



18 September – 24 September 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Sometimes, as followers of Jesus, we can be extremely naïve about the way the world works. When we neglect the work of reflection and mindfulness, we can easily miss how seductive the temptations to power, possessions, and pleasure can be. The result is that we can find ourselves speaking words of faith while living no differently from those around us, with the same values, desires, and actions leading us into the same struggles, broken relationships, and consumerism. That's why Jesus constantly challenges us to be aware of how the world and its systems work - and of the destructive consequences when everyone lives from a basis of individualism, self-sufficiency, and self-protection. Until we are willing to take an honest look at the world, we will not see the need to change, and the wisdom of the Reign of God will remain hidden to us.

But, once we have seen how the world works, and we have chosen to embrace the alternative values and behaviours of God's Reign, we are invited into a life of generous grace and welcome. We discover that the resources we have are not just for our own use. We are conduits - not containers - for the talents, possessions, time and love that God has given us. Then, we can use whatever resources we have, and can find, to touch and bless others, and to expand the all-inclusive community of Jesus into our world.

This week we will be encouraged to take a tough look at the world, and to be even more intentional about living out the mission and message of Jesus.

SUNDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Luke 16:1-13

Reflect: The parable in today's reading is a difficult one to understand - especially if we try to identify the different characters in

this story as specific beings like Jesus, God, or ourselves. There is a real sense in which this parable is offered as a contrast to the story of the Prodigal Son, which immediately precedes it. The parable of the Prodigal describes the amazing grace of God's Reign, in which a wasteful child, who comes to his senses, is welcomed back and restored to his place in the family. The parable of the Dishonest Manager shows how different things are in the world. Here the manager, who had been just as wasteful as the Prodigal, has to use dishonest means to win friends in order to secure his future. He has no hope or expectation of a grace that can save or restore him, so he is left to his own expedient devices.

This is how things work in the world. Expediency and self-protection rule the day and win the favour of those in power. But ultimately, these tactics can never offer us lasting security or deep relationships, and they can never heal the brokenness in our world. That's why Jesus encourages us to use what we have faithfully, to bless others, and reveal the mutual care and support of God's Reign. When we turn from self-protection and self-sufficiency to mutual care and generous grace, we not only create a safer world for others, but we find a more hospitable world for ourselves.

Are there any areas of your life where you have been living according to the world's values of self-protection and self-sufficiency? How can you embrace generous grace today?

Do: It is often difficult for us to recognise the difference between the values of God's Reign and those of human empires, and so we need to hear the voice of the Spirit, as Jesus told the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Throughout today, invoke the Spirit's presence and listen for the Spirit's voice so that you can discern how best to follow Jesus' way in each situation.

Pray: Make your presence known and your voice heard, O Spirit, to guide me in your ways.

MONDAY 19 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Psalm 12

Reflect: The reflection of the world that is given in this Psalm is not very different from that which is depicted in our daily news reports.

Deception, corruption, boasting, and flattery seem to be the norm, and it can feel like faithful and good people are becoming fewer. The poor and the most vulnerable among us are facing the violence of rape, war, exploitation, and enslavement on a constant basis, and there seems to be no end to the brokenness and destructiveness of the world. When we see the world only in this way, it can be tempting to fall into despair and cynicism.

But there is also another reality at work. God is not ignorant of the violence being done in the world. God has not abandoned us to our worst selves. Rather, God is constantly rising up to save those who are threatened and to undermine the works of evil. We see this in the growth of international advocacy movements across the world, and the effectiveness of activism web sites that bring ordinary people together from around the globe and pool their collective voices and efforts to bring about change and healing and justice. We also see it in small, life-giving initiatives started by churches and individuals who care. The challenge for us, then, is not to allow evil to imprison or silence us, but rather to hear God's call and join the work of salvation, healing, and restoration.

To what healing movement can you contribute today?

Do: In the face of evil, prayer can seem like an impotent response. But, when we allow our prayers to lead us into godly action, our prayers become a world-changing activity. Today make time to pray for situations where evil seems to be triumphant, and then ask God how you can contribute to healing and restoration.

