

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
18 - 24 December 2016

Thought for the Week:

The Gospel reading for this last Sunday before Christmas – the fourth Sunday of Advent – speaks of Christ as the one who comes to us as “God with us”. This is more than just a promise of God’s presence. It’s an indication of God’s longing for intimacy with us. God is not “up in heaven” watching us “from a distance”. Rather, God is immersed in our flesh, our experience and our world. The theological word for this is “incarnation” – that God takes on human flesh. This means that everything that makes up the physical world – from our planet to our bodies – is important to God. Spirit and matter are not separate, but are one, and God is to be found within our embodied lives.

There are two powerful messages that we can hear through this truth. Firstly, we can rest in the knowledge that God truly is with us – not just in a once off moment in history, but in every moment and every situation. Secondly, we can offer our bodies, our energy, our lives to God as God’s Temple – the place where God Spirit dwells. And then, as we experience God’s abiding presence within us we become “little incarnations” – people who “carry” God within our flesh and our lives. This means that, as we seek to love and serve others as Jesus did, we also become little “Emmanuel’s” through whom others encounter God’s living presence.

This week we explore what it means to live in the presence of God and to share that presence with others.

Sunday 18 December 2016

Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Reflection: When the writer of Matthew’s Gospel tried to explain the significance of Jesus’ birth, he turned to the prophet Isaiah. When the kingdom of Judah was under threat, Isaiah gave King Ahaz a sign – and the angel in Matthew’s Gospel used this same sign about the birth of Jesus. In Isaiah’s case, the sign was intended to show

the King that he did not need to place his trust in human alliances, but that God would be with God’s people and would sustain and care for them. In Joseph’s case, Jesus was the sign that revealed that God was with God’s people, and that the dream of God’s Reign was finally being fulfilled in the world.

Of all the signs God could have chosen to reveal God’s grace and presence, the birth of a child is, perhaps, one of the most unexpected. But, from the outset God seeks to show that God’s Reign is completely different from human empires. In God’s Reign, children are the teachers, and the greatest are the least. And the sign of God’s Reign is the sign of birth, of creativity, of new life.

So, as we prepare for the coming Christmas celebration, let’s remember that Jesus is really not the focus. Jesus is the sign that points to the presence of God’s Reign, God’s life, God’s creativity among us. What does this mean to you today?

Practice for Today: A sign is designed to point us to something that we might not see without the sign. It’s a call for us to pay attention. In the same way, Jesus is a sign that calls us to pay attention to God’s presence and grace among us. Today, make a conscious effort to be mindful of God’s presence in your life.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Teach me to pay attention, Jesus, and to be aware of God’s presence.

Monday 19 December 2016

Reading: Galatians 4:8-20

Reflection: The believers in Galatia were struggling with the freedom that Christ offers. It seems that, though they had embraced this freedom initially, they had begun to doubt that it was real, and so they had fallen into legalism and superstition. Some of their teachers were denouncing Paul’s ministry and claiming his message was false. So, Paul did two things to try and correct this beloved church: He reminded them of how his ministry had come to them, and how they had received it, and called them back to that childlike faith and freedom. And then, he confronted their legalism. Although he would have preferred to address them more gently, Paul did not shy away from using strong words when necessary.

The pattern that the Galatians went through is fairly common among people of faith. We often begin with joy and freedom, as we are overwhelmed by God's grace and presence in our lives. But, once the first flush of excitement has worn off, we may begin to over-analyse things, and to doubt that grace really can be so free. We may start to put limits on it, and draw lines around who is "in" and who is "out". And then, we may find ourselves living by rules in order to prove that we really are "saved" and worthy of God's grace. The whole thing just becomes more and more rigid and lifeless. That's why it's so important for us to remember what God has done to bring us grace, and how freely and openly God has welcomed us into God's grace. Only when we keep these reminders clear, can we retain a sense of God's presence within us, and share God's presence with others.

How can you remind yourself of God's free gift of grace today?

