

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
04 - 10 December 2016

Thought for the Week:

As John the Baptist prepared God's people for the Messiah, so he prepares us, in this Advent season, to receive God's Reign in a deeper way. The Lectionary this week calls us to anticipate the new order that is established by God's Messenger, as well as the peace and well-being that we find in God's new world.

One thing that this "voice in the wilderness" made very clear is that God's Reign is not just a "place" or a "state of being" that we receive passively. Although we become citizens of God's Reign purely by grace, when we become part of God's new world, God's new world becomes part of us. This means that who we are, what we think, how we feel, and how we behave are all shaped and formed by the values and purposes of God's Reign. It's not just Jesus that we invite into our hearts, but God's new way of being. And when this happens, God's new world begins to be reflected in us as it flows through every dream, every interaction, and every moment of our lives. This is why we are never born into God's Reign. We are only ever born again into it - it requires a remaking of who we are, a true baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire!

This week we will explore what it means to allow God's new world to take hold of us.

Sunday 04 December 2016

Reading: Matthew 3:1-12

Reflection: It should not be surprising that John the Baptist preached exactly the same message as Jesus. Compare verse 2 of today's reading with Matthew 4:17. Both John and Jesus held this simple, but life-changing, message at the centre of their mission. It consists of two simple statements that must always go together: 1) God's Reign is near (or "at hand" or accessible and available) and 2) Repent (which simply means change). This is not about getting to heaven after we die. This message is all about experiencing a whole

new way of being now, in this life. These two messengers of God proclaimed that God's new world was not a pipe dream, but was available and accessible to us now – we can experience it and participate in bringing it into being. Then they explained how we can experience it – by changing. When we give up our devotion to the systems and values of human society, and take on the values and purpose of God's Reign, we have repented and we begin to manifest God's Reign in our own lives.

Notice two things about John's message to the religious leaders, though. Firstly, he told them that it was not enough for them to be "children of Abraham". Their human ancestry, and their position in the religious community did not automatically mean that they were participants in God's Reign. In the same way, it is not our family, or church, or religious affiliation that makes us part of God's Reign. Secondly he told them that they would need Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire. They would need God's power, and the refining work of God's Spirit to cleanse and equip them to live this new way. We need exactly the same empowerment from God.

Today, allow God's fire to cleanse you and change your attitudes and motivations, and then allow God's Spirit to fill you and empower you to live with new actions - those of God's Reign.

Practice for Today: It doesn't take long, when we start to follow Jesus, to realise that we don't have what it takes in ourselves to live God's way. Our negative, broken attitudes and our destructive habits have too strong a hold on us. That's why we need to develop the habit of constantly invoking God's Spirit to cleanse and empower us. Go through today with a constant invocation in your heart.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Holy Spirit, cleanse me with your fire and empower me with your presence, I pray.

Monday 05 December 2016

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Reflection: Today's reading is really very comforting. If we are tempted to believe that living as part of God's new world requires us to do dramatic, miraculous things these words should put those fears to rest. There are really only two simple instructions that the

writer gives. The first is that we love one another as Jesus taught. This means that we live faithfully, not engaging in sexual or other behaviour that betrays our sisters and brothers. The second is that we live quiet lives, minding our own business and working "with our hands" (simply and in whatever way we are able). This is about resisting the siren-call of power, possessions, and pleasure that have become the obsessions of our culture, and learning to be content with simplicity, service and the small, loving sacrifices that make our relationships strong, and our world more whole.

The challenge that comes out of this reading is for us to reflect on how well we are following these simple instructions. In what ways do we betray our sisters and brothers in the faith (not only sexually)? In what ways have we failed to love those around us, and how could we love them better? Where have we fallen prey to the desire for more influence, more material wealth, or more instant gratification? How can we learn to be content with our "quiet" lives, and how can we find satisfaction and joy in the work that flows out of our best selves, and out of the gifts and temperament that God has given us?

Take some time to reflect on these questions today.

Practice for Today: When we are faced with a searching challenge like in today's reading, the ancient Ignatian practice of "examen" is helpful. In this practice we invite God's Spirit to help us to examine our own hearts and identify where we are following Jesus well, and where we may be struggling or failing to live as true disciples. Today, practice the prayer of "examen" using the questions above.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Search me, O God, and know my heart, and teach me to live in a way that pleases you.

