



10 July – 16 July 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

How do you measure faith – by a lack of doubts, or by the ability to do amazing miracles, or by a life of health, wealth, and happiness? Should we even worry about measuring our faith? Doesn't the idea of measurement only lead us into legalism and competition? These are important questions, and they need to be faced honestly. Jesus calls us to bear fruit, and he gives us some clear guidelines to determine how fruitful we are becoming.

It doesn't take long, when we read the New Testament, to realise that Jesus does not measure faith by miracles, certainties, or even purity. For Jesus there is only one measure of the fruit we bear - love. Those who are growing in faithful obedience and intimacy with Christ naturally become more loving. When we are close to Christ, we cannot help but become like him in values, priorities and behaviour - which means that we begin to make loving others in practical, life-giving ways our primary focus in all things. This is why the Lectionary keeps coming back to the call to love.

What is very clear this week is that love for God and love for other people are not separate. Rather, our love for God is revealed in the love we have for others. If we do not love those around us, then, no matter how much we may claim to love God, our faith is empty. This love is not a feeling, or a set of words. Love is anything we do to bring joy, peace, safety, wholeness, and welcome to others.

This week we will, once again, be exploring what it means to be people of Christ-like love.

SUNDAY 10 JULY 2022

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Reflect: Luke's Gospel is the only one that recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is significant that the parable is coupled with

the religious expert's question about the greatest commandment. It is interesting that Luke notes that the man is seeking to justify himself when he asks, "Who is my neighbour?" The direct answer of Jesus to his question - that the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbour - leaves him no "wiggle room". So, in an attempt to create a loophole, it seems, he tries to find a way to narrow the definition of neighbour. But, of course, Jesus doesn't allow him that.

Jesus' final question after the parable is not "who viewed the wounded man as a neighbour?" but "who was a neighbour to the wounded man?" If "neighbourliness" is dependent on the other person, then some people will be our neighbours and others won't. But, if being a neighbour is something we choose, then there is no one who is not our neighbour. We are called to see all people as neighbours and to treat them accordingly.

Who needs you to choose to be a neighbour to them today?

Do: It is easy to write other people off when we stereotype them, and racism, sexism, religious factions, and other forms of violence and division follow easily. But, when we take time to listen to another's story, they stop being a stereotype and they become a person - with similar hopes, fears, and feelings as we experience. This is often the first step toward learning to love another. Listen to the stories of those around you today.

Pray: As I listen to the stories of my neighbours, O God, teach me to love them as you do.

MONDAY 11 JULY 2022

Read: James 2:1-7

Reflect: These words from James could have been written to the Church yesterday! We easily become blind to the way we favour some people over others, and to the sinful criteria we use to make such distinctions. When people are wealthy and well dressed, we automatically assume they are somehow "better". But, if we are to follow the way of Jesus, we need to become blind to the categories of wealth, status, fame, beauty, and power. Rather, we are called to see through to the humanity of every person and recognise that all are equally valued in God's Reign.

It can be a painful and humbling thing to face the discrimination in our own hearts, but until we do, we cannot be healed of it. It is not enough just to look inside briefly and decide that we're "not racist" (or sexist etc.). Discrimination is only revealed - like love - by our actions. If we treat others differently because of their skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, financial circumstances, educational level, religious convictions, or nationality, we have failed to live up to the loving standards of Jesus. But, if we can face our natural tendencies to discriminate, and work to change them by getting to know our neighbours - especially those who are most different from us - we can learn to love as Jesus did.

Do: There is only one way to deal with the favouritism in our hearts - we must acknowledge it, confess it, repent of it, and allow God's Spirit to change us. Today, try to be aware of how you treat others. Notice, especially, when you feel yourself becoming withdrawn or "short" with another person, and ask yourself if this reaction is evidence of discrimination in your heart. Then, spend time in confession and repentance.

Pray: When I discriminate against others, O God, convict me, forgive me, and change me.