Practice for Today: The practice of remembering is an important one in the life of faith, and there are many ways to do it. We can journal, we can write notes in our Bibles, we can build small altars which remind us of significant events in our spiritual journey. However you choose to do it, make today a day of remembering God's presence and grace.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I remember all that you are and have done for me, O God, and I celebrate.

Tuesday 20 December 2016

Reading: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Reflection: As you reflect on the state of the world, are you tempted to feel that God has abandoned us? Do you ever wonder how God can allow the circumstances we see around us?

The Old Testament judge and prophet Samuel was born to a woman who must have felt like this before his conception. Hannah was barren in a time and culture in which women were considered the property of their husbands, useful only for the purposes of work and bearing heirs to carry on the family line of inheritance. As a childless woman, Hannah was pitied and mocked, and was treated badly by her husband's other wife. But, then, miraculously, she was able to

bear a son. In thanksgiving and celebration she offered the prayer of praise that we read today.

Notice how her prayer is not just about herself, but explores God's activity in the world. In her time all things, good and bad, were believed to be the direct result of the intervention of the gods. This is a primitive view of God that we cannot embrace in the light of Christ. But, the essential truth remains helpful for us – that God raises the poor, the marginalized, and the humble, and opposes the greedy, the power-mongers, and the arrogant. This is the same essential message that the Gospel writers proclaim with regard to Jesus' birth. Jesus came to establish the Reign of God in which justice and love are the foundations.

Where do you see God's just and loving activity at work in your life and your world today?

Practice for Today: When Hannah became aware of God's work in her life, she responded in praise. The practice of praise always helps us to deepen our sense of God's presence in our lives, and it helps us to hold firm to the gifts of God that we have received. Make today a day of praise.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I praise you, O God, for your presence and gracious work in my life.

Wednesday 21 December 2016

Reading: Genesis 37:2-11

Reflection: Joseph was not the most tactful of biblical characters. While his dreams were obviously significant for him, he lacked the sensitivity to be careful how he shared them with his family. The result was that he came across as arrogant and foolish, and his brothers developed a strong dislike toward him.

Nevertheless, God was at work in Joseph, and in his family. They all needed to learn some humility, and they also needed to learn to recognise the presence and power of God that was at work within them. God had spoken to their ancestor Abraham and promised that this family would become a nation through whom the entire world would be blessed. And, God was at work to fulfil this promise even through Joseph's misguided sharing of his dreams.

The birth of Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. Through the birth, life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus all nations have been, and continue to be, blessed. And now we, too, enjoy the blessing of God's presence, grace and love in Christ. What an amazing thought that God has been working through all of history to flood the world with the blessing of God's presence and power.

How can you open yourself again to God's presence and power in your own life today?

Practice for Today: One of the great gifts of our faith is a simple prayer that has been passed down through the ages: "Come, Holy Spirit." We don't pray this because the Holy Spirit is absent, but because we need to be reminded of God's presence and power. This prayer of invocation reminds us that the Spirit is within us and at work in us, and it makes us more aware of the Spirit's presence. Today, whenever you think of it, pray this invocationary prayer and open to God's Spirit.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Come, Holy Spirit.

Thursday 22 December 2016

Reading: Isaiah 33:17-22

Reflection: The prophecies of the book of Isaiah span a long period in Israel's history. In the first section of the book, of which today's reading is a part, the prophet sees the coming threat of the Assyrian Empire which would bring much suffering and uncertainty to God's people. Yet, as with all prophecy, there is always a glimpse of hope in the midst of the warnings and judgements. And so, today we read of God's promise to lead Israel to freedom, restoration, and safety.

We have all experienced the truth that while we can choose our actions, we can't choose the consequences. When we live in ways that are self-protective, self-promoting, and self-serving we inevitably bring pain to ourselves and others. But, when we live in ways that are open, humble, and self-giving we inevitably experience life and connection for ourselves and others. This is the hope of the Gospel, and it is not just for us on an individual level, but for the entire world. Jesus was born and lived to demonstrate this

new selfless way of living, and this is, in a very important sense, one of the ways in which Jesus saves us.

