

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:
20 - 26 August 2017

Thought for the Week:

A word that is often associated in the Bible with God's salvation is "mercy." Writer and poet Calvin Miller once defined mercy as "giving a thumbs up to an old antagonist at the end of your sword." It is the choice to treat others with grace, forgiveness, compassion and love, no matter who they are and what they have done. Mercy is often spoken of by the biblical writers as one God's primary attributes, and if it were not for God's mercy we would have no hope of overcoming the broken and destructive forces within us and around us.

In the Lectionary this week God's mercy is expressed through Joseph, who forgives his brothers, through Isaiah's call for all people to receive God's mercy and treat one another accordingly, through Paul's declaration that both Jews and Gentiles are recipients of God's mercy, and through Jesus' surprising interaction with a Gentile woman. There can be no question that giving mercy to us is high on God's agenda. But, so is God's desire that we should become people of mercy who release our need for vengeance and retribution, and who embrace forgiveness and restorative justice.

This week we explore the depths and challenges of God's mercy.

Sunday 20 August 2017

Reading: Matthew 15:10-28

Reflection: Today's reading is in two parts, and both parts are surprising and even a little shocking. In the first section, Jesus tried to get his disciples to understand that the most important thing about following his way is the attitude of the heart. Although the Jewish people followed extensive food laws in order to remain undefiled, Jesus instructed his followers to go beyond what they put into their mouths and to focus instead on what comes out - words of kindness or judgement, attitudes of mercy or cruelty, actions of blessing or harm. It is the heart and what it creates through our lives that makes us clean or defiled, and not what we eat. Of course, his disciples

were worried about the way these words insulted the religious leaders who upheld the food laws, but Jesus, called these leaders blind guides of the blind and plants not planted by God. Characteristically, Jesus' harshest words were reserved for religious people who judged others.

In the second part of today's reading Jesus encountered a Gentile woman who pleaded for him to heal her demonised daughter. Again, his response seems rather harsh and unkind. First he ignored her, then he effectively called her a dog, and finally, when even this did not deter her, he agreed to the healing. Is this a moment of growth for Jesus, in which he learned that his mission was wider than he had believed? Or was he playing a game in order to make a point for his disciples? We can't be sure either way. But, we can be sure that this woman, in spite of Jesus' response to her, was completely convinced that mercy would come to her, and she was willing to stop at nothing less. If only we could learn to purify our hearts by embracing such a commitment to receiving and giving mercy.

How can you allow mercy to purify your heart and life today?

Practice for Today: It seems that we are incapable of truly understanding mercy until our need is so great we won't survive without it. But, once we have truly tasted mercy, we cannot help but share it with others. That's why confession is such a powerful discipline. It does not just open us to receive God's mercy and forgiveness, it teaches us that we have no right to withhold mercy from anyone else, and so we become more merciful people. Today, confess whatever is broken in your heart and receive God's mercy. Then share this mercy with others.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I receive your mercy, O God, I am filled with gratitude and I long to share it with others.

Monday 21 August 2017

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Reflection: There was really no reason for Elisha, the Israelite prophet, to heal the commander of the Aramean army. It is clear that the king of Aram had been an enemy of Israel at some point since Naaman owned an Israelite slave, and when the king of Israel received the message from his Aramean counterpart, he was

convinced it was a trick to start a war. Yet, in spite of this, Elisha stepped in and offered to heal Naaman. Yet, even so, the Aramean commander almost missed his chance because of his arrogance. He was insulted that the prophet did not come out to him, but sent a messenger instead. And he was angry that he was being instructed to wash in one of Israel's rivers rather than the better (in his mind) rivers of his homeland. Thankfully he had companions around him who talked sense into him and he received the healing he needed.

It seems that Elisha knew that Naaman needed more than just a physical healing. He needed a change of heart that would make him a more humble person. Ironically, Naaman was angry at the prophet, probably feeling that his refusal to show respect to this military leader was the ultimate arrogance. But, Elisha gave him just what he needed, not just to be cured of his skin disease, but to healed of the arrogance that was keeping him from true wholeness. Although Elisha's actions may have appeared dismissive or even cruel, he was actually very merciful to this enemy commander.

Who is there in your life who needs mercy, but to whom you would rather not show mercy today? Can you do it anyway?