TUESDAY 12 JULY 2022

Read: 1 John 3:11-17

Reflect: If we needed any further evidence that love is the measure of faith, today's reading gives it to us. In verse 14 John states very clearly that it is love that proves that we have passed from death to life. While John's focus here is on our love for one another as Christian sisters and brothers, the testimony of the New Testament, is that our love must be for all people, whether they share our faith or not. And our love is expressed in the act of giving our lives for others. This means laying aside our own agendas, our own desires, our own comfort and safety for the sake of others. The wonderful paradox here, though, is that when we do this, we inevitably find that our needs are met, albeit, perhaps, in different ways than we might have expected.

There are two challenges in today's reading that we need to take seriously, though. The first is the very practical challenge to those

who have resources. If we have enough to live comfortably, but leave our sisters and brothers in poverty, we are not living in love. While I recognise that there are complexities in this issue, we cannot avoid the Gospel call to work to alleviate poverty. The second challenge lies in how others may respond to us. Our choice to live in love does not automatically mean that others will respond to us in love. In fact, as John indicates, we might find that our love causes others to "hate" us. This may be because our love drives us to stand with the marginalised while challenging the powerful. So, if we are going to embrace the way of love, we need to be prepared for opposition - just like Jesus.

How can you lay down your life for others today?

Do: The challenge of today's reading can be summed up in a famous saying from Victor Hugo: "You can give without loving, but you can never love without giving." One of the best ways we can lay down our lives for others is by laying down the resources that would otherwise be used for our own self-centred desires. Today, forgo a pleasure that you would enjoy and use the money to bless a poor person.

Pray: As you have laid your life down for me, Jesus, teach me to lay my life down for those around me.

WEDNESDAY 13 JULY 2022

Read: Ecclesiastes 9:13-18

Reflect: It's amazing and disturbing to realise that today's reading was written thousands of years ago, but the way it describes the world is still accurate today. The parable of this poor, wise man who saves his village, but receives no thanks, is played out every day in communities around the world. Unknown and uncelebrated heroes bring life to those around them all the time, and yet continue to be overlooked by the "Powers-That-Be" in our world. It seems incredible that we could value wealth and power over wisdom, but you don't have to go far to see the evidence that this is the case. Nevertheless, the writer praises wisdom as better than royal authority and better than weapons. And, more often than not, such wisdom is found among those who have suffered the most, who

have endured life's deepest grief and suffering and yet have found joy and wonder and love in spite of the pain.

The truth of our world is that the greatest acts of healing and salvation are not performed by governments or corporations. True, lasting, positive change happens when ordinary people, like this poor man, act in wisdom and kindness for the sake of their local communities. It is the cumulative power of millions of small acts of kindness and love that bring God's healing and grace into our world. When we stop waiting for the government, or for some rich and powerful "hero", to fix our problems, and start working together, taking hands especially with the poorest and weakest, we will begin to bring about the world we long for. This is the promise of Jesus' Gospel message.

What small acts of kindness can you do for your community today?

Do: The truth is we don't often have to start movements for change from scratch. There are so many people and projects right on our doorsteps that are already doing good work, that all we need to do is appreciate their work, and join in. One of the most powerful ways to thank someone for their good work is to become a participant in it. Today, find someone, or some project, in your neighbourhood that is doing good work, and offer your help where you can.

Pray: May my thanksgiving for the good work of those around me lead me to share in that work, in your name, Jesus.

THURSDAY 14 JULY 2022

Read: Genesis 12:10-20

Reflect: I hope you didn't read the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt without feeling horrified. What Abram asked of Sarai was clearly offensive even back then - as Pharaoh's reaction, when he found out that Sarai was Abram's wife, reveals. The Scriptures don't tell us what Sarai's response to Abram's request was, but as a woman in a patriarchal society, with no rights and no position without her husband, she had no option but to comply - even though she knew it would mean using her body to ensure her husband's safety. Before we laugh this off as a quaint ancient problem that has no relevance today, we need to remember that women are still used

and abused like this every day in homes and societies across the globe. The call to love will not allow us to stay silent or to do nothing while many women - and girls in particular - remain in oppressive or harmful situations.

Apart from Abram's patriarchal assumption that he could use his wife's body for his own purposes, there was another big mistake Abram made in this story - he failed to listen. There is no evidence that he gave Sarai any opportunity to voice her opinion in this situation. There is also no evidence that he checked that his assumptions about Pharaoh were true. If he taken the time to listen and see what Pharaoh's response might be, he may have been able to avoid this whole nasty scenario. There is no question that listening - which is Sunday's theme - is a key practice of love.

