

## **Sacredise Daily Worship**

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:  
29 January - 04 February 2017

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

In the prophecy of Micah, which is one of the Lectionary readings for today, the prophet asks what God requires of God's people. Then he answers his own question: "...to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8 CEB). If we wish to know what justice, faithful love and walking with God look like, the Sermon on the Mount gives a pretty good picture. Situated near the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, the famous Sermon is the first of five important teaching sessions of Jesus, and it offers summary of Jesus' message, a manifesto for his ministry. The first part of the Sermon, known as the Beatitudes, is the Gospel reading for today.

Along with Micah's prophecy, the Beatitudes show us the kind of life that "God blesses". This doesn't mean that we earn God's blessing by making the Beatitudes as a new law. Rather, these Scriptures invite us into the blessing of God that is already ours because of God's grace. Everyone is blessed! But, not everyone experiences the blessing because we may have shut ourselves off to the qualities and values that open us to abundant life. We may not live as justly as we could, and we may not embrace faithful love for God and others – in which case we have chosen ways that bring pain to others and, ultimately, to ourselves. But, when we open ourselves to God's values and purposes, our hearts begin to change and we begin to live the kind of life that brings blessing and justice. God's grace enables us to live this way, but if we refuse to allow God's grace to do its work, we separate ourselves from God's "blessings".

This week we explore what it means to live a life of justice, faithful love and walking humbly with God.

### **Sunday 29 January 2017**

**Reading:** Matthew 5:1-12

**Reflection:** After the destruction of the Jerusalem, Judaism was experiencing a kind of identity crisis. The temple had been

destroyed and sacrifices could no longer be performed, and the Jewish people were seeking a new way to live and worship in this very different world. Matthew's Gospel was written to proclaim the way of Jesus as the answer to this identity crisis, and so the writer presents Jesus as a new Moses, teaching a new (or fulfilled) law, to a new people of God made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The Gospel is built around five great teachings of Jesus (each symbolising one of the five books of the Law), of which the Beatitudes is the first. These simple statements of blessing have inspired human beings of all cultures, races and creeds throughout the centuries since they were first spoken.

Notice how different these qualities are from those that our society considers to be "blessed". Those who feel their poverty or inadequacy of spirit – their need to grow to be fully human and whole – are blessed. Those who grieve, who are humble, who seek justice (righteousness), who are merciful, and who work for peace are blessed. Even those who are persecuted for their convictions and actions of goodness and rightness are blessed. How different from the arrogance, wealth, frivolous happiness, self-protection, and power-hunger that is considered the way to blessing by so many.

The challenge is not to turn these qualities into a law that we must observe to earn blessing. Rather, we are to recognise that those whom the world ignores and rejects are already blessed by God, and then we are to find these qualities within us (they are already there) and allow them to open us to God's undeserved favour as we stand with the world-rejected, God-blessed ones. How can you open yourself to those who are blessed, and learn from them today?

**Practice for Today:** We learn nothing from other people if we refuse to acknowledge or interact with them. This is why the practice of welcoming and greeting others is so powerful. When we take the time to notice those who are different from us - especially those we would normally ignore - we open ourselves to receive some of the wisdom and blessing they already possess. Today, take a moment to interact with someone who is usually "hidden" or ignored in your world, and welcome them as you would welcome Christ.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I welcome others in your name, Jesus, may I receive from them, and give to them, your blessing.

## Monday 30 January 2017

**Reading:** Philemon 1-25

**Reflection:** Philemon was a leader in the early church – probably in Colossae. Onesimus, his slave, had run away, had encountered Paul while he was in prison, and had been led to faith in Christ. As a result Paul asked Onesimus to do something unthinkable for an escaped slave: to return to his master. But, Paul also asked something unthinkable of the master, Philemon: to accept his slave back as a Christian brother and to treat him as well as he would have treated Paul. The letter to Philemon (and to the small house church that gathered in his home) is Paul's very personal plea for Philemon to do the right thing according to his faith – to treat his slave with grace and love, and not to punish him as the law allowed.

While the issue of slavery is never directly addressed, Paul's plea makes it clear that the way of Jesus is very different from the ways of the world around us. Rather than living by the values of retributive justice, Paul asks his friend to live by Jesus' way of gracious, restorative justice, in which healing, restored relationships, and goodness are the focus, not punishment. As we wrestle with issues like crime, corruption, terrorism, and political incivility, we would do well to heed Paul's definition of justice and turn away from our hunger for punishment, retribution, and vengeance. We and our world will only really find wholeness when we are willing to embrace Paul's teaching and learn to be people of peace, forgiveness, acceptance, restoration, and radical love.

