



14 August – 20 August 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

As followers of Jesus, we may be tempted to believe that we should never be involved in conflict or disagreements. The call to be people of love and grace can feel like a call to just be nice to everyone. But, in this week's readings, we hear a very different message. The Scriptures celebrate our ancestors in the faith, noting that many of them stood against the injustices of their day – even to death. This Sunday you may have read a prophecy from Jeremiah in which he denounced false prophets who proclaimed comforting lies to God's people and refused to confront the ways they were betraying God's justice and peace. Or you may have read the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus declared that he would bring division among people because some would be willing to discern the true nature of the times in which they were living, and others would not. The challenge we must accept as Christ-followers, is not whether we will face conflict or not, but rather what the reasons will be for the conflicts we face. This calls for discernment, courage, and wisdom.

It is never easy to have hard conversations with friends, family, or neighbours about what brings injustice into the world. It can be painful to confront racism, materialism, patriarchy, or power games in our lives and world. Often, when we do try to address these difficult issues, we may be scapegoated, rejected, or persecuted. But we cannot remain silent in the face of injustices small or big if we are to follow Jesus faithfully. Rather, if we are to live the Gospel, we must be willing to do the difficult work, and to embrace the pain, of discerning what's really going on in our lives and our world, confronting the injustice in our own hearts, and then challenging it in our small corner of the world.

This is the tough call of this week - to endure conflict and division for the sake of the Gospel's saving, liberating values and purposes, while discerning the "signs of the times".

SUNDAY 14 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 12:49-56

Reflect: When we commit to creating a better world, one of the consequences is that the old world must first die. We cannot create something new without first destroying - or at least significantly altering - what is already there. That's why Jesus says that he has come to set the world on fire. One meaning of this is that Jesus seeks to inspire in people a passion for God's Reign. But another meaning is that as these "on fire" people begin to live differently – challenging, undermining, and ultimately destroying the status quo, while helping to build God's new reality. Jesus longs to see the world on fire as old ways of power, possessions, and pleasure are burned up in a new passion for simplicity, service, and sacrifice.

But Jesus is not naïve. He knows that as people become passionate about the things of God, so others, who are invested in the status quo, will oppose, and persecute them. These divisions can occur even between friends and family members. It's not that Jesus wants this to happen. It's that, when some can see how our current way of life is destroying us and others can't or won't, conflicts will inevitably occur. As painful as this may be, the new world of God's Reign cannot come into being without these "birth pains".

How can you stand firm for the values of God's Reign in spite of the opposition of others today?

Do: Proclaiming the alternative lifestyle of God's Reign does not always mean that we need to speak out or challenge others directly. Most often the best way to challenge what is broken and destructive is to live what is good and creative. Today, think of one value of God's Reign - simplicity, service, or sacrifice - and try to live it out as a challenge to injustice in every moment.

Pray: May my life proclaim your justice, O God, and challenge whatever opposes it.

MONDAY 15 AUGUST 2022

Read: 1 John 4:1-6

Reflect: It can be very tempting to "overspiritualise" passages like today's reading. When we read words like "Antichrist" we may

imagine all sorts of apocalyptic scenarios. But we must be careful not to read into the Scriptures what is not there. In this passage - sandwiched between two calls to love God and others - John addresses the basic question of what it means to really follow Jesus. The basic test of authenticity for John is whether people believe that Jesus came in the flesh. Our faith stands or falls on the incarnation. When we believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, we must believe in his teaching, and build our lives on it. The essential difference between followers of Jesus and followers of the "antichrist" spirit is whether we embrace Jesus' way of simplicity, sacrifice, and service, or the world's way of possessions, power, and pleasure. But even as we challenge the world, we are called to love it.

John warns against those who claim to be "more spiritual" than others, or who try to create a Christian enclave that is untouched by the world. Rather, John calls us to a different way of living *within* the world. We will always have relationships and interactions with the world and its systems. But, in those relationships and interactions we must choose either to condone the values of the world or to confront them by embracing the values of God's Reign. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for others is to demonstrate, in our own lives, a more life-giving way to be.

How can you live today in such a way that you love those around you, but also demonstrate the life-giving way of Jesus?