Tuesday 06 December 2016

Reading: Romans 15:14-21

Reflection: Like John the Baptist, the apostle Paul had a clear understanding of the task he had been called to perform. He knew that he had been appointed to carry the message of Jesus to the Gentiles – those who had previously been considered beyond God's grace and love. His ministry had achieved a lot, and it had impacted large numbers of people in dramatic ways. Yet, he refused to take

credit for any of it. He simply pointed the Roman believers back to Jesus, and celebrated the work that God had done.

This did not mean that Paul was not ambitious – he states in verse 20 that he was. But, his ambition was to serve God by reaching those who had never heard the Gospel before. Paul's knowledge that he was just a channel of God's grace did not lead him into passively waiting for God to do everything. He worked hard for those he was called to serve. Nor did it give him any sense of entitlement, or privilege because he belonged to God's family. Rather, he sought to share God's grace as widely as he could. These simple attitudes are both inspiring and challenging. As we seek to follow Jesus, we do well to avoid any boasting about what God does through us, or any sense of special privilege because of our place in God's grace. We do well to allow God to use us as a channel of grace to all those who cross our path, and to serve and love others as well as we can.

How can you live by these simple attitudes today?

Practice for Today: One of the great gifts of the Scriptures is that it tells the stories of those who have gone before us on the road of following Jesus. Their lives and attitudes - and even their mistakes - teach us what it means to live as participants in God's mission. Today make time to reflect on and listen to the biblical stories of ancient Christ-followers.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Thank you, God, for those who have walked the road of faith before me, and for how they teach me.

Wednesday 07 December 2016

Reading: Matthew 12:33-37

Reflection: It's sad that we often fall into the trap of making our faith all about the ideas we hold in our heads, and the words we say, rather than the fruit we bear. It's sad that there are so many people in our world who feel judged or rejected by the words of Christians, and who fail to see Jesus in the actions of those who claim his name. This is not a new thing. The great struggle of religion has always been to transform people so that they live out the highest and best ideals of their faith. However, all too often religion becomes a way to draw lines between those who are "in" and those who are

"out" and to create cohesion in the "in" group by rejecting the "other". This is what Jesus is challenging in today's short reading.

The framework for Jesus' teaching is the metaphor of a tree bearing fruit. The fruit that Jesus is referring to is not about ideas, or even about words - although he goes on to address how we speak very strongly. The fruit of our lives is about the impact we have on others, for better or worse. When we encounter people, do they leave feeling more loved, more accepted and more inspired to live up to their best selves, or do they leave feeling diminished, dismissed, or more open to react from their worst selves? Ultimately this is about how we treat them, but in this context, our words become an important part of our fruit. Idle words dismiss and hurt others, making them feel smaller, less valuable, and less sure of themselves. Careful words have the opposite effect, making people stronger and surer of their ability to make a difference.

Which words will you choose to speak today? What fruit will you seek to bear?

Practice for Today: The reason we close our worship gatherings with a benediction (a "good word", or a word of blessing) is not just so that we feel blessed as we leave the sanctuary and return to our routines. It's to teach us how to be people of blessing who consistently speak words of life over those we encounter each day. Today use your words to bless others in this way.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May the words of my mouth, and the actions of my life, bring blessing to others in your name, O God.

Thursday 08 December 2016

Reading: Ruth 1:6-18

Reflection: The call to be faithful in living out the values and purposes of God's Reign is repeated throughout the Advent season - and throughout the Church Year. Sometimes our faithfulness feels like it's not achieving much, and like we are just hanging on because there's nothing else to do. But, even small acts of faithfulness have results that may not be visible, but that make a huge difference.

