



09 October – 15 October 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

You have probably noticed how regularly the Gospel returns to the theme of radical inclusivity. There is a stark contrast between the religious leaders of the Old Testament who drew lines between 'clean' and 'unclean' and 'in' and 'out', and the prophets who called for all people to be welcomed and treated with justice, grace, and dignity. There is a stark contrast between the way the religious leaders of Jesus' day drew lines of division between those who were acceptable (in their eyes) to God and those who weren't, and the way Jesus welcomed, healed and served all people, regardless of race, nationality, language, economic position, gender, or religion. If our religion leads us to live with anything less than the radical inclusivity of Jesus, we have missed the point of the Gospel.

It's easy to speak of how all people are equally loved by God, and how all people are connected and essentially the same. But these words only really make sense when we start to act them out. This means that we must be willing to give up anything that we think makes us 'better', or 'special', or separate from others, while honouring the uniqueness and dignity of each person on their terms. It takes a loving, servant heart to recognise that some people require more care or sensitivity because of how they have been marginalised or hurt, while being willing to give up any desire for such special treatment for ourselves. Yet, this is what Jesus did.

This week, we will be wrestling with what it means to love and serve others in a way that honours them and gives them dignity.

SUNDAY 09 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Luke 17:11-19

Reflect: It is significant that the group of Jewish lepers in today's story included one Samaritan. Under normal circumstances, Jews

did not associate with Samaritans. But once they had been cast out of decent society because of their illness, these Jewish lepers could no longer be exclusive. When the healing happened, though, the Samaritan had much more to be thankful for. Jesus had made no distinction between him and the Jewish sufferers. He healed them all and told them all to go to the priests. In this way he indicated that the Samaritan was included in God's people, just as the Jews were. This was probably the first time the Samaritan had felt so accepted. No wonder he ran back to Jesus to say thank you!

Notice how, when he comes back to Jesus, there is little concern with his nationality - except to express surprise that he is the only one to give thanks. And then, even though he had already been healed, Jesus says that his faith has healed him. What a curious statement, considering that the Samaritan did nothing to express faith, except to go with the others to the priests and to return to give thanks after he was healed. Perhaps Jesus was referring here not to the healing of his leprosy, but of his exclusion from God's grace and love. When he returned, the Samaritan obviously believed that Jesus would welcome him back - which not many Jews would have done. This faith healed his social exclusion as much as his physical ailment had been healed.

How can you express faith in God's indiscriminate welcome today?
How can you extend God's welcome to others?

Do: One of the simplest and most powerful ways we can show God's love for others is by treating them with dignity, no matter who they are or what their relationship to us. When we take time to notice, greet and meet the eye of those around us - especially those who serve us - and when we speak kindly and patiently with them - even when we feel we are not being well treated - this gives them dignity and shows God's love. Today, work hard to treat everyone with dignity and respect.

Pray: As you have welcomed me and given me dignity, O God, so I do the same for those around me.

MONDAY 10 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Acts 26:24-29

Reflect: This small section of Acts is part of a much larger, very dramatic story. After preaching about Jesus, which stirred up a riot in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested. But, in an attempt to make sense of his case he was moved around and had to speak to many officials. There were a number of instances where Paul could have got himself released if he had just stayed quiet, or if he hadn't asked to be heard by Caesar. But Paul was not concerned for his freedom nearly as much as he was concerned to share God's love and grace with as many people as possible. Because of his circumstances, he had an opportunity to speak to some of the most powerful people in the world and he wasn't going to let his desire for freedom get in the way. Perhaps that's why Festus - one of these important people - called him insane!

Paul's final words in today's reading are an example of radically inclusive Christianity. When the King challenges him about whether he thinks he can make him a Christian so quickly, Paul expresses his prayer that everyone gathered there – both Jews and Gentiles, ordinary folk and elite leaders - would be as he is, but without the chains. What he means is that they would know the hope and joy he had found in Jesus, and that they were included in God's grace.

Sometimes we do speak to people about Jesus in order to get them to join our church, or to think and behave like us. This wasn't Paul's desire. He simply wanted the best for his listeners - to know God's life and love. How can you love and serve others - no matter who they are - in this selfless way today?

Do: Being inclusive may be a matter of the heart and of attitude, but it starts with how we act toward others. When we start to serve people, we quickly begin to see them as human beings created in God's image, and that leads to a heart of welcome and inclusion. Today, use every opportunity to serve people in whatever small ways you can.

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

TUESDAY 11 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Psalm 61

Reflect: The Psalm that is set for today may not, on first reading, feel much like it has anything to say to the theme of inclusivity. The ascription attributes it to David, and it begins with a prayer for God to rescue the Psalmist and for God to be a refuge of security for him. There is a quiet beauty to the image of God's sanctuary being like a shelter beneath the wings of a mother bird, David would have been quick to acknowledge that, even as God provided such a safe refuge for him, so God protects and shelters all who come to God. The second part of the Psalm relates to David's role as king. After giving thanks for God's faithfulness, the writer prays for God's protection and love to guide his reign. Although David went through some very trying times in his life, his season on Israel's throne was generally considered to be the high point of the nation's life. The sense of security that David found in God seems to have spread from him into the very soul of his people.

