

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
27 November - 03 December 2016

Thought for the Week:

The first Sunday in Advent is generally considered to be a time when we consider the Return of Christ. While the Scriptures definitely do call us to consider Christ's return, and to place our hope in his coming, how we answer this call can make a huge difference to how we live our lives. If we make the return of Christ the "real thing" after the "curtain raiser" of life here and now, we inevitably devalue this world and the lives we live in it. If we become obsessed with predicting the time and manner of Christ's coming, we lose touch with the world we are called to serve now. And if we make too much of the future return of Christ, we may end up missing God's coming to us in the midst of our daily routines now.

If we are to avoid these pitfalls, we will need to understand something that the Scriptures make clear. Firstly, we don't just hope in Christ's return. Rather, our hope is in the new world that Christ's return offers – the new heaven and new earth that will be established, and the Reign of God that will finally be completely manifest. Secondly, our hope is not just about some future event, but about a new way of seeing and living in the world now. This means that, rather than try to take the prophetic language of the biblical writers literally, we are to grasp the hope that is found in the *meaning* of Christ's return, and then live from that hope now, in every detail and interaction of our lives.

This week we explore what it means to live in the hope of God's new world in Christ.

Sunday 27 November 2016

Reading: Matthew 24:36-44

Reflection: In context, this passage flows out of Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple, and his call for his followers to stay alert and watch for the signs of God's Reign in the midst of the turmoil. By the time this account was written, Jerusalem had been

sacked for some time, along with the destruction of the Temple, and the believers were under threat of persecution. These are the events that Jesus is referring to in verse 36, and they had come as just such a shocking surprise to many. The descriptions of people being swept away, of one person being taken while another one is left, is not a reference to an end time rapture, but to events that had already been experienced by the first believers.

Yet, in the midst of these turbulent times, Jesus promised, he would come to his people. While the New Testament does point to a future time in history when Christ's return will be completed, the sense of Jesus words is that we should always be alert and watching for the signs of God's presence breaking into our lives. Our hope then is that we would know God's presence and sustaining strength now in the face of this age's great challenges, and that, one day, the world will be healed and made completely new and whole. Both of these hopes are necessary if we are to follow Jesus faithfully, and witness to God's presence and activity in our world.

How can you watch and be alert for Christ's coming to you today?

Practice for Today: The call to stay alert can sometime seem like a passive one - as if we wait until God decides to show up. But, the truer picture is that God is always breaking into our lives, and we can cooperate with God's work by invoking God's presence and Spirit. Today, stay alert to God's presence by inviting God's Spirit to be revealed to you throughout the day.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Show yourself to me, O God, for I watch and wait for you.

Monday 28 November 2016

Reading: Romans 6:1-11

Reflection: The big question that Paul continually seeks to answer is simply this: "How then should we live?" In the light of all that God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus, what should our response be? At the heart of this response is the realisation that we are united with Christ. Through the sacrament of baptism, we join ourselves with the death of Jesus - the sacrificial act of love through which we find our home in God's Reign. But, we have also buried our lives in

the life of God and been raised into God's new life - the life of eternity, experienced here and now. It is not that baptism has some magical quality. It's that baptism reveals the presence and grace of God that is already at work in us and in the world, and to which we open ourselves through faith in Christ.

But, the real miracle of this union with Jesus is that we are no longer at the mercy of our worst selves. Those things that bring death to us and others - our quests for power, possessions and pleasure - have lost their hold on us, and now we live according to the values of God's life, and we seek to bring life to others. This is a constant journey of growth and change, and it is built on the knowledge that Christ's life and power are available to us now, and that we are participating in bringing God's new world into being by living our most loving and just lives in our small corner of the world. In other words, we should live as those who overcome our worst, live as our best selves, and bring life wherever we can. This is Paul's answer to the question. And when we do this, we experience God's coming to us in every moment.

How can you live in this way today?

Practice for Today: Paul is very clear that living this new life in Christ is not something we can do in our own strength. It is only as Christ's life takes hold of us by God's Spirit that we are transformed from our worst selves into our best selves. This means that prayer is a crucial practice in this journey. As we pray - for ourselves and others - we open ourselves to God's life and we experience transformation, both personally and communally. Why not pray like this today?