Practice for Today: The discipline of forgiveness is a largely neglected practice in our society today. The norm is to retaliate forcefully enough to ensure that our enemy does not try to hurt us again. But, the result is an unending cycle of violence and pain. Forgiveness, not only ends the cycle, but has the potential to liberate us from our own bitterness, and even reconcile broken relationships. Forgiveness is a choice that is renewed each day, and expressed in actions of mercy. Today, make the choice to forgive.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As you have forgiven me and shown mercy to me, O God, so I forgive and show mercy to those who have hurt me.

Tuesday 22 August 2017

Reading: Psalm 87

Reflection: In the Old Testament the city of Jerusalem became the symbol of God's Reign, and the place where God's people were called together and cared for by God. This is why there are a number of Psalms that celebrate the city as part of their worship of

God. The image of the city is one of peace, justice, joyous celebration, and vibrant life, of singing and the playing of music. You can't find a better way to describe what God's Reign looks like. This image summarises everything Jesus taught and demonstrated in his life, and it reflects the kind of people God calls us to be.

Notice, though, who is counted among the citizens of this great city. It is not just the Jewish people, or the faithful followers of God. Many of Israel's enemies are included in the list of nations to whom God shows mercy. Egypt, Babylon and Philistia, in particular, all had a rather violent and hate-filled history with God's people, and yet in this song they are described as those who know God and as citizens of God's city! This is a vision of what the world could be like if we could recognise that we are all God's children, and if we could treat one another with the same mercy that God shows toward us. When we are all citizens of the same holy city, there is nothing left to fight about.

Who are the ones whom you consider to be outside of God's "city"? What would it mean to consider them included by God today?

Practice for Today: It is not costly to greet others with grace and kindness, but it is a very powerful practice. When we can extend this grace even to those whom we consider enemies, or whom we would rather reject, we have truly become people of Christlike mercy. Today, welcome everyone you meet with kindness as a companion in God's holy city.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Everyone I meet is counted as a citizen of your city, O God, and I welcome them in your name.

Wednesday 23 August 2017

Reading: Matthew 8:1-13

Reflection: Immediately after concluding the Sermon of the Mount, in Matthew's Gospel, the writer relates the story of two healings that Jesus performed. Each of the people who come to Jesus is outcast in some way. One suffers from a skin disease that would have excluded him from society and from worship. The other is Gentile, and a centurion in the hated Roman army. Yet, these are the first two people in Matthew's Gospel to call Jesus "Lord." Both are used by the Gospel writer to show how Jesus lived out the principles he

preached in his sermon, and both reveal the nature of Jesus, and of the God he proclaimed.

The man with the skin disease asks Jesus if he is willing to heal him. This is because, in those times, skin diseases like leprosy were considered to be a direct infliction by God - a curse or punishment for some wickedness. For Jesus to say that he is willing to heal this man is to change this view and show that God does not inflict anyone, but rather seeks to bring wholeness to all. And, with the centurion's faith-filled request, Jesus proclaims that Isaiah's prophecy of all nations coming to God is being fulfilled right then and there. And with just a word, Jesus heals this man's beloved servant. These two stories show the extent of God's mercy, and the way it extends to all people - not just some.

Where do you need God's mercy today? How can you confidently receive it and share it?

Practice for Today: One of the simplest ways to become aware of God's mercy, and to open ourselves to receive it, is through the practice of prayer. As we bring our requests to God, so we remember that God cares for our needs and desires. And as we pray for others, we remember that they, too, are recipients of God's mercy. Pray for mercy today - for yourself and for those around you.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I need your mercy, O God, and I pray to receive it, and then, to share it.

Thursday 24 August 2017

Reading: Psalm 124

Reflection: In the last few weeks we have been focussing on God's salvation and mercy. We have already noted that this salvation is not just about escaping this earth and going to heavenly bliss when we die. But, in the coming week, the Scriptures drive home the truth that God's salvation can and must be experienced here and now. We don't wait to be saved. It begins now. That's why theologians say that we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved - all at the same time. Salvation is not a destination. It is an eternal process.

But, today's Psalm gives us a clear picture of what it felt like for the

singer to experience God's salvation in his own life, and that of his people. Faced with a dangerous threat, the people needed God's protection and care, and they received it. In this Psalm they were literally and physically saved from their enemies. Which, of course, raises questions about why some people aren't saved so dramatically and immediately. We can't always answer those questions, but we do know that the final verse is true - our help is from the Creator of heaven and earth. Sometimes that help delivers us from suffering, and sometimes it sustains us through suffering, but either way, it is always there for us.

