



11 September – 17 September 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

The Gospel reading this week speaks of the joy when lost things are found. Jesus used the image of a lost sheep and a lost coin to describe the joy in God's Reign when people turn from sin to Jesus' way. There are two important truths that must be remembered as we read these parables. The first is that what Jesus means by "being found" is not primarily about accepting certain intellectual ideas and being assured of heaven when we die. For Jesus, a person is found when they recognise that the values of this world do not bring life, and they turn to embrace the values of God's Reign and live a life of love and justice here and now. The second truth to remember is that for us to know we have been found, we need to repent - that is, we need to change our values, actions and, yes, our thoughts, to align with those of God's Reign.

This act of repentance is not a once-off experience. Rather, it is a choice we must make every day as our hearts are captured more and more by the vision of God's Reign. This is where readings like Psalm 51 are so helpful. Written after David's sins of adultery and murder, this Psalm is one of the most powerful prayers of repentance in the Bible - which is why it is one of the set readings for today. You may want to carry the words of this Psalm with you throughout this week as we seek to do the work of repentance.

SUNDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Psalm 51:1-10

Reflect: Most of us will never need to repent of the kind of acts that David did. While adultery may be fairly common in our world today, few of us will ever commit murder to cover up our sexual indiscretions. However, the heart attitudes that drove David to do what he did are well known to all of us. We all wrestle with lust of one kind or another. While we may not all struggle with inappropriate

sexual desires, our lusts may take a different form - the lust for more wealth, the lust for power over others, the lust for a job or an experience that someone else has that is out of reach for us. All of these lusts can break down our relationships or lead us into destructive behaviour. When it comes to murder, we may feel safe, but, as Jesus pointed out, even our anger can be as destructive as taking a life. While we may not harm another person physically, we too often allow our words to destroy the reputations, the confidence, the self-esteem, or the good relationships of others.

When we are willing to acknowledge these destructive tendencies within us, we have taken the first step to healing, and we have made repentance possible. Part of this repentance is acknowledging that every destructive thing we do is an offense against God, because everyone we hurt is loved by God. Then, as we admit our wrongs to God, we must acknowledge that we need a power beyond ourselves to change. This is why David asked God to cleanse him and to renew his spirit. True transformation is God's work.

What repentance work do you need to do today?

Do: One of the great gifts of the Bible is the way it reveals the truth of our hearts. Often, as we read the words of Scripture, we are convicted of the areas of life where change is needed. Today, go back and reread Psalm 51. As you read, ask God to show you, through these words, where repentance is needed in your own life.

Pray: Show me, O God, where my life fails to reflect the values of your Reign.

MONDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Amos 7:1-6

Reflect: In the time of Amos, the nation of Israel seemed to be so strong. The worship of the people was regular, beautiful and excellent. The wealthy were prospering, and life seemed to be so good. But the prophet saw a very different picture - injustice, rote ritual with no heart, greed, exploitation and rebellion against God. And so, though he did not consider himself a prophet, Amos felt compelled to speak out in God's name. Today's reading reveals the heart of this faithful servant of God. As he heard God's words of

judgement, Amos pleaded on behalf of his people. As strong as Israel thought it was, Amos knew that, in the face of God's wrath, the nation was small and weak, and so he begged for mercy. In these two cases, the Scriptures speak of God "repenting" - changing God's mind and deciding not to bring about the judgement God had planned. Nevertheless, if you continue reading, you will see that God insists that the people will finally face the consequences of their actions one way or another.

It may seem strange to think of God repenting, but, in the Old Testament, it was common to think of divine beings in such human terms. While we may wrestle with the specifics of this passage if we take it too literally, there are two important messages for us here. The first is that we who are called to challenge injustice and sin in God's name must always do so from a place of compassion for those whom we confront. The second is to remember that our prayers do make a difference, and so we need to be committed to this work as part of our personal and communal repentance. Repentance - for us and for our communities - is not just about ceasing to do what is wrong. It is also about doing what is right. This is what really brings God's justice and healing into the world.

Who needs your loving confrontation and prayer today?