Breath-Prayer for Today: Work in me and my world, O God, so that your life can be revealed in ever greater ways.

Tuesday 29 November 2016

Reading: Hebrews 11:32-40

Reflection: Hebrews 11 is the great chapter on faith. We often love to read the first verses of the chapter which speak of faith as the assurance of what we hope for and of what is not yet seen. We forget that this is not referring to anything our hearts might desire,

but is speaking of our Christian hope – the establishment of God's Reign among us. We also love to read the stories of the heroes and heroines of faith who achieved great things, and saw great miracles. It is not often, if we're honest, that we read all the way to the end of the chapter and read about some of the other things that happened to people because of their faith – public shame and mockery, whippings and imprisonments, stonings, being cut in two, and murdered with swords. All of this suffering was said to be the result of their faith, too! What makes it worse is that the writer says that they did not receive what was promised, because the promise had to wait for future generations (like us) to receive it.

All this resonates with the words of Jesus from Sunday. It is clear that following Jesus does not guarantee a peaceful, successful, and trouble-free life. Rather, what it does guarantee is the Spirit of God and the strength of God to carry us through when tough times hit. Our faith is not seen by the so-called blessings we accumulate. Rather it is seen by our character and attitude in the face of suffering and persecution, and it is seen by our willingness to embrace sacrifice for the sake of others. When we nurture this kind of faith in our hearts, then we become Advent people, for whom, and through whom, God's Reign is always being manifest.

How can you nurture this faith in your heart today?

Practice for Today: What kept these faithful people strong was not their faith in God's "blessings", but their faith in God's goodness and in God's Reign. They were willing to give everything – even their lives – for the sake of bringing salvation and wholeness to the world. Their praises of God's Reign inspired this faithful commitment. Today allow your praises to inspire you in the same way.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I praise you, O God, for your Reign, which heals the world, and is worth everything I have to give.

Wednesday 30 November 2016

Reading: Psalm 124

Reflection: Today's Psalm celebrates what happens when we know that God is "for us". As we remember Jesus' warnings about the turmoil we would experience in the world, it is important to note that

even the Psalmist recognised that having God's presence and grace with us does not keep us from tough times. It's not that the Psalmist was not attacked, but that the attack did not destroy God's people. It's not that the waters did not rage and flood, but that the flood did not sweep God's people away. It's not that there were no enemies seeking to trap God's people, but that the people were able to escape, as birds from a cage.

It's important that we place these words alongside the ones we read in Hebrews yesterday, though. In that passage, even having God's favour and presence did not save some of the faithful ones from death. We make a mistake if we think of our faith as a fortress which makes us impervious to the suffering of the world. This is not what Jesus offers, and it is not what he calls us to. Rather, we are called to embrace the struggles of our human existence, to stand with those who are persecuted, attacked, entrapped, or who suffer trauma, and bring the life, love and care of God to them. When our faith stops us from seeing God as a divine bodyguard, and leads us to see ourselves as God's hands and feet, God's defenders of the threatened, and providers for the poor, then our faith truly lifts us above the pain and struggle of this world, and becomes something that allows God's Reign to break into our lives, and the lives of those around us. What an amazing Advent hope this is!

How can you be an agent of God's Advent hope to others today?

Practice for Today: Sometimes all people need to carry them through their times of struggle is some kindness. Whether it's a kind word, or an act of kindness that helps them to grieve or to survive, there is tremendous power in kindness - and it costs so little. Today, speak words of kindness and blessing over everyone you meet - and act with kindness if they need it.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I treat others with kindness, O God, so I make your Reign known.

Thursday 01 December 2016

Reading: Isaiah 4:2-6

Reflection: As is the pattern in these devotionals, today begins the process of preparing our hearts for Sunday. With the promise of

God's Reign that breaks into, and that will ultimately heal, our world, we now begin to see how God has chosen to make God's new world a reality among us. At the heart of God's promise is a special person. In Isaiah he is sometimes called "the branch" and in Sunday's reading he is called the "shoot from the stump of Jesse". This speaks of the way he brings life out of death, and creates newness, abundance and life for all of creation. This special "branch", of course, refers to the Messiah, the appointed servant of God who establishes God's Reign on the earth. In today's reading we see a glimpse of what this servant of God is like.

