



28 August – 03 September 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

In our celebrity-obsessed world, the quest for recognition, influence, wealth, fame, and the praise of others drives all too many of us. Ultimately, this pride-filled drivenness leads us into conflict and destructiveness, as all of life becomes a game of winners and losers. The great narratives of different faiths are then placed in competition with each other for the 'honour' of being the 'ultimate truth'. The priorities of nations are placed into conflict as politicians wrestle to find a place in the corridors of world power, while their people's needs are used as bargaining chips or forgotten altogether. Values, integrity, and fidelity all end up being expendable as success, victory or popularity become the ends which justify any means. And, as this driven, competitive way of being spreads through the world, we all pay the price in increasing rates of divorce, heart (and other) disease, conflict, and inequality. But, of course, those who end up paying the most are those at the 'bottom' of the game – the innocent losers.

Into all of this a simple word of justice speaks – humility can heal our world. As we learn, individually, nationally, and globally, to live with simplicity, contentment, respect, and integrity – and expect the same from our leaders and our corporations – the game of winners of losers begins to shift to a playful, collaborative game of shared benefit. And then, our eyes are opened to the fullness of life that is found in the hidden, poor, and forgotten places – places that the rich and wealthy never see.

This call to a healing humility is the focus of our meditations this week.

SUNDAY 28 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Reflect: It feels good to be honoured, and it is natural to seek the recognition we deserve. But what is natural is not always what is best for us. Our egos are insatiable, and when we are made to feel important, or when others begin to treat us differently because we are "special", something can easily become corrupt in our souls. When we become obsessed with the game of who is most important, and when we are always seeking the best seats at the table, our capacity to love, to serve and to honour others is significantly diminished.

This is why Jesus, noticing how the people at a dinner were playing this power game, taught that it is better to choose the lowest place, and to embrace an attitude of humility and service. This attitude frees us from the tyranny of our egos, and it ensures that we are not ashamed for assuming too much honour for ourselves. But, more than this, when we make a habit of choosing the lowest place, we keep our souls healthy. We maintain an ability to be with anyone, no matter what their status or position, and we nurture a capacity to love and serve all people.

How can you release any desire to be treated as special, or to be honoured today?

Do: One of the best ways to keep ourselves humble is to engage regularly in serving others - especially those from whom we can expect nothing back. This is why Jesus goes on to suggest that we invite the poor and the marginalised to our feasts. When we give ourselves in service, we learn to recognise the humanity in all people, and we receive far more than we give as our souls are liberated and inspired. Today, do something in service of someone who cannot repay you.

Pray: Teach me to be a humble servant of all Jesus, and to release my need to be "special".

MONDAY 29 AUGUST 2022

Read: Hebrews 13:7-21

Reflect: Today's reading is part of the final greeting from the Book of Hebrews. These last words call the believers to a life rooted in Christ, embracing Jesus' sacrifice for our sakes, and following Jesus' example for our daily living. At the heart of these instructions is a call to deep humility. There is the humility of Jesus, who willingly died outside of the city - where outcasts and lepers lived - and there is the challenge to embrace this humility for ourselves - going to him "outside the gates" (Verse 13). There is the call to two simple practices - praising God and doing good to those in need. Then there is the call to obey our leaders and help them find joy in their work. These are not dramatic actions, but they are transforming. When we live in this simple, humble way, we find life for ourselves, and we bring life to others.

The obsession in our society with fame, recognition and wealth can sometimes make us feel like a humble life is somehow inadequate. When we are not striving to be "the best", or to stand out and be noticed, we can feel invisible and unimportant. But the healing and transformation that the Gospel offers to our world is not primarily revealed in dramatic, important actions and people. The power of the Gospel is in ordinary people living with humble praise of God and service of one another. When we follow Jesus in his example of humility - joining hands with the least and the most vulnerable - we not only help to make the world a healthier place, but we also find abundant life for ourselves.

How can you praise God and do good to others today?

Do: Part of the power of praise is that it heightens our capacity to recognise God's presence in unlikely places and people. When we praise God authentically, we cannot help but begin to see God in those who are outcast and "unlovable". And then, we find ourselves trying to celebrate the God in them as we serve and love them in Jesus' name. Today, allow your praise to open your eyes to God's image in all people.