How do you need God's help today? How can you take hold of it?

Practice for Today: This Psalm gives thanks for a time when God's help saved God's people. These moments of remembering always strengthen and sustain us when we face difficult times again - as we will. The practice of thanksgiving is a great way to make remembering a habit that brings strength and courage to each day. Today, remember God's gracious salvation through giving thanks.

Breath-Prayer for Today: When I have needed your presence and care, O God, it has always been there for me.

Friday 25 August 2017

Reading: 2 Corinthians 10:12-18

Reflection: If we are supposed to experience salvation now, what does a saved life look like? In one sense, this is exactly the problem Paul was dealing with as he wrestled with the Corinthian church. He longed for their lives to reflect the grace and love of Christ, but they were plagued by squabbles and arrogance. A group of so-called apostles had begun to spread lies and rumours about Paul and his companions, claiming that they had no authority over the Corinthians, that they weren't really apostles, and that their message lacked power. And to give their own message more power, these false apostles boasted about all their achievements. In the end, Paul was forced to confront their accusations.

Notice how Paul addressed this issue. While he did defend the work he had done, he did not make himself the focus. He had only done what God had given him to do. He did not seek credit for his work. He only wanted the faith of the Corinthians to grow so that the

message of Christ would spread. The marks of Paul's salvation were his commitment to bring salvation to others, and his submission to the will of God, and he wanted the lives of the Corinthian believers to reflect the same passion for Jesus and his way.

When, like the false apostles, we get caught up in trying to aggrandise ourselves and exercise control over others, we do not reflect Christ. But, when we centre our lives around Jesus' way, boasting only in God, our lives touch others with grace and mercy and salvation. And, in this way, we know the fruits of our salvation right where we are and in every moment.

How is your salvation reflected in your life today?

Practice for Today: Paul instructs us that, if we want to boast, we should boast only in God. This is the basic principle of praise, and it keeps our focus on God's life within us and around us. When we praise God like this, our lives begin to reflect God's grace and kindness to others, and this opens a door for them to experience God's salvation as well. Allow your practice of praise to reflect God's work of salvation in your life today.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I praise you, O God, for saving me and allowing my life to reflect your salvation to others.

Saturday 26 August 2017

Reading: Matthew 16:5-12

Reflection: Before we get too smug watching how obtuse the disciples were, we need to realise that we often miss the point of Jesus' teaching just as easily - in spite of years of learning and teaching to draw on. It seems strange to us that a comment by Jesus about the yeast of the Pharisees should be taken so literally and so out of context that the disciples would begin an argument over who forgot to pack the bread for their meal. I wonder what they thought Jesus meant by "the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees". Did they think he was instructing them to boycott a specific bakery controlled by the religious leaders? Why did this cause them then to argue about the bread they had forgotten? It doesn't make sense. But, once again, Jesus was patient with them, and explained his meaning.

It seems that he was trying to get them to shift from the scarcity mentality of the religious leaders to the perspective of abundance of God's Reign. Perhaps this is why he reminded them of the two times he had used small amount of food to feed crowds. He was trying to get his followers to grasp how different the values of God's Reign were from the society around them, and slowly they were beginning to understand. Just after this Peter made his famous declaration of Jesus as the Messiah. But, while they were beginning to understand that following Jesus meant turning away from the ways of the religious and political leaders of their time, they hadn't yet fully understood what they were turning to. It would take resurrection and the gift of the Spirit to make that clear to them. But, at its heart, Jesus explained, God's Reign was about trust in the abundance of God's world, sharing what we have so we can all experience this abundance, and releasing our need to worry and control everything in order to feel safe. This is a wonderful picture of what it looks like for us to know God's salvation – God's peace, justice, equality, and sufficiency – in this life.

How is your life still locked into religious, economic or social ideas of scarcity and competition? How can you turn from this "yeast" to God's values of abundance and shared blessing?

Practice for Today: The act of giving is one of the most liberating practices, because it releases us from our need to hoard and control wealth to feel safe. It is not for the sake of others that we give, but for the sake of our own health and freedom. When we learn to give generously and cheerfully, we begin to manifest the abundance of God's Reign in our own lives, because we are focussed on the goodness we have, not on what we don't have. Today, identify the abundance in your life and share it with those around you.

Breath-Prayer for Today: You have given me an abundance of blessings, O God, and I share them with those around me.

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