



31 July – 06 August 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Where do we find meaning? In what do we place our trust? These are central questions in every human life, and there is no shortage of answers vying for our acceptance. This week, the Lectionary readings challenge us to face these questions in the light of Jesus' message and mission. In the Gospel, Jesus is asked to resolve an inheritance dispute between two brothers, but instead, he warns his listeners about the danger of giving in to greed. In Ecclesiastes, the writer laments how pointless it is to accumulate great possessions through hard work, when it all gets left to others who have not worked so hard. And in Hosea, God wrestles with a desire to judge the people who have turned away from God, but in the end, God relents and promises restoration. All of these readings challenge us to think carefully about where we place our allegiance, and on what we depend for security and life.

It is easy to say the words of faith, to sing the songs of faith, and to attend the gatherings of a community of faith. But it's our actions and our values that reveal what we really believe. When we allow our desire for wealth or comfort to undermine our relationships, we contradict our faith in Jesus. When we seek pleasure, possessions or power for our own sakes, we get out of step with the mission and message of Jesus. But, as the call of Jesus takes hold of us, we slowly but surely start to see a shift in our priorities, we begin to embrace the sacrifice, simplicity and service of following Jesus, and we discover that abundant life is found not in the size of our bank accounts, but in the size of our hearts.

This week we examine our priorities in the light of God's Reign.

SUNDAY 31 JULY 2022

Read: Luke 12:13-21

Reflect: When Jesus is asked to resolve a dispute between siblings over their inheritance, it is not surprising that Jesus refuses to take sides. Instead, he warns against the destructive power of greed. In a world where the popular wisdom tells us that "Whoever dies with the most toys wins" Jesus offers a challenging alternative: "Life is not measured by how much you own."

The parable that follows this interaction is challenging. Most Bibles call it the "Parable of the Rich Fool". What makes the man in the parable foolish is not his wealth, but his desire to hoard his wealth. When we start to believe that only things that have a monetary price are valuable, we inevitably hoard as much wealth as we can, and we devalue what cannot be bought - including the people who are not able to accumulate wealth. The result is that the gap between "haves" and "have-nots" grows ever wider. But, when we realise that the ability to create wealth is simply one of many talents, and that its purpose is not for self-gratification, but to support and sustain those who have other gifts that bring value into the world, the whole picture changes. We stop hoarding what we have, and we seek to use our wealth to support those who do valuable work that cannot be measured in financial terms. Imagine what the world would look like if it operated according to this Christ-like set of values!

In what ways do you use money to measure value? How can you open yourself to recognise & honour the value of what cannot be bought or sold?

Do: In Jesus' parable, the rich man would have been considered wise if he had simply shared what he had received. He clearly had more than enough for his own needs and giving would have enriched both his own life and that of others. This is why giving is such an important Christian discipline. Today, use every opportunity to give to others as generously as you can - especially those who need it the most.

Pray: Free me from the temptation to hoard, O God, and inspire me to give generously.

MONDAY 01 AUGUST 2022

Read: Psalm 127

Reflect: One of the biggest fallacies of modern existence is that we can be completely self-sufficient. Yet, in spite of the delusion, we very easily get caught up in the cycle of hard work and accumulation that we think will make us secure and comfortable and happy. Then, when tough times come and we discover that we can never be self-sufficient enough, our whole world collapses. This is what the Psalmist is talking about in today's reading. No matter what we may build, we need God to be the source of our security. It must be God who metaphorically builds our house and guards it, if we are to cope with the worst and the best that life offers. If we are unable or unwilling to place our trust in God, we will wear ourselves out with work and anxiety as we strive to keep the world at bay.

But, in the midst of this bleak picture, the Psalmist offers a picture of an alternative life that is restful and meaningful - the way of relationship. Children, says the Psalmist, are God's gift. They are a protection because our children always draw our most compassionate and generous selves out of us. Our children fill our lives with meaning and joy, and they reveal both our worst and our best as we work to nurture and teach them. The image here is of the wealth that relationship brings - a wealth that cannot be measured in financial terms, and that provides a richness that cannot be stolen or destroyed. What a contrast this is to the pursuit of wealth and security in our own individual pleasure and possessions!

How can you trust God to "build your house" today? What relationships do you enjoy that provide security, comfort and joy?