What retributive justice are you seeking in your heart today? How can you turn toward restorative justice instead?

**Practice for Today:** When we talk about forgiveness, we usually think about our own need for restoration. But, when we deal with the sins of those who have hurt us or our community, we are often much slower to speak of forgiveness. But, for Jesus, forgiveness must be given – for our own sakes – as much as it must be received. The powerful practice of absolution teaches us to share, the freedom of true, restoring forgiveness. Why not practice absolution today?

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Empower me to be a person of forgiveness, Jesus, so that the world may be restored.

## Tuesday 31 February 2017

**Reading:** Ruth 2:1-16

**Reflection:** Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law had cost her much. As widows they were among the lowest members of their society, but as a foreigner, Ruth was one of the most vulnerable and disregarded people in her world. Yet, she embraced this sacrifice out of love for Naomi, and concern for her mother-in-law's wellbeing. Her kindness did not go unnoticed. When she followed the custom of her day, and gathered the grain that fell behind the harvesters of a wealthy man, he recognised her, protected her, and was extremely generous to her. He even instructed his labourers to deliberately drop barley for her to pick up. Boaz's kindness and commitment to justice was admirable, and it gave Ruth and Naomi a measure of security. In time, the relationship grew, and Ruth and Boaz were married. His kindness was repaid through Ruth's devotion and love. This story had another important result – Ruth and Boaz became the great grandparents of the great king David.

Even small acts of kindness have significant consequences. When we face the great challenges and evils of our age, it is easy to become disillusioned, and to believe that we can't contribute to the world's healing, but, if we embrace the call to love justice, to embrace faithful love, and to walk humbly with God, as Boaz did, we become part of the world's healing. Simply by living each day with kindness toward those around us, and with integrity and honesty in our dealings, we help to manifest God's Reign in our world.

How can you follow Boaz's example today?

**Practice for Today:** When we read the Gospel call to serve others, we may feel overwhelmed by the great need, and by our small capacity to make a difference. But, much of the service that we are called to do amounts to simply making kindness a habit. We don't need to be activists to contribute to justice, and we don't need great influence or wealth to contribute to the wellbeing of others. We just need to treat them kindly, and reject all forms of aggression, selfishness, and dismissiveness. Make today a day of kind actions.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** May your kindness toward me lead me to treat others kindly in your name, Jesus.

## Wednesday 01 February 2017

**Reading:** Luke 6:17-26

**Reflection:** On Sunday we read Matthew's account of the Beatitudes. Today, we read Luke's version, which is very different. Two particular differences stand out. Firstly, while Matthew's version has a spiritual focus (e.g. Blessed are the poor in spirit), Luke's is grounded in our physical and economic realities, focussing on the physically poor, hungry, and grieving. Secondly, where Matthew's account only lists blessings, Luke includes sorrows on the wealthy, the prosperous, the happy and the popular. All of this makes Luke's version far more difficult to read, which may be why Matthew's Beatitudes have become better known and loved.

There is no competition between these two accounts. Both the spiritual and the physical meanings are important, and Jesus certainly expressed both concerns in his ministry and teaching. It's important that we learn to embrace both elements if we are to participate in Christ's healing mission. We need to ensure that we are restored to right relationship with God, that we acknowledge our spiritual poverty and hunger, and that we share God's grace with those around us. But, it is also important that we ensure that we participate in Christ's work of justice by helping to alleviate poverty and hunger through our generosity and service of those who suffer, and by challenging those who are wealthy, comfortable, and happily oblivious to the suffering of others. Justice is both a physical and a spiritual reality, and we are called to be Christ's servants to nurture justice in our part of the world in whatever way we can.

What small act of justice can you do today?

**Practice for Today:** When we seek to learn to serve, Jesus is our teacher. All we need to do is practice following Jesus' example. This is why we need to read the Scriptures regularly - they tell the story of God's work among us, especially through Christ. Today, allow the scriptures to teach you. You may want to read through Matthew's Beatitudes again, and compare them with Luke's. Then take some time to invite God to speak to you through these two accounts.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Make me your servant who brings spiritual and physical justice to those around me, O God.