Pray: May your generous grace and love triumph over corruption and violence, O God.

TUESDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Reflect: Paul's words in today's reading are very different from the wisdom of our age. We are told that freedom is found when we do not allow anyone else to tell us who we are, who we can be, and what we should do. When we are completely independent and oriented only to our own needs and desires, that's when we will be

truly free, the gurus tell us. But our relationships and our world break down when we all seek only what is best for us.

Paul's message is exactly the opposite of this self-centred teaching. Although he acknowledges his freedom in Christ, he willingly allows himself to be shaped by the people to whom he ministers. While his values, message, and purpose remain consistent - to follow Jesus and to live as a true citizen of God's Reign – Paul also seeks to accommodate the understandings, the practices, the cultural characteristics, and the needs of the people to whom he witnesses. His purpose is to serve them as best he can, and to present Jesus in ways that they can understand so that they too can discover Christ's life. This self-sacrificial, serving attitude is where true freedom, purpose and fulfilment are found.

How have you been influenced by the self-centred message of our age? How can you learn from Paul to be willing to be all things to all people in order to win them over?

Do: In spite of the gurus who tell us to go our own way, every day we are flooded with messages telling us how to live, what to value, and who we should be - usually with a call to buy something. It can be hard to resist these messages, learn how to follow the way of Jesus, and to be willing to accommodate and serve others. This is why we need the Scriptures. When we see how Jesus, and those who followed him lived, their lives become a challenge for us to embrace their values. Today, try to spend as much time as you can in Bible reading. You may want to read through the Gospel of Mark as a beginning.

Pray: Give me ears to hear your call, and a heart to resist the self-centred wisdom of this age, O God.

WEDNESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Proverbs 21:10-16

Reflect: If we want a quick overview of the difference between the ways of human empires and the ways of God's Reign, Proverbs often gives it to us. Today we see a contrast between "evil people" and "the godly". The differences are not dramatic, but they are significant. Evil people desire evil - their hearts are focussed on

themselves, and their neighbours can expect no mercy or compassion. They are comfortable using bribery to get their way, or to "oil the wheels" of the world, which is why they are afraid of justice. Their ears are closed to the cries of the poor, and they have little common sense. Yet, the writer assures us that God knows what goes on in their homes - and their hearts - and the time will come when the consequences of their actions will catch up with them.

Godly people, on the other hand, are willing to be corrected and to correct others when necessary. They love justice, care for their neighbours, and live by God's common sense. These are simple attitudes and actions that help to make the world a friendlier and healthier place, and that bring life to all. It's not that hard to live like this, but it does take a commitment to embrace the love, self-sacrifice and forgiveness of Jesus on a daily basis.

How can you be more intentional about living the godly common sense of Jesus today?

Do: One of the big differences between those who are godly and those who are not is their attitude to others. When we live with compassion and care for others, we share God's love and life. This is the heart of the Gospel - a simple life of love for God and others. Today, whenever you encounter someone who needs care, seek to serve him or her in a quiet, gentle way.

Pray: As you have served and loved me, O God, so I seek to serve and love those around me.

THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

Reflect: When you read the Bible regularly you begin to notice how often it speaks about money and what we do with it. This Sunday, the Gospel reading will challenge us very strongly on this matter. In a week where we explore how God's call is different from the values of our society, the question of money is a central issue. When we live according to the values and purposes of God's Reign, we recognise that "our" money is not ours at all but is a channel through which God's grace and love are to be shown. This was one of the principles that Paul sought to teach the early churches which he

served. When the church in Jerusalem faced financial challenges, Paul asked the churches in Asia Minor to contribute to helping them. Some of the churches were very generous - even those that were not very wealthy themselves (like the Philippians). But, the Corinthian church, which had at first been generous, seems to have changed its attitude. And so, Paul reminded them of God's generous grace, and asked them to finish what they had started - a generous contribution to Jerusalem.