Today we read about the difficult choice that a young woman named Ruth made. She had married a man who was a foreigner in her

country and gone to live with his family. Her sister-in-law had done the same thing, but then both men died - as their father had done a few years before. This left the two women with their mother-in-law in a place of great vulnerability. That's why Naomi decided to return to her homeland, and why she encouraged her daughters-in-law to return to their people and seek to marry again. Orpah chose to do what her mother-in-law suggested, but Ruth refused, probably out of concern and deep love for her mother-in-law. Her decision to go to Naomi's homeland where she would be an outsider was an act of sacrificial faithfulness, but it had massive consequences. It ensured that both she and Naomi were more secure than they would have been alone. But, more importantly, she ended up marrying an Israelite, and starting a family, which, in a few generations, gave birth to the great king David. This small act of faithfulness, created the framework for God's promise of salvation in Jesus to be worked out in the world!

How can you live with this simple faithfulness today?

Practice for Today: Faithfulness is about little more than simply choosing to stay true to our convictions, to the values of God's Reign, and to the people who share our commitment to Jesus. This is not always easy - other believers will hurt us, and sometimes it will be easier to lay aside our convictions. But, if we make the practice of dedication a daily habit, we will find ourselves much stronger when the times of trial come. Today, renew your commitment to God's Reign.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you have stayed faithful to me, O God, so I commit to be faithful to you and your people.

Friday 09 December 2016

Reading: Psalm 146:5-10

Reflection: On Sunday the Gospel reading from the Lectionary describes a moment of doubt in John the Baptist's heart. He was in prison and sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one, or if the people should wait for someone else. In reply, Jesus described the way he was liberating people from every kind of captivity - spiritual, physical, emotional - and how the poor were hearing Good News. These acts were often described in the Old Testament as

characteristic of the Messiah, and so by using them as his reply to John, Jesus assured him that he was who John believed him to be.

In today's Psalm God's work on behalf of God's people is described in the same terms. In the verses just before today's section, the Psalmist encourages people not to trust in powerful people. The implication is that those who are wealthy and powerful - who are invested in the world's systems - will not be the ones to bring justice to the poor and vulnerable. But, God, who is the wealthiest and most powerful, the one who created everything, is the one who does bring justice, liberation, healing, and security to those who trust in God. This is because, when we give ourselves to God's Reign, we become part of a community of justice and compassion in which we look out for one another. This is what Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated in his ministry, and it is what his followers are called to do as well.

How can you be more connected with God's community of care today?

Practice for Today: Being part of a community of care is really not that hard. To begin with we need to be willing to commit to a group of people. Then, we simply need to become welcoming of each other - a little more each day. Practice this today by warmly welcoming everyone with whom you interact.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I connect with your community, O God, I receive and give care and support.

Saturday 10 December 2016

Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1-8

Reflection: In a world where people believed that everything happened because of the intervention of the gods, Hannah's prayer makes perfect sense. She had been barren, and was mocked by her husband's other wife, but then, she had given birth to Samuel, whom she dedicated to God. In gratitude she offered this prayer of thanksgiving in which she praised God for the way God works in people's lives. The way she saw the world, it was God who decided who would be rich and who would be poor, and who, as an act of justice, would sometimes raise up the poor and bring down the

proud and powerful. Nevertheless, the focus of her prayer was on God's grace and justice, and on the way God takes note of the suffering of those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

The Bible shows that human understanding of God has moved beyond this image of a divine chess player who moves people around like pawns. We now know that God works within our choices and decisions, and that much of the disparity and suffering in our world is not because of God's action, but because of human decisions and actions. However, one thing that hasn't changed in our understanding is that we continue to believe that God's priority is for justice in the world, and that God is always working to raise up the poor and vulnerable through God's people. The signs of God's Reign are always the ones that Jesus gave to John - which are the same signs for which Hannah gave thanks in her prayer: liberating and uplifting the poor, and bringing down unjust systems.

But, what does this mean for us? It means that we are to reflect these signs in our own life through the way we share whatever power or influence we have, by the way we give as generously as we can, and by the way we treat all people with dignity and respect. How can you do this today?

Practice for Today: The work of justice - of uplifting the poor and bringing down unjust systems - may feel like it should be done by activists and large organisations, but the reality is that justice happens in the small daily interactions of people. Today, use every interaction as an opportunity to express justice through treating others with dignity, generosity and compassion.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May your Reign be reflected in me, O God, as each day I practice simple acts of justice and grace.

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