

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
19 - 25 February 2017

Thought for the Week:

One of the great questions of the Christian faith is this: What is holiness? The Scriptures speak about holiness a lot, and often in ways that are challenging and uncomfortable. When we hear the call to “be holy as God is holy” it can feel like an impossible task.

Perhaps that’s why we are so tempted to turn holiness into a code of specific acts of purity – or rather the avoidance of certain acts that are seen as impure. If holiness is only about what we do or don’t do with our own bodies, it is restrictive, oppressive and life-draining. There is little benefit to a faith that is based on such narrow legalistic control of a few physical actions.

But, if we explore what holiness looks like from the New Testament perspective, we get a very different picture. Holiness is not about what we don’t do or about a few narrowly defined personal actions. Rather, it’s about the broad sweep of how we engage and interact with God, with others, and with the world. True holiness is creative, liberating, loving, and life-giving.

This week we explore what it means to live in true Christian holiness.

Sunday 19 February 2017

Reading: Matthew 5:38-48

Reflection: The world has never seemed to be able to get beyond “eye for an eye” thinking. Although this idea was originally intended to prevent conflict from escalating into ever-increasing violence, it could never bring healing and peace to the world. As Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” That’s why Jesus goes beyond this limited response to injury. Jesus’ teaching creates the possibility for the cycle of evil to stop, because it is not propagated by the one who refuses to retaliate. This is how Jesus lived, as evidenced by his willingness to submit to the cross instead of starting a violent revolution.

But, Jesus goes even further than just “Turn the other cheek”. If we really want to “be perfect as God is perfect” we must learn to love our enemies. This means that it’s not enough to just refuse to retaliate. We must also seek the best for those who hurt us. And, if doing this makes us like God, we can’t even find refuge in the idea that God will “get them” for us. We are asked to love our enemies because that’s how God loves! It’s not often that you hear holiness (or perfection or maturity) defined as loving your enemies, but that’s exactly what Jesus does. So, if we want to be holy, we’d better start learning to love in this radical, transforming way.

What enemies need you to learn to love them today?

Practice for Today: The essence of love is to seek the best for the other person. This means that love for enemies involves seeking the best for those who have sought our worst. It’s a sacrificial way to respond, but it is also one that promises life and healing for the world. It’s important to remember that this love is not about how we feel so much as it is about how we act. Today, allow your love to be seen in practical acts of kindness toward those whom you would usually want to reject.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I learn to love my enemies, O God, so I become a little more perfect as you are perfect.

Monday 20 February 2017

Reading: Romans 12:9-21

Reflection: Darkness is not conquered by fighting it, or by creating more darkness. It can only be removed by the shining of a light. But, even the smallest light cannot be extinguished by the deepest darkness. This is why Paul teaches believers to overcome evil by doing good. This is the only way evil can ever be defeated. It also means that the holiness we seek cannot be found only by seeking to avoid what we consider evil. Holiness is not the absence of evil. It is the presence of good. That’s why Paul’s letters include many practical guidelines for living a good life.

In today’s reading Paul echoes the words and spirit of Jesus’ teaching as he describes how we are to treat those who hurt us. To begin with we need to be in a loving community, because this gives

us the strength to love those who persecute us. Then, we are to bless those who threaten us, refusing to pay back evil for evil. We are to seek the best for our enemies, feeding them if they are hungry, and giving them drink if they are thirsty. We don't do this in order to heap burning coals on their heads (this would not be really loving). Rather, what Paul means is that when we treat our enemies well, it shames them and this can sometimes lead to change in their lives. The point is not to shame our persecutors, but to love them to life. And, of course, we can also love our friends to life if we follow Paul's instructions to weep with them in grief and to celebrate with them in times of joy.

Who needs you to love them to life today?

Practice for Today: Paul shows in a very practical way what it means to love others. If they are hungry, give them food, and if thirsty, drink. Be ready to help others, and always be eager to practice hospitality. These are practical acts of generosity, which always show love to those who receive these gifts. Today allow your generous acts to show love to those around you.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I give of myself and my resources to others, O God, may your love shine through me.