Do: In our world, the most natural response to disagreement or conflict is to retaliate and reject the other person. But, in the way of Jesus, our response must be to bless and pray for those who hurt us. When we do this, we show our faith in the teachings, work, and life of Jesus. Today, show the love of Christ to others by praying for them and blessing them even if they hurt you.

Pray: May your love and blessing flow through me to others, even if they hurt me, Jesus.

TUESDAY 16 AUGUST 2022

Read: Isaiah 5:24-30

Reflect: There is no one in the Scriptures who did discernment and confrontation like the prophets. Theirs was the tough task of pointing

out to God's people - and other nations - where their actions and attitudes were destructive, and what the most likely punishment (read "consequence") would be. In today's prophecy from Isaiah, God is angry with God's people for rejecting God's law. People are dying, and foreign nations, seeing their opportunity to conquer a nation weakened by injustice and division, are getting ready to declare war. But, because of their rejection of God's ways, God's people have none of the protections of community, mutual support, and wisdom they would have enjoyed if they had remained faithful to God's ways. And so, in an attempt to wake the people up, the prophet, who has discerned the times, declares this prophecy of judgement, and challenges the people to turn back to God.

It can sound self-righteous and unloving when God's people identify destructive trends in society and speak out against them. But, when we know that people are being harmed by injustice, it is more unloving to stay silent. Notice, that such words of challenge in the Scriptures are never about small issues of doctrine, or even about "purity" of belief or behaviour. Both Jesus and the prophets focussed their words of confrontation on all that marginalised and hurt those who were poorest and most vulnerable. Jesus taught that the law was summarised in the command to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. When we fail to follow this law, we hurt the people that God loves and we bring destruction on our world and ourselves.

Where do you see injustice and the lack of love bringing destruction in your world? How can you confront this and help to change it?

Do: The act of confrontation can be difficult, but, if we are willing to allow others to confront our own blind spots, we all grow healthier and more whole. One of the most powerful ways we can address injustice in our part of the world is to watch our words - and to challenge destructive words in others. Today, if you hear jokes, comments or words that belittle, judge, or stereotype another person, express your offense. And, if you are tempted to speak such words, choose rather to stay silent.

Pray: Give me the courage, Jesus, to confront the small, but destructive injustices in my world, and in my heart.

WEDNESDAY 17 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 19:45-48

Reflect: The animal sellers in the Temple were there to offer a helpful service to worshippers. They ensured there was a ready supply of acceptable animals for sacrifice. And, in an attempt to keep the Temple free of human greed, a special currency had been created for the transactions that happened there. There was nothing inherently wrong with this system, but it was eventually corrupted by greed and manipulation. The prices on the Temple animals became obscene, and the exchange rates for the Temple money escalated terribly. This made it increasingly difficult for poor worshippers to afford the required sacrifices. According to Richard Rohr, 90% of Jerusalem's economy rested on this corrupt system. Jesus discerned this corruption and reacted against it.

Notice what happened after the cleansing of the Temple. Jesus taught daily in the Temple - offering God's wisdom, grace, and love freely to all. What a contrast to the corrupt system that he had just confronted. But the religious leaders began planning to kill Jesus. They were unwilling to face and eradicate their own corruption. So, they chose instead to get rid of the one who had challenged them.

We all allow our worst selves to drive our actions and attitudes at times. The problem is when we refuse to hear the challenge of those who confront us. Imagine if, instead of becoming defensive and self-righteous we humbled ourselves, apologised, and thanked the other person for caring enough to correct us!

How can you be more open to correction today?

Do: When we make confession a habit, we grow comfortable with acknowledging our faults. Then, when we are confronted by other people, we can more easily apologise and work to make things right. Today, make confession and repentance a constant part of your day.

Pray: Give me the humility and grace to apologise and make things right when I hurt others, Jesus.

THURSDAY 18 AUGUST 2022

Read: Hebrews 12:3-17

Reflect: We love to speak about God's grace and love, but we don't like to think about God's discipline. As parents, when we avoid the tough work of discipline in favour of being "fun" and "loving" we actually harm our children. In the same way God cannot stand by and do nothing while we behave in ways that hurt us and others. This is why God will often allow us to face the consequences of our actions. When we spend more than we have to satisfy our need for instant gratification God cannot protect us from self-inflicted debt. When we make our own desires more important than those of our loved ones, God cannot stop our relationships breaking down. When we insist on holding on to grudges and bitterness, God cannot protect us from ourselves. Sometimes the only way we learn is when we have to face the consequences of our destructive choices.