Do: When we get caught up in the quest for more, we easily forget the good things - especially the relationships - that we enjoy, and we become isolated, dissatisfied, and depressed. When we practice thanksgiving, though, we remind ourselves of all the goodness we experience in our lives, and we are freed from anxiety and addiction. Today, give thanks throughout the day.

Pray: For all the good things that I enjoy - especially my relationships - I give thanks, O God.

TUESDAY 02 AUGUST 2022

Read: Colossians 4:2-6

Reflect: Paul had very different priorities from those of our world. Even though he was imprisoned for proclaiming the message of Christ, he didn't ask the believers to pray for his release, or for his comfort. Rather, he asked them to pray that he would have many opportunities to proclaim the Gospel, and that he would communicate clearly. He was only concerned that the Reign of God should touch as many lives as possible. This motivated him to continue his work even in the face of persecution, and to encourage the believers to faithfully reflect the grace of Christ to the world.

The way Paul frames this faithful Christ-following life is quite simple in today's reading. To begin with he encourages the church to be devoted to prayer. The key attitudes in this prayer life are an alert mind - to discern God's perspective on the world - and a thankful heart - to strengthen faith. This instruction is directed at our relationship with God. Then, Paul encourages the believers to live wisely and make the most of every opportunity to engage graciously and welcomingly with others. This is directed at our relationship with people and calls us to live in such a way that they see Jesus in us and are attracted to him because of us. Devotion to prayer and living a life that reflects God's Reign: these are very different priorities from the world's, but they are healing and life-giving.

What priorities are reflected in your life? How can you increase your devotion to prayer and living a Jesus-reflecting life?

Do: Prayer, when offered graciously and gently, can be a gift even to the most resistant person. When we offer to pray for someone, we are saying that we care for them, and we seek their well-being. Today find opportunities to pray for those around you, even if they don't know you're praying.

Pray: For my colleagues, friends and family, I pray your blessing and grace, O God.

WEDNESDAY 03 AUGUST 2022

Read: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, 13-14

Reflect: The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes tried everything - pleasure, power, and possessions - but in the end he discovered that it's all meaningless. All that remained, at the end of his search,

was relationship with God, and living God's way. The truth, that this Teacher discovered - and that many people since have also found - is that living for personal gain, wealth, and status is empty and completely unsatisfying. That's why so many people, when they reach retirement, start looking for ways to make a contribution to the world. It's in giving and serving that true life is found.

The teacher learned this the hard way, but he tried to convince his readers to avoid his mistakes. Instead of chasing after empty things, he encouraged them to remember their Creator before they got old, and life lost its joy. The way he describes old age and death sounds very depressing, but there seems to be an implication that if we remember our Creator when we are young, then old age will be more meaningful, more vibrant and less regretful. This is certainly the testimony I have heard from many of my elders in the faith. But, once again, it's all about priorities. Whether young or old, when we make God's life our priority, our life is richer and more meaningful, and it makes an important difference to the world.

How can you remember your Creator today?

Do: We all have times when our priorities get mixed up, and we chase after what doesn't satisfy. We learn our lessons the hard way when we do this, but at least, if we do learn, there is value even in our mistakes. The key is to admit that we've made a wrong turn once we realise it, and then turn back to God's way. Today, when you find yourself chasing the wrong things, confess it to God and allow God's Spirit to lead you back to God's way.

Pray: When I chase after what does not satisfy, O God, forgive me and lead me back to you.

THURSDAY 04 AUGUST 2022

Read: Job 21:1-16

Reflect: Job was understandably bitter. After living a righteous life, great tragedy had struck his family and his circumstances. Then, to make it worse, his friends, who came to "comfort" him, refused to believe that he was innocent of wrongdoing. They kept urging him to repent so that God would stop punishing him and restore him. But, like a person who is charged with a crime he or she didn't commit,

Job refused to plead guilty. He needed to express his anger and frustration at God, though, and so he replied to his friends in words that he knew would probably bring further rebuke.

Job declares that he is innocent but is suffering, while evil people prosper and are protected from harm. Even though they want nothing to do with God, God does not judge them. The struggle Job was facing is the same one that human beings have wrestled with through the ages. Why do bad things happen to good people, and why do good things happen to bad people? There is no explanation given, but the last words of this passage reveal Job's faith and his willingness to trust even in his pain: "I will have nothing to do with that kind of thinking." Job refused to give in to his worst self, choosing to re-affirm his commitment to be faithful and to trust God.