Pray: I praise you, O God, for your love and grace, and for the way you reveal yourself in other people.

TUESDAY 30 AUGUST 2022

Read: Isaiah 2:12-17

Reflect: Although it may not be obvious at first, Isaiah's words in today's reading were a remarkable shift in theology for the people of his day. At a time when it was believed that God was on the side of God's people, and that it was only the enemies of Israel that needed to be judged, Isaiah confronted the pride that this "God is on our side" thinking inevitably created. Using the metaphor of all things that are lofty and glorious - large trees, high mountains, tall towers - Isaiah prophesied a day when God would bring down the pride of God's people. Only God would be exalted, he proclaimed.

To the cynics among us, this may sound as if God is guilty of the same pride that God judges in women and men. But God's exaltation is not for God's own sake. God is God, and for us to deny this, and try to make ourselves our own gods, is to bring tremendous pain and difficulty on ourselves and on others. This is why the Bible considers pride to be one of the most destructive and resistant of sins. However, when we recognise that we can never be our own gods, and we submit ourselves to God's rule, we open ourselves to God's direction and instruction and we are able to navigate life with greater wisdom and resilience. This is the gift of humility.

Are there any "high places" in your life that need to be brought low today? Are you willing for God to do this work in you?

Do: No matter how hard we work at humility, we all have areas of our lives in which we feel proud and "better" than others - even if it's just that we feel more humble! It can be difficult to admit this pride - especially to ourselves - but if we will open our hearts to the Spirit's conviction, we will soon see what needs to be brought down. Today, allow God's Spirit to convict you, and confess any areas of pride that you become aware of in your life.

Pray: Show me the "high places" in my heart that need to be brought low, O God, and forgive me for my pride.

WEDNESDAY 31 AUGUST 2022

Read: Psalm 119:65-72

Reflect: In a world in which it is a mark of pride to be able to say, "I did it my way", it can be very hard to pray a prayer like the one found in today's reading. After acknowledging God's goodness, the Psalmist asks for God's knowledge and instruction. The writer acknowledges that going his own way brought only pain, and so he commits to doing what God says. The Psalmist even celebrates suffering because it taught him the wisdom of God's instructions, and now he values them more than material wealth. In contrast, the writer has found arrogant people to be dishonest and unfeeling.

It takes great humility to admit when we have gone wrong, and to be grateful for the "hard knocks" that life uses to teach us. It also takes humility to reject the expediency and addiction to self-importance that arrogance brings. It is easier to pump ourselves up, deny our mistakes and do whatever it takes to feel good, no matter the consequence. It is easier to shore up our self-esteem by claiming that "at least, I did it all by myself". But such pride only denies us the honesty and openness that can heal us, teach us, and make us stronger, healthier human beings. It can be painful to admit that we don't know it all, and that we need help to navigate this life, but once we do, we are able to receive God's wisdom which leads us to the best possible life.

Where do you need God's instruction to guide you today? How can you open yourself to God's wisdom a little more?

Do: In the Book of James, we are told that anyone who lacks wisdom should ask for it and he or she will receive it (James 1:5). Today, whenever you feel the need for God's direction or instruction, pray and ask for it, and trust that God will guide your way.

Pray: Whenever I need guidance, O God, please give me your wisdom.

THURSDAY 01 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Philippians 2:25-30

Reflect: As we begin to shift our focus toward Sunday's message, the Scriptures offer us a valuable insight. From the reflections of the last few days, we may be tempted to believe that humility, and God's blessing and wisdom that come with it, is a guarantee that we will

avoid pain and weakness. It may be that the Philippians were tempted to believe this as well, and so, when they heard that Epaphroditus - their representative sent to minister to Paul in prison - was sick, they were very concerned - possibly because it made them question his effectiveness. Paul, however, describes Epaphroditus's sickness using the same words that he earlier uses to describe Jesus' self-giving sacrifice. As Jesus was obedient to death (Philippians 2:8) so Epaphroditus had served so faithfully that he almost died for the work of Christ (verse 30). In this way Paul shows that faithfulness in ministry does not guarantee a life free from pain and suffering. Rather, we share the same weaknesses and struggles that all people experience, but, in following Jesus, we find the ability, like Epaphroditus, to serve and love others anyway.