Do: When we pray, it can be easy to fall into a pattern of thinking only of those in need. When we are called to stand against people because of their injustice or the harm they do to others, we may be tempted to ignore them in our prayers. But God calls us to pray even for our enemies, and to invite God's Spirit to work within those who oppose us. Today, make time to pray for those who bring pain and oppression into your community.

Pray: May your love and justice flood through my enemies, O God, bringing healing and reconciliation.

TUESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: 2 Peter 3:8-13

Reflect: From today's reading it is clear that the first century Christians were expecting Jesus' return very soon. In fact, as Peter's response indicates, they were becoming despondent that it hadn't

happened as quickly as they had hoped. In order to address this crisis of faith, Peter reminds the believers of God's incredible grace, and that God does not want anyone to perish. For these early followers of Christ, this meant that they needed to stay faithful and committed to living the Jesus way, since this would hasten God's coming (v.11 & 12). Peter adopts the apocalyptic language of the Old Testament - images of fire and noise, of heaven and earth being consumed and remade - to affirm God's purpose and sovereignty over the universe, and to proclaim the hope of God's ultimate restoration of the universe to goodness, truth and beauty.

As we read this passage, we must be careful not to make the same mistake that the early Christians did. Jesus made it clear that no one knows when his return would happen, and so we must avoid trying to predict when it will come - even in broad terms like "in our lifetime". We must also be careful to hear the challenge of Peter's words. When we live faithfully, constantly repenting of anything that draws us away from Jesus' way, we help to manifest God's presence and purpose in our world. If we all did just this one simple thing each day, it would not be long before we would experience a new heaven and a new earth!

Why not renew your commitment to faithful, Christ-like living today?

Do: So often, when we fail to live the way Jesus calls us to, it is simply a matter of losing focus. It's not that we intend to go astray. It's just that we allow ourselves to act mindlessly. But, when we take a moment each day to affirm our commitment to Christ, this simple act can awaken our mindfulness and help us to stay faithful. Today, renew your commitment to Jesus through a simple act of dedication.

Pray: I dedicate myself again today to your ways and your purpose, O God.

WEDNESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Job 40:6-14; 42:1-6

Reflect: The Book of Job, which is an extended parable rather than a historical account, raises questions about why suffering happens, but they are never really answered. Job suffered through no fault of his own, but his friends didn't understand this. Their basic belief was

that suffering was God's punishment, while health and wealth were God's blessing. Yet, Job consistently pleaded his innocence, and cried out to God for allowing his pain. In the end, God challenged Job, and revealed God's power and glory, leading Job to repent - not of anything that brought his suffering on, but of his doubt and despair as he journeyed through the suffering. The message of this story seems to be that God's ways are sovereign and beyond our understanding. So, when suffering comes, we shouldn't question, but just trust and remain faithful.

On one hand, this is good advice. Suffering is a mystery, and it does challenge our faith. But, if we allow it to rob us of our connection with God, we lose the one resource that can sustain us through our darkest times. On the other hand, though, the Scriptures often encourage us to question, to lament, and to wrestle with God, because we know that God does not desire suffering. The God that Jesus revealed would never inflict suffering on someone just to win an argument like the God depicted in the beginning of this book. Rather, whenever we suffer, God suffers with us. But, for us to know God's sustaining presence it can be helpful to turn away (repent) from any attitudes that lead us into despair or unbelief.

How is your faith being challenged today? How can you hold on to faith in the face of your questions and doubts?

Do: The practice of lament is a powerful and healing spiritual activity. When we can express our true feeling to God, especially the negative ones, we are often reminded of God's presence, and we experience relief and a renewal of our hope and courage. Today, use this practice to express any doubts, fears or questions that may be challenging you.

Pray: Hear my questions and doubts, O God, and answer.

THURSDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Exodus 23:1-9

Reflect: Sunday's readings offer a challenging call to be generous, both with our money and with grace. Our response does not require any dramatic feats - we simply need to live with basic consideration and respect for others. This is the heart of today's reading. The life

of following Jesus is all about integrity, honesty, and compassion. We are not to spread false rumours or help others to be dishonest when giving witness. We are not to favour either the wealthy or the poor when we are asked to bear witness, but simply to speak the truth. When we see our enemies in trouble, we are to help them, and we are not to accuse other people falsely. We are to seek justice for all, and to refuse to take bribes, oppress foreigners, or participate in corruption. These are basic guidelines for living in community. Imagine if everyone lived like this!