Reading Isaiah's prophecy it may seem like God swoops in like a superhero to liberate God's people from their enemies. But, in reality, what saved God's people was when they heard the voice of the prophets and changed their ways to conform with God's values and priorities.

How can you align your life more closely with the values and priorities of Jesus, and allow him to save that way?

Practice for Today: One of the simplest tests of our maturity in the faith is to evaluate what we pray for. If our prayers are nothing more than a shopping list of our wants and needs for God to fulfil, then we must recognise that, in this sense, our faith is rather immature. But, when our prayers include requests for others, and even for our enemies, then our faith is aligning us with the priorities of Jesus. Can you pray like this today?

Breath-Prayer for Today: Save us, Jesus – not just me, but also my neighbours, and even my enemies.

Friday 23 December 2016

Reading: Luke 1:46b-55

Reflection: If you read Mary's song – known as the Magnificat – carefully, you may be surprised at its content. Mary was a newly pregnant teenager, possibly facing execution for adultery because her betrothed husband-to-be was not the father of her child. Yet, as she arrives at the home of her elderly cousin, she bursts into a song of thanksgiving. This is probably because Elizabeth, who was experiencing her own miraculous pregnancy immediately recognised the divine nature of Mary's child. What a comfort and affirmation this must have been for Mary.

But, if we look deeper, we will notice that the content of Mary's song does not focus on her own situation. She begins by giving thanks for what God has done in and through her, but then she goes on to celebrate God's acts of justice in the world. God has raised up the humble and brought the arrogant low. And, Mary somehow recognises that in her pregnancy God is fulfilling God's ancient

promise to God's people – and through them to the world. The birth of Christ is not just about God getting individuals into heaven. It is about God's presence and power overturning all the world's power structures. And it is about bringing people into anew, just and loving, way of living.

How can you embrace this world-changing Christmas truth in your own life today?

Practice for Today: Although tomorrow, on Christmas Day, we will be giving and receiving gifts, the most significant gift that we receive again this year is God's call to participate in bringing God's Reign into full manifestation in our world. As we recognise the power of God's way to lead us to abundant life, we cannot help but respond in thanksgiving, as Mary did. And, this thanksgiving can make us even more appreciative of all the gifts we receive – including those of Christmas Day. Why not prepare for tomorrow by making today a day of thanksgiving?

Breath-Prayer for Today: Thank you, O God, for your Reign of justice and love that comes to me in Jesus.

Christmas Eve Saturday 24 December 2016

Reading: Luke 1:67-80

Reflection: The births of Jesus and John the Baptist are remarkably similar in Luke's Gospel (Luke is the only Gospel writer to include John's birth story). Luke also includes two prophetic songs – the first is Mary's "Magnificat" when she arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth which we read yesterday, and the second is the "Benedictus" uttered by Zechariah when John is born - which is today's reading. One thing that these two songs have in common is their thanksgiving for God's salvation and rescue.

According to Luke, Zechariah saw God's purpose for his son, and recognised that God was acting on behalf of God's people. To begin with John's father recognised that the time of the Messiah had arrived, and that God's promise that an heir of David would establish an eternal Reign was being fulfilled. Then, he also affirmed that God had remembered God's covenant to Abraham, and was rescuing God's people from their enemies. Finally, there is the affirmation of

John's role in preparing people's hearts, and leading them into a new, forgiven, way of living. Zechariah had tremendous insight into the significance of history for understanding God's work in God's people, into the future promise of God, and into the present work of God. This sense of God's work through time, strengthened his faith and hope, and inspired this amazing song.

How can you nurture your awareness of God's presence and work through your history today?

Practice for Today: As followers of Jesus we are called to develop a new understanding and awareness of time, that is shaped by our understanding of God's activity through history. One of the best ways to learn this new understanding is to meditate on the way the Scriptures reveal God at work in the past, the present and the future. Today, allow the Bible to open your eyes to God's perspective on history.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Past, present and future are in your hands, O God, and you work in all times.

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