Tuesday 21 February 2017

Reading: Hebrews 12:14-16

Reflection: Once again, in today's short reading from Hebrews we see the link between holiness and how we live with others. When we work at living in peace with everyone, we are also working at living a holy life, and in this peace and holiness we discover God's presence within and among us. These words resonate with Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God" and "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". The Bible is clear that God is revealed in the love we share with one another, and in the acts of kindness and grace that we do for one another. That's why the writer of Hebrews encourages the believers to look after one another so that no one fails to receive God's grace. We are agents of grace and love to each other.

In contrast to this picture of peace, grace, love and holiness, the

writer warns against allowing any "root of bitterness" to grow up between us. Such bitterness poisons our hearts and relationships, and brings pain and conflict on all involved. When we do this, it's as if, like Esau, we've given away our birthright as children of God for something far less valuable - personal pride, being right, or revenge. The challenge this reading offers us is this: Would we rather be right, get back at others for hurting us, and have our way, or would we rather live in peace and in loving relationship with God and others. Is our personal satisfaction worth more than sharing God's grace and love?

What can you do to work at living in peace with everyone in your life today?

Practice for Today: Conflict is inevitable in any relationship of any depth and honesty. What isn't inevitable is that conflict should break the relationship down. When we learn to apologise and to forgive, our conflicts become doorways to new depths of connection, rather than wedges that drive us apart. Today, whenever you find yourself in conflict with others, seek to apologise and forgive quickly and often.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Teach me to live in peace, O God, through quick apologies and quick forgiveness.

Wednesday 22 February 2017

Reading: Proverbs 3:27-35

Reflection: As we have seen this week, holiness is not a "super-spiritual" quality that is reserved only for those who are uniquely connected with God. Rather, holiness is a very simple, practical way of living - conforming our lives and priorities with those of Jesus. The teacher who wrote Proverbs seems to have grasped the simplicity of holiness, and so he offers clear and practical guidelines for living. Notice, once again, how living the Jesus way is reflected in our relationships with others.

Holiness means doing good for others when we are able to, and refusing to withhold any kindness which we are able to give. It means refusing to do harm to those around us, and believing the best of everyone, instead of accusing them needlessly. It means

avoiding envy and deception, but seeking what is virtuous in every situation. When we live like this, we know “God’s blessing” which simply means that we cooperate with the way life works best, and we reap positive consequences. But, when we fail to follow these guidelines, we inevitably create conflict, pain and suffering for ourselves and for others. Holiness, then, is simply making the choice about how we will live in this world - the Jesus way, or some other way.

How can you live out your holiness in practical kindness toward others today?

Practice for Today: It should not surprise us that many practical acts of kindness and service begin in an attitude of prayer in which we consider the needs of others and bring them before God. It is often in these moments of prayer that God’s Spirit nudges us to act in loving ways. Today allow your prayers for others to lead you into acts of loving kindness.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I pray, O God, show me how to be your answer to my prayers through love and kindness.

Thursday 23 February 2017

Reading: Hebrews 8:1-7

Reflection: On Sunday we celebrate Jesus’ transfiguration, that moment when he went up the mountain with his three closest disciples and was transformed before them into glorious radiance. This experience made it clear to them that, in Jesus, God was revealed in human flesh. The amazing truth of the incarnation reassures us that Jesus really is the ultimate high priest. No other sacrifice is necessary, and no other intermediary could possibly connect us with God more deeply. This is why the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Temple and the sacrificial worship of the Old Covenant as temporary and passing - a shadow of the real covenant in Jesus. No building we could make, and no religion that we could devise, could ever adequately explain or reveal what God has shown us in Jesus.

This is true of every religion, every expression of worship, and every church. All our buildings, hymns, liturgies, and doctrines are just our

attempt to understand and open ourselves to God’s presence and grace. But, they are not the point. They are just the “shadow”, or the reflection through which we can catch a glimpse of God’s glory. These things all point us to Jesus, and it is only when we allow the Incarnate One to connect us with God that we discover true intimacy with our Creator. The moment we try to trap God in our religious practices, we fall into idolatry - worshipping the signs instead of the one to whom the signs point.