When we're dealing with friends and loved ones, it's easy to follow these instructions. Of course, we'll try to help those closest to us, and deal as honestly with them as we can. But, when we're dealing with strangers, or with those who are different from us or who oppose us, it can be much harder to be fair, to be ruthlessly honest, or to avoid any hint of bias in our interactions. But this is a consistent message of the Bible - we are to treat others well, no matter who they are, what their relationship is with us, or what they may have done to us.

Who needs you to treat them with integrity and grace today?

Do: It is not possible always to live with integrity and grace toward all people in our own strength. We too easily allow our biases, our stereotypes and our desires to get in the way. But, when we remember that God first loved us and gave us grace, we can respond with thanksgiving and then share the gift of grace with others. Today, allow the practice of thanksgiving to remind you of God's grace and to lead you to be more gracious to others.

Pray: Thank you, God, for your love and grace.

FRIDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Romans 8:31-39

Reflect: When we speak about grace and generosity it is important to remember that the source of grace and true generosity is the God who has chosen to stand with us, to live among us and within us, and who is unshakably committed to us. This is the essential message of Paul's words in Romans 8. After slowly explaining humanity's tendencies to rebellion against God and destruction

against one another in the early chapters of this book, Paul goes on to explain how, in Jesus, God has removed any condemnation from us and has claimed us as God's children. Then, in Romans 8, he explains what it means for us to belong in God's family - nothing can separate us from God's love, and there is no one who could possibly condemn us in any way. The glory of all this is that there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve God's love. Nor is there anything we can do to disqualify ourselves. It is all pure grace. We need only receive it and enjoy it.

Notice how careful the apostle is to point out that this does not mean that everything will always be pain-free in our lives. So often when we suffer, we wonder whether this is God's judgement or whether it indicates that we have lost God's love. But, in verses 35-37 Paul explains that we may well suffer, especially if we answer the call to follow Jesus and share his grace and generosity with others, but God's love remains with us in our darkest times, and even then, we can know victory through Christ.

How have you experienced God's grace and generosity in your own life? How can you celebrate it today?

Do: The whole of today's reading is an exuberant expression of praise. Go back and read it again, but this time, make the words your own, and offer them to God as a prayer of praise for God's grace and generosity toward you. Then, carry these words with you, using them to inspire praise whenever you become aware of God's love through the day.

Pray: I praise you, O God, that nothing in the entire universe can separate me from your love.

SATURDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Mark 12:41-44

Reflect: I've often wondered what was going on in the mind of this poor widow that she would give so sacrificially to the Temple, especially since, just the day before, Jesus had cleansed the house of worship because of the corruption of the priests. We know nothing about this woman's circumstances, or of her hopes and dreams. We don't know where she got the faith to give out of her small

resources, but Jesus indicates that the money she dropped into the box was part of what she needed to live on. Although her gift was small in comparison with those of others, her generosity and trust in God's grace was way beyond anyone else's. It is likely that this was not an unusual practice for this woman, but even so, her faithful giving didn't suddenly miraculously make her rich. She remained poor, but within her poverty, she must have had a tremendous sense of God's sustenance and presence. Her gift was an act of true worship and love, and this could only have impacted her entire life - which is why Jesus took the time to point her out and commend her.

Most of us give like the other people in the Temple - offering God a small portion of our excess. We live in a world where a few of us have more than we need, while many struggle to put food on the table. Yet, we live with stress because of the debt we have accumulated or the possessions we have acquired and which we are afraid of losing. If we're honest the foundation of these attitudes is fear - fear that it's all up to us and that we won't have enough. But when we learn to trust in God's grace and generosity - especially as communities of faith - we can release our need to accumulate and live simply and generously.

How can you embrace the joy and faith of real, sacrificial generosity?

Do: The practice of giving is not just about mindlessly throwing a bit of our excess wealth into a plate. True giving is mindful and sacrificial, and it proclaims both our faith in God's presence and grace, and our commitment to share God's goodness as widely as we can. Today, embrace the act of giving in this way and allow it to inspire your faith and free you from your fear.

Pray: In love for you, and as a way to share your goodness with others, O God, I gladly give all I can.