## Thursday 02 February 2017

**Reading:** Psalm 112:1-9

**Reflection:** If you didn't ever read another Psalm you might think that following God's ways is a guarantee of health, wealth and happiness. But, that is not what all the Psalms say. Some speak of great suffering for God's faithful ones. However, there is a consistent theme throughout the Bible that following God's ways leads us into a life that is abundant, even when we suffer. Those who follow Jesus enjoy wealth that is more than just an abundance of money, and they enjoy a sense of confidence that sustains them even in the darkest times. This is why the first part of verse 4 in today's reading is so important: "Light shines in the darkness for the godly." It's not that we will not face darkness, but that God's light shines on us and through us no matter what our circumstances may be.

Notice also the kind of life the Psalmist describes as the way of the godly. They share freely, give generously, conduct business fairly, and do good deeds constantly. The blessing of this kind of life extends to the children of those who follow God's law, but also reaches out to entire generations! The impact of one life well lived cannot be measured, and it brings blessing to others far beyond just those who are touched directly. This is what it means when Jesus calls his followers the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world".

How can you commit to living the way of Jesus a little more determinedly today?

**Practice for Today:** One of the features of the godly people described in today's Psalm is the sense of gratitude. Although it's not specifically mentioned, those who share their good fortune so freely usually do so out of a deep sense of thankfulness for what they have received, and a desire to share the goodness around. Giving is the most profound way to express our thanksgiving. Today, show your gratitude by sharing some of your good fortune around.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** In gratitude for all the goodness I enjoy, O God, I share with those around me.

## Friday 03 February 2017

**Reading:** James 3:13-18

**Reflection:** The way James describes wisdom is very different from the wisdom of our times. It seems that it was different from the wisdom of James' time as well, which is why he emphasised the need to understand God's ways. God's wisdom is not about learning to manipulate the world's power and financial systems for our own advantage. On the contrary, it is all about humility and doing good. It is about purity and loving peace, about mercy and sincerity and the refusal to show favouritism. When we live like this we plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness (or justice) says James.

Verse 14 offers an interesting piece of wisdom, though. To those who harbour bitter jealousy or selfish ambition, James says to avoid trying to cover up the truth about our hearts with boasting and lying. The implication is that we should rather acknowledge these destructive tendencies within us in order that they can be forgiven and healed. If we fail to do this work, our brokenness of heart will result in disorder and evil "of every kind".

How can you embrace God's wisdom more intentionally today? And how you can acknowledge your brokenness of heart so that it can be healed?

**Practice for Today:** We all have times when our hearts lead us away from God's wisdom. We all have times when we allow ambition and jealousy to rule us and lead us into conflict and brokenness. That's why confession is such a healing practice. As we acknowledge the truth and turn back to God's wisdom, we are healed and we bring healing to others. Allow confession to heal your heart today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Whenever my heart becomes consumed with jealousy or selfish ambition, O God, heal me and restore me to your ways of wisdom.

### **Saturday 04 February 2017**

**Reading:** Mark 7:1-8

**Reflection:** When faced with the great challenge of God's ways, religion has always sought the easier and simpler way of legalism. When we get absorbed in following lists of laws that clean us outwardly, we can easily feel righteous and good, while leaving our

basic brokenness of heart untouched. When we satisfy ourselves with following outward law, we no longer have to do the messy work of love, service and sacrifice for others. We can feel close to God and acceptable to God, while avoiding the uncomfortable task of sharing God's love with those who are different from us or repulsive to us. This is what Jesus confronted in the religious leaders of his day. Such legalism honours God with our lips, but leaves our hearts far from God. And it is a temptation we must all face and overcome.

The law of God as Jesus preached it, is all about love for God and others. It is not about the minutiae of washing or observance of certain outward rituals. The heart of the law was always about relationship and living as those who share life with those around us. The religious leaders had missed this truth, and so substituted dry, legalism for a living, vibrant relationship with God and others. It's easy to fall into this trap, because legalism is so much easier, cleaner and less painful.

Where are you tempted to legalism today? How can you choose relationship with God and others instead?

**Practice for Today:** If love is the antidote to legalism, then we need to make a conscious effort to practice the disciplines that lead us deeper into love. Legalism is always quick to point fingers and judge others for being different from us in belief or behaviour. Love, on the other, hand is quick to bless others and celebrate their uniqueness as children of God. Today, practice showing love to others by speaking words of blessing over them.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I speak blessings over those around me, O God, fill my heart with love.

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