do to earn God's favour. When we seek to nurture our hope and faith, the best starting point is to focus on who God is, and then to dedicate ourselves to following God for God's own sake. Today, offer yourself to God again, because of God's grace and goodness.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** No matter what I may have to deal with in the world, O God, I dedicate myself to you because of your goodness and grace.

### **Friday 25 November 2016**

**Reading:** Genesis 6:1-10

**Reflection:** When Jesus told his disciples about the coming time of turmoil, and of his own glorification, he referred to the time of Noah, when people were completely unprepared for calamity. Today, we read the preamble to the flood story. It would be unwise to take this reading as literal, factual history. For example, why should God destroy all the animals for the sin of human beings? There is no justice or mercy in that! That's why we need to remember to read this passage as it was intended – not as a factual account of history, but as a story that expresses a truth much deeper than facts.

It is important to keep in mind that the writers of this account did not have the benefit of Jesus' revelation of God's grace and mercy. Yet, they still show God as a grieving parent who reluctantly judges humanity, while saving a remnant to continue to work through. Flood stories are common in the cultures of the Ancient Near East, and since the world which they knew (the Tigris-Euphrates River valley) was regularly flooded, it makes sense that they would have seen this as God's judgement, especially if a particularly devastating flood occurred. For us, there are two lessons in this story. Firstly, God is concerned for what happens among God's creatures, and God works in and through the world to bring justice into being. Secondly, God's grace and love is that of a grieving parent seeking to liberate and heal all people. Advent reminds us that God is involved in our lives, and that God is working to bring healing and justice into our world. But, just as the flood surprised the people of Noah's time, so the coming of God's grace and presence is often surprising and unexpected. That's why we need always to be alert and ready.

How can you prepare your heart for God's coming today?

**Practice for Today:** To be alert for God's coming - or rather the manifestation of God's presence that is always with us - we need to practice mindfulness. This means practicing the discipline of opening our hearts and awareness to God's presence and activity in our lives. One of the best ways to learn this awareness is through stillness. As we allow ourselves to become still, we turn our awareness to God's Spirit, and we learn how to recognise God's presence and hear God's voice. Make some time for stillness today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I become still, O God, I become aware of your presence and grace.

### **Saturday 26 November 2016**

**Reading:** Matthew 24:1-22

**Reflection:** A couple of weeks ago we focussed on Luke's version of today's reading. Back then we were exploring the way God's Reign remains true and sure even in the face of great turmoil, and how our ordinary actions help to express the values of God's Reign in our world. Today, we prepare ourselves for Advent Sunday, and

the reminder that God is always coming to us with the promise of grace, mercy and peace.

The struggle with interpreting today's reading is that it combines two perspectives that must be held together. On the one hand there is the teaching about the Temple's destruction and the time of turbulence in which this will happen. As the Gospel writer was penning these words, the Temple had already been destroyed, and followers of Christ were being persecuted for their faith. On the other hand, there is the apocalyptic language (that is, language which reveals deep truths) from Daniel, which is often taken to refer to Jesus' final return in glory. But, Jesus knew that the Roman invasion and persecution would happen, and so he warned his followers to stay faithful and to trust in God's Reign in the midst of the struggle. But, he also assured them of God's presence and God's Spirit to strengthen and guide them through these difficult times.

The message of the Advent season, which we begin tomorrow, is that God is always breaking into our experience now (not just in the past and future) to enable us to live faithfully according the mission of Jesus, even when the world is in turmoil, as it is now.

How can you open yourself to the comforting, strengthening presence of God?

**Practice for Today:** The practice of prayer is sometimes thought of as an attempt to get God to do what we want. But, it is more accurate to think of prayer as an attempt to see what God is already doing, and then to align ourselves with that. Today, as you pray, ask God to reveal God's presence and activity to you, and seek to live in accordance with God's direction.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Show me your presence and work, O God, so that I can live in alignment with your purposes.

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