It is significant that, when Epaphroditus heard about the concern of his Philippian sisters and brothers, he did not become defensive, or feel sorry for himself. Instead, he was more concerned for them, and sought to reassure them that they had nothing to worry about. This is true humility, true servanthood, and true willingness to embrace the cost of following Jesus.

What cost are you facing as you follow Jesus today? How does Epaphroditus' story encourage you?

Do: Although we may find it costly to follow Jesus, the strength, joy, and fulfillment we find in giving our lives to something eternal and transforming are a wonderful gift. When we remember this, and make a point of expressing our gratitude for God's presence and blessing, it becomes much easier to endure the tough times. Why not make today a day of thanksgiving, no matter what your circumstances may be?

Pray: Thank you, O God, that, whatever I may be called to endure in my life, your presence and grace sustain me.

FRIDAY 02 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Reflect: Although, on Sunday, we will be wrestling with the cost of following Jesus, it is good to remember that the benefit, for us and for our world, far outweighs the cost. Psalm 139 is one of the most

encouraging and comforting passages in the entire Bible. It expresses the complete faith in God that flows from the knowledge that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Our lives are not random and meaningless, but we are formed by God in love. We are known - every millimetre of our bodies, every thought, every inner compulsion - and we are wholly loved. There is not a day of our lives that is not known by God and held in God's heart, and God's thoughts toward us, which sustain and guide us, are innumerable! Whether we sleep or wake, whether we live mindfully or mindlessly, God remains with us, calling to us and inviting us into God's life and God's love.

In the light of these amazing truths, we can find comfort and strength even when we face the toughest of times. Those who come to Christ with the expectation that all will be happiness and wealth and safety may lose heart when they discover that following Jesus is not easy. There is the struggle to live out the costly values of simplicity, service and sacrifice, and there is often conflict with those who reject the values of God's Reign. This means that being a Christ follower is often painful, and difficult. But, when we remember the words of the Psalmist and meditate on how God knows and loves us, we are able to stay faithful to Jesus because we know that God's way, as hard as it can be, is the best way, and that it always leads to life that is truly abundant.

What strength and comfort can you draw from this Psalm today?

Do: One of the toughest struggles we face, both in our greatest joy and our greatest pain, is the tendency to forget God's presence. In moments of extreme joy or pain, we get so caught up in the experience that we lose sight of God's love and grace, and we can feel abandoned or rejected. Today, no matter what you may be facing, invoke God's presence and remember that God is with you always.

Pray: In my greatest joy and in my greatest sorrow, O God, make your presence and grace known to me.

SATURDAY 03 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Deuteronomy 29:2-20

Reflect: As the people of Israel drew near to the Promised Land, Moses took time to review God's covenant. This was a new generation - the people who had first received the Law had almost all died by now - and so it was important that Moses reminded them of the truths that governed their life together as the people of God. Since his own death was near, Moses made the most of this final opportunity to teach the people he had led for forty years. The Book of Deuteronomy is the record of this review of the Law.

At the heart of Moses' final words, is a call to be in covenant with God - a sacred, binding commitment to follow God's ways and reflect God's goodness to the world. Moses reminds the people of how God had cared for them through the wilderness, and also what the consequences would be of forgetting God's ways. None of Moses' words are for God's sake. It is not that God craves the worship of the people, and that God would angrily punish them if they failed (even though this is the language that is used here). Rather, it is that, if they rejected God's ways - choosing rather to follow what felt easier, more secure, and more pleasurable - they would bring pain on themselves and one another. This is the simple, but difficult truth of the Gospel. Following God's ways may feel costly, but the alternative is far worse. The short-term pleasure and happiness we may find in going our own way is soon replaced by brokenness, conflict, despair, and emptiness.

In Christ, God has, once again, called us into a covenant. The Law, which governs our commitment, is the Law of Love. How can you renew your loving covenant with God today?

Do: The decision to follow Jesus is not a once-off thing. Rather, it is a choice we must make each day. Today, as you hear Christ's call to follow him again, take a moment to renew your covenant and give your life to Christ again.

Pray: Once again I hear your call to follow you, Jesus, and once again I commit my life to you.