But, through it all, God never stops loving us, and God constantly calls us back to a life of love and wholeness. This is why the writer to the Hebrews instructs the readers of this letter to live in peace (maintaining relationships with others) and holiness (maintaining a relationship with God), and to refuse to trade their birth right as God's children for things that do not last and do not matter.

Where, in your life, is God disciplining you at the moment? How can you live more intentionally as a child of God today?

Do: In tough times it can be easy to become bitter and cynical. But, although we may not be grateful for the struggle, we can give thanks that God is with us through it. And, if our struggle is self-inflicted, we can give thanks that God loves us enough to allow us to face the consequences of our bad choices, so that we can learn and grow. Today, try to give thanks in the midst of your tough times.

Pray: Thank you, God, for your presence and grace that uplift and teach me even in my struggles.

FRIDAY 19 AUGUST 2022

Read: Acts 17:1-9

Reflect: The message of Jesus will always challenge those who are invested in the status quo, and who use legalistic law-enforcement

to preserve their position and power. In Thessalonica, the preaching of the Gospel was received with joy by many of the Jews and also some of the Gentiles. But this upset some of the Jews. So, they started a campaign against Paul and all who were associated with him. They blamed Paul for causing trouble, when actually things were very calm until they stirred up the mob. They suddenly became loyal to Caesar and declared that Paul was preaching treason by calling Jesus king - which was technically true, but for faithful Jews, loyalty to Caesar was unheard of. When Jesus spoke about the division he would bring into the world, this was exactly what he had in mind.

This is why it is important for followers of Jesus to learn to do two things. Firstly, we need to grow in the ability to discern the true motives behind people's actions and respond in Christ-like grace and love. Secondly, we need to ensure that, in our own hearts, we do not harbour any jealousy or addiction to power, and that we do not use law to try and control those around us. If you keep reading the verses after today's reading, you will find that Paul and his friends moved on to Berea - graciously avoiding any further dispute in Thessalonica. But these angry people followed them and stirred up trouble even there. Sometimes even our most Christ-like reactions are unable to reach those who oppose God's Reign.

What situations in your life require discernment and grace in your response?

Do: When we face resistance - within ourselves and from those around us - to God's values and purposes, we need something to strengthen us and keep us firm in our commit to God's ways. The discipline of praise offers us exactly this gift. Today, when you face resistance, turn your focus to God and God's Reign and offer praise for all that God brings into your life.

Pray: In the face of resistance, O God, I celebrate your Reign that leads me to abundant life.

SATURDAY 20 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 6:1-5

Reflect: Yesterday we read how the people of Thessalonica tried to use the law of Rome to get Paul arrested for treason. Today, we see the religious leaders using the religious law of the Sabbath to accuse Jesus of acting unlawfully. Tomorrow, we will read another story of confrontation between the religious leaders and Jesus over the Sabbath - this time because of a healing Jesus performs. But notice Jesus' response. He honours the law, but he moves past the letter to the spirit.

It must have been shocking for the religious leaders to hear Jesus say that he is Lord of the Sabbath, but Jesus' point is that the Sabbath is not an end in itself. It is meant to point people to the rest, the life and the abundance that we find in God's Reign. For the Pharisees the actions of the disciples were offensive. As they ate a few heads of grain, the disciples were hardly "harvesting", but the Pharisees had become so caught up in legal technicalities, that they could exercise no flexibility here or anywhere. For Jesus, though, the Sabbath was a time to enjoy the life and goodness God gave, and so eating a few bits of grain was perfectly acceptable. It was certainly no worse than David eating the priest's bread!

Do you ever get caught up in technicalities as an attempt to control yourself or others? How can you be a little more flexible in your faith?

Do: Sometimes our faith is all about work. This is not a bad thing - it is important that we do the work of nurturing our relationship with God. However, it is equally important that we rest sometimes. We need to lighten up, take a break and allow our spirits to be restored. Today, try giving yourself a spiritual holiday, and just rest in the joy of God's presence.

Pray: Thank you for Sabbath times, O God, when I can find my rest in you.