How can you allow your religious practices to be signs that lead you to deeper connection with Jesus today?

Practice for Today: Unless we are constantly expanding our understanding and experience of God we risk stagnating and turning our ideas about God into idols. The practice of praise, when we allow it to touch us and change us, always leads us to new, larger visions of God, and into deeper, more authentic connection with God. Today allow God to reveal God’s Self to you in new ways through your praises.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I praise you, O God, so you lead me into ever expanding visions of you.

Friday 24 February 2017

Reading: Exodus 19:9b-25

Reflection: In the Scriptures, when God’s glory is revealed, it is often the case that the people react in fear. On the one hand it is good that God’s people stay mindful of their brokenness, and realise that God’s presence will always challenge us to change. This conviction of God can often be painful and difficult to endure, but it always brings life and healing in the end. On the other hand, our fear can keep us from a deeper intimacy with God. As long as we believe that God disapproves of us and seeks to destroy us, we will never find joy and freedom in God’s presence. This, it seems, was the understanding of God that filters through today’s reading.

The idea that any god would seek to be revealed to human beings, or that a god would seek relationship with people was foreign for much of human history. But, beginning with God’s calling of the people of Israel to be blessed by God and to be a blessing to the

nations, a different picture emerges. Here we discover a God who longs for intimacy with us, and who takes the initiative to connect with us. It took centuries for God to overcome our fear of the divine - and ultimately it required God to take on human flesh before we could really believe that God could love us just as we are - but God was willing to do the work. In today's reading we see one of the first steps. On Sunday, as we reflect on Jesus' transfiguration, we see how far God was willing to go to reveal God's glory to us, and invite us into an experience of that glory and grace.

How can you let go of any fear you may still have of God and fall into God's glory and grace today?

Practice for Today: Sometimes our relationship with God is hindered by our anxiety that we are unacceptable to God. When we focus on ourselves like this, we end up missing God's generous offer of God's Self to us. Today, rather focus on giving thanks for God's loving offer of intimacy, and allow your gratitude to connect you more deeply with God.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Thank you, O God, that you come to me and welcome me into your love.

Saturday 25 February 2017

Reading: Mark 9:9-13

Reflection: After the transfiguration, the disciples were understandably confused. What they had seen had confirmed for them that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. But, now he was talking about death and rising again. They had no frame of reference to understand these things. So, they shifted the conversation to a point of doctrine. The religious teachers said that Elijah was supposed to come to prepare the people for the Messiah, but this did not seem to have happened. This opened the door for Jesus to explain that John the Baptist had fulfilled this role. But, then he went on to make another surprising connection - John had been persecuted and executed, which no one would have expected of Elijah, and in the same way, the Messiah would need to suffer and die.

The two moments when Jesus heard God's voice were at the start of his ministry, just before his temptations, when he was baptised,

and at the transfiguration when he started his journey to the cross. Jesus recognised that his ministry would be rejected by those in power, but he did not shy away from it. But, he did try to use these moments of glory to reveal that, in spite of the suffering which his disciples did not expect, he was God's chosen one. This would lead them to understand something about God that they would never have seen before - that God suffers, and stands with victims of suffering in their pain. The transfiguration may have been a moment of glory, but it was a very different glory from that of this world!

How can you recognise God's glory in the midst of your struggles, and in the world's suffering, today?

Practice for Today: When we experience suffering, we may be tempted to automatically conclude that God has abandoned us. If this happens, we may forget to embrace the practices that remind us of God's presence and glory in the midst of our pain. This is why invocation, in which we invite God's Spirit to be known within us and among us, is such an important practice, especially when we're suffering. Today, allow invocation to remind you of God's presence in whatever circumstances you face.

Breath-Prayer for Today: In my joy and my sorrow, Holy Spirit, make your presence known.

Written by John van de Laar © Copyright 2017 Sacredise.

Readings "Reprinted from *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings*, copyright © 2005
Consultation on Common Texts (www.commontexts.org)

If you would like to receive these devotions for yourself, please go to sacredise.com/daily