In his instructions, Paul offers some good principles for Christian giving. We are to give in proportion to what we have, giving out of what we have, and not what we don't have (contrary to some preachers who tell you to give what you don't have so that God will "bless" you!) Our giving should not make it more difficult for us but should be done gladly and generously. The idea is that, in the community of faith, we share what we have so that others can also have enough. Then, when we hit hard times, they are the ones who share so that we can have enough. Imagine if the whole world lived by these principles!

Who needs you to give in order to support and help them today?

Do: When we give, we recognise how wealthy we have become. We may not have a lot, but if we are able to give, we are truly fortunate. And as we give, we bring life to others, knowing that the community that is built through mutual generosity will also sustain us when we need it. Today, allow your generous giving to connect you more deeply with a community of mutual care.

Pray: In gratitude for all that you have given me, O God, I share generously with others.

FRIDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

Reflect: When we think about grace and generosity, it is tempting to believe that we are the originators of these attitudes in our own hearts. As Christians we can sometimes fall into feeling that our faith is an achievement, and that God's grace has come to us through something we have done, or believed, or prayed. The result of this rather arrogant attitude is that we may lose the capacity to be

generous with those who do not believe, or act, or pray, as we do. In addition, we may begin to think that what we see as God's blessings are the rewards for our goodness or faithfulness. It is often this sense of entitlement that is at the heart of our lack of compassion and justice. That certainly seems to be how Jesus saw things, if his parables are anything to go by.

In today's reading, Paul addresses this same attitude of entitlement. Where the believers were tempted to point at the pagans around them as "sinners" and people who were disobedient to God, Paul states that the believers did (and do) the same things. Where the believers were tempted to view their faith as an achievement, Paul teaches that it is all a pure gift of grace. Then, Paul goes even further, stating that the grace is given so that God's people can do the good works - bringing God's grace to others - which God has called them to. There is no place for pride, arrogance, or a sense of entitlement in our faith. There are only humble thanks for God's grace, and the call to generously share God's goodness with everyone we can.

Where have you slipped into pride over your faith? How can you embrace the humble thanksgiving and generosity of grace today?

Do: It is only thanksgiving that reminds us that everything we have and enjoy - including our faith - is pure gift. Thus, it is thanksgiving that frees us from pride and entitlement, and that leads us to generosity and compassion. Make today a day of deep, heartfelt thanksgiving.

Pray: For all the good things I enjoy including your grace, O God, I give thanks.

SATURDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 2022

Read: Luke 9:43b-48

Reflect: The disciples so often reflect the very attitudes that we hold in our hearts. That is what makes reading their stories so comforting. In today's reading we see two common attitudes that keep followers of Jesus from experiencing the new life of God's Reign. In the first place, there is the attitude of denial and triumphalism. In this state, we are unable to see the truth of the world in which we live - that

embracing the way of God puts us in opposition to the powers-that-be and often leads to great sacrifice. Yet, as we deny this truth, we often believe that following Jesus will guarantee security and victory over others (whomever we may wish to have victory over). In the second place, there is the competition between the disciples that reflects the way they still work according to the same values as the world over which they seek victory. They are still looking out for themselves and seeking to lord it over all the other people around them. With these attitudes, it's no wonder that they completely missed what Jesus was talking about.

But the values and attitudes of Jesus are the exact opposite of these. Jesus willingly embraces sacrifice because to try to avoid it is to turn his back on love - which is a fate worse than death. Jesus refuses to play the power and status games of the world, because he knows that no one ever wins. Instead, he brings a child - someone with no power, no position, and no wealth - and points to the little one as a picture of God's Reign. Once again, the clear message of Jesus is that his ways are very different from the ways of human systems and desires. But it is Jesus' way that brings grace, generosity, justice and compassion into the world. And it is to this way that we are called.

How can you embrace the sacrificial, serving ways of Jesus in your life today?

Do: Before we can embrace the alternative ways of Jesus, we need to allow them to capture our hearts and we must be convinced that they are where life is found and shared. One of the best ways to fill our hearts with a vision of God's Reign is through praise. Why not fill every moment and situation of today with praise for God's "upside-down" Reign.

Pray: I praise you, O God for your Reign, which, in humility and generosity, leads me to life.