Notice how today's reading speaks of those who survive the destruction of Jerusalem. There was always a sense that God's Reign would be established after great turmoil in the world. But, the reality that comes after the struggle is one of peace, cleansing, security, belonging, and beauty. This is a powerful image because it reminds that God does not come into our world to destroy it - not in the past, not now and not ever - but to restore it and heal it. And the same is true for our lives!

How can you open yourself to God's coming and receive God's wholeness and beauty in your life today?

Practice for Today: Of course, for restoration to happen we need to admit that things have been broken. This is the power of the practice of confession. When we acknowledge our brokenness, God is able to work in us to bring wholeness and to make us the beautiful creation that God intended at the beginning. Today, lift any broken places in your life up to God and invite God's healing to come.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Where I am broken, O God, please heal me and restore me to your beauty.

Friday 02 December 2016

Reading: Isaiah 30:19-26

Reflection: In the Old Testament, one of the primary manifestations of God's grace is that God sends messengers, teachers, judges, and leaders to guide God's people in God's ways of life. However, the history of God's people shows that often the ones who were supposed to lead God's people ended up leading

them astray, and bringing hardship on the ones to whom they should have brought blessing and joy. This is why there is a constant promise spoken through the Old Testament prophets that God would send a messenger and teacher who would be a person of integrity, would love the people, and would care for them the way they needed. In today's reading we see the promise of such a teacher spoken by Isaiah.

Notice, firstly, how the teacher is described as a voice of wisdom that whispers in each person's ear. The best teachers don't make their message about themselves, but allow their wisdom to be absorbed into people's hearts and minds so that wisdom becomes second nature to them. Secondly, notice how the wisdom of this teacher brings blessing on God's people. This is simply the consequence of living well, which wisdom teaches us to do. Of course, as we celebrate Advent, we remember that Jesus is the Teacher who brings God's wisdom and blessing to us.

How can you open your mind and heart to hear the whisper of Jesus' wisdom today?

Practice for Today: In order to learn to hear the voice of Christ, we need to take time to still the noise of all the other voices that seek our attention. This is why stillness has always been a central practice of Christian spirituality. Today, make some time for stillness and for listening to the voice of Christ.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I still my heart and mind, I hear your voice, Jesus.

Saturday 03 December 2016

Reading: John 1:19-28

Reflection: Two characteristics stand out in John the Baptist. Firstly, he was remarkably confident in what he had been called to do. He knew exactly what his task was, and that it was God who had called him to do it, and he was completely comfortable in his calling. So, when the religious leaders tried to nail him down, or fit him into their preconceived categories, John could easily stay true to himself. The second characteristic of John's ministry was his amazing humility. Knowing his calling, he did not try to go beyond it, or to

reach for a position that was not his. He knew that he was simply the forerunner, and that the Christ was to come after him, so he happily pointed the people beyond himself to the Coming One. The result of this was that his ministry was effective, his integrity spoke to the people, and, when Jesus arrived on the scene, he simply slipped out of the limelight and made way for Jesus' work to take over.

In our celebrity driven culture, where everyone is a "brand" and so many seek to achieve wealth and fame without effort, ability, need or a sense of calling, the message of John's life is a powerful and challenging one. As we seek to understand what the new order that Jesus established is really all about, John's simple humility, his confident service, and his willing sacrifices are a profound example of Kingdom living. And his confidence in his calling is a reminder of what can happen when we find our purpose in following Jesus according to the gifts and opportunities that we have been given.

How can you serve God's Reign with confidence, humility and integrity today?

Practice for Today: If there is anything that helps us to see our lives and our calling clearly, and to find confidence and satisfaction in who God has made us to be, it is the practice of thanksgiving. As we give thanks for the gifts and opportunities that we have received, and we express gratitude for what we have instead of complaining about what we don't have, we learn to be content and faithful in the tasks God has called us to. Today allow thanksgiving to bring you this satisfaction.

Breath-Prayer for Today: For the gifts and opportunities I have received to serve you, O God, I give thanks.

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