Think about the people in your life - especially the women - today. How can you listen more carefully to their stories, and stand with them in their struggles?

Do: In our relationships it is easy to take one another for granted and hurt each other, not necessarily by anything we do, but by what we fail to do. But, when we take the time to really see other people, and to welcome them into our hearts, we inevitably act in ways that love and bless them. Today, especially with the women in your world, take the time to really see them, and to welcome them as Jesus did.

Pray: As you have seen me and welcomed me, O God, may I see and welcome the people in my world.

FRIDAY 15 JULY 2022

Read: Ephesians 3:14-21

Reflect: How would it make you feel to know that someone was praying a prayer like this for you? If someone were so concerned for your life and well-being that they would plead with God for you to find a deep, intimate connection with God that would empower and inspire you, how would you respond? Today, through the ages Paul's prayer - offered on behalf of the Ephesian believers - reaches to us and we can know that this is God's longing for all people. Also, when we remember that the Scriptures tell us that Jesus prays for

us constantly, we can rest in the knowledge that prayers like this are constantly being offered on our behalf. What an amazing truth to hold on to in this chaotic world!

There were two things that inspired Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. The first was his own experience of God's grace and love. That's what he is referring to when he says, "When I think of all this..." Paul has seen that God's resources are unlimited, that God's Spirit is available to all, and that Christ willingly makes his home in our hearts. Paul knew that once we have been impacted by a revelation of God's love, we would know a strength and a life that is beyond our natural capacity. The second thing that inspired Paul's prayer was his love for, and knowledge of, the Ephesians. He knew this community as loving and faithful, but facing some strong challenges and persecutions in their pagan city. He had spent time with them and listened to their stories, and now he could offer a prayer that took their needs into account. This attentive, listening love is the key to effective prayer. When we are willing to take the time to listen and get to know those for whom we pray - or at least learn about their circumstances - we can pray from a love that is real and connected.

Who needs you to pray for them like this today?

Do: The practice of prayer is not just about saying a few words and "sending good thoughts" in the direction of others. When done mindfully and attentively, prayer is a means of connection with others. It opens the door for us to listen and learn what God wants to do in their lives and then to become participants in God's work. Today, take time to listen to others, to connect with them, and to pray for them out of this connection.

Pray: When I think of your love and grace, Jesus, I cannot help but pray for those who need your touch.

SATURDAY 16 JULY 2022

Read: Psalm 15

Reflect: In any relationship, the deepest connections happen when we are willing to join our lives together. This means that we allow the other person to become our reference point, and we allow ourselves to be shaped and changed by the relationship. If we refuse to

change, or to be moulded into an intimate union - if we insist on remaining an independent, unmoved, individual - no intimacy can happen. The same is true of our relationship with God. If we define worship as intimacy with God, the Psalmist's question becomes, "Who may enjoy intimacy with you, O God?" The answer, then, makes perfect sense - those who are willing to allow their lives to be joined with God's life, and who are willing to be changed and shaped by relationship with God. If we are unwilling for this to happen, then we will never know true worship - true intimacy with God.

What does the life of someone who is intimate with God look like? The rest of the Psalm unpacks this for us. Those who love God become like God. That means we become people of integrity and sincerity, people who refuse to gossip about others or hurt our neighbours, people who keep our word even when it hurts. Such people are not easily drawn in by evil, by corruption, or greed, or power games. If we seek to be people like this, then we need to open ourselves to God, listen to what will please God and lead us into God's life, and then live what we've heard each day.

How can you open yourself to a deeper intimacy with God today?

Do: The act of invocation - of inviting God's Spirit to fill and empower us - can be a dangerous thing. If we want to live our own way, and just use Jesus' name to "sanctify" whatever we do, then we best not invoke God's Spirit. But, if we want to experience deep, transforming intimacy with God, then we will need God's Spirit to work within us. Today, I pray that you will choose intimacy, and offer prayers of invocation throughout the day.

Pray: Come, Holy Spirit, and lead me deep into the life of God.