If we embrace the way of God's Reign only when things go well, we may as well not embrace it at all. While we may wrestle with the seeming injustice of our world, it is only when we are willing to remain true to the way of Jesus in every circumstance that the Gospel has really taken hold of us. And only then can our lives really contribute to making God's Reign a reality in our world. How can you re-affirm your commitment to the Gospel today?

Do: The act of dedication is a significant and powerful thing to do each day. As we commit to the way of Jesus even when we don't understand why the world works the way it does, we open ourselves to God's strength and wisdom, and we are able to navigate both the best and the worst of times. Today, dedicate yourself again to living faithfully in Jesus' way.

Pray: Even though I wrestle with the injustice and evil in the world, O God, I commit my way to you.

FRIDAY 05 AUGUST 2022

Read: Acts 7:1-8

Reflect: If the high priest had known what he was letting himself in for, he may not have asked Stephen to respond to his accusers. Stephen was one of the first deacons in the Acts Church, but because of his passion and boldness in proclaiming the message of Jesus, he found himself in conflict with the religious authorities. Like

his Master, Stephen faced false accusations, and was ultimately executed for his faith. He was the first Christian martyr. But, when he had the opportunity to address his accusers, Stephen didn't beg for his life, or apologise for what he had done. Instead, he preached a long and challenging sermon - which put the final nail in his coffin.

Stephen's sermon began with the account of Abraham, who was called by God to leave behind his comfortable life and go to the land God had given him. Even though Abraham didn't see the fulfilment of God's promise, he trusted God and followed God's lead. Stephen held Abraham up as an example of faith, showing the religious leaders how far they had strayed from the faith of their ancestors. On Sunday, the Scripture readings challenge us to be ready to serve, to be alert for the coming of Christ into our lives and world, and to resist the temptation to store up worldly wealth. As Abraham was willing to trust his life to God, and as Stephen was faithful in proclaiming Jesus' message, so we are called to trust and follow, ensuring that our hearts are captured not by the things of this world, but by a vision of God's Reign.

In what way is God calling you out of your comfort zone into a life of risky trust?

Do: We may not be called to leave our families and possessions and set out for a new land like Abraham, or to lay down our lives like Stephen, but we are constantly being called to step out of our safety and comfort to embrace the way of Jesus. This means that each day we need to be alert as we listen for the specific tasks God calls us to do. Today, listen carefully for God's voice.

Pray: I am listening, O God, for your call, and I am ready to respond.

SATURDAY 06 AUGUST 2022

Read: Matthew 6:19-24

Reflect: This short section of the Sermon on the Mount reveals how concerned Jesus was with our attitude to possessions and wealth. It is one of the central issues that Jesus addresses in his teachings about God's Reign. But, in this passage, there is an interesting combination of ideas. Jesus begins by challenging his followers to

resist the temptation to store up worldly wealth. Rather, we should store up our wealth in heaven - in God's Reign - where our "wealth" cannot be stolen or destroyed. This heavenly wealth is not money. It is the light and love that come from living in God's presence and purpose.

The short statement about the eyes seems to be unrelated to what comes before it, but since Jesus returns immediately to the question of money, it must be part of this teaching. In 1 John 2:16, John refers to one kind of sin as "lust of the eyes" (KJV) or a "craving for everything we see" (NLT). I suspect that Jesus was speaking about a similar thing. When our eyes are "dark" - when we allow our eyes to lead us into a selfish consumerism, and a longing to have everything of this world that we can see, then our whole being is filled with the darkness of our addiction. But, when our eyes are good - seeking out the signs and values of God's Reign - then our whole being is filled with the light of freedom, joy, grace, generosity, simplicity and love. This is why Jesus states so strongly that we cannot serve both God and money. The values of materialism, consumerism, and accumulation are directly opposed to the simple, life-giving values of God's Reign.

How are you affected by the "lust of the eyes" and the addiction to materialism that it brings? Are you trying to serve God and money in any way? How can you change that today?

Do: One of the most pressing questions that every person must face is this: Will we use our energy and resources only for our own satisfaction and gratification, or will we give ourselves for the sake of others. Our answer to this question determines whether we are storing up treasure on earth or in heaven. And all it takes - to shift the focus of our lives is to try, each day, to do something for someone else, with no expectation of thanks or repayment. Today, take every opportunity to serve selflessly.

Pray: As I give myself in service of others, O God, I store up treasure in heaven.