This is an important truth to remember when we think about being people who include others. When we feel insecure, it is much harder to welcome others, because we fear for what we may lose. But, when we know the peace that feeling secure in God's presence and care provides, we can more easily include others, because we know that God's arms will never be too short to embrace everyone. Also, when we know the joy of finding our home in God, we automatically want others to know that joy as well.

How can you nurture in yourself the kind of security that David felt in God's presence?

Do: One of the ways David nurtured his own sense of security was by giving thanks to God for God's faithful love and presence throughout his life. When we know that God has been with us in the past, we can trust God's care for the future. Today, take time to give thanks for your memories of God's presence and care.

Pray: For your faithful love and welcome, O God, I thank you.

WEDNESDAY 12 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Matthew 10:5-15

Reflect: The words of Jesus in today's reading may come as a surprise if you have become used to the radical inclusivity of his message. To begin with, he sends his disciples out to the people of Israel alone, and then he teaches that, if they are not welcomed anywhere, it would be worse for that town than for Sodom and Gomorrah (which were destroyed by God's judgement)! You may be wondering where the inclusivity has gone!

As far as we can tell, Matthew's gospel was written into a world, after the sacking of Jerusalem, where Judaism was in transition and trying to discover what it was to become without the Temple and its sacrifices. The Old Testament made it clear that Israel had been called to be a light to the nations, and part of Jesus' mission was to help God's people to understand and recapture their purpose and vision. This is why Jesus began his work with the Jews, and then moved on to include the Gentiles and Samaritans. This is also why he adopted such strong Old Testament language to describe the seriousness of rejecting his message. If God's people, who thought they were at the heart of God's mission, refused to participate in God's Reign, then they were no different from the two cities that they considered to be the ultimate in sinfulness.

Sometimes it requires strong words and images to wake people up to recognise what they cannot see. Jesus was not above using shock tactics to try to reach his people. That's why, as he tried to get them to embrace God's visitation and become part of the work of God that would enable them to be the light to the nations and include those who felt they were beyond God's grace, he gave his disciples this strong message. It's also a warning for us to be careful not to become so sure that we're "in" with God that we fail to embrace "outsiders" with God's grace and love.

How can you live as a light to others today?

Do: The disciples were sent out to live among the people and share blessing wherever they could. It was this simple sharing of hospitality and allowing their lives to bless others that were their main witness to God's Reign. Today, try to find small ways to share

and receive hospitality and blessing as a way to proclaim the message of Christ.

Pray: May my life be a blessing to others and lead them to your hospitality, Jesus.

THURSDAY 13 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Acts 17:22-34

Reflect: Today's reading is one of the most wonderful examples of inclusive witness to Jesus in the Bible. When Paul visited Athens, he noticed all the shrines to the different gods in the city. He could have used that as a basis for judging and condemning the people, but he didn't do that. Instead, he took note of one shrine in particular - the one to an unknown god - and started his conversation with the men of Athens from that point. Notice how he commended the people of the city for their piety and how, by associating Jesus with the "unknown god" he affirmed that, in a sense, they already worshipped Jesus without knowing it! All of this ensured that he got the most open reception to his message, and that he revealed God's grace and inclusivity in the most authentic and clear way.

One of the most profound statements in Paul's message to the Athenians is that it is in God that we all "live and move and exist" (or "have our being", as some other translations put it). The "we" here includes the Athenians. So, Paul is saying that all people live and move and exist in God, whether we know it or not. We may want to place ourselves beyond God's grace and life, but God never does! We are always just a breath away from God's welcoming presence.

How can you remember that you, and those around you, exist in God's life today?

Do: When we take time to reflect on who God is, and respond to God's presence in praise, we cannot help but recognise that all of creation exists in God. As Richard Rohr says, "God is either everywhere or nowhere." Today, allow the practice of praise to remind you that your life is lived in God, and that you live in a world that lives in God.

Pray: I praise you God, for it is in you that I, and all creation, live and move and exist.

FRIDAY 14 OCTOBER 2022

Read: 2 Timothy 2:14-26

Reflect: So often, when the New Testament speaks about the practicalities of following Jesus, and proclaiming his message through our lives, the issue of our words comes up. The way we speak is a clear indicator of what's going on in our hearts. When we are argumentative, divisive, and thoughtless in our speech, our hearts grow cold, and our lives fail to reflect the love and grace of Jesus. But, when we speak gently and lovingly, engaging others with the intention to learn and to teach, and when we ensure that our words are free from lust after power, pleasure or possessions, then our words reflect the voice of Christ to those around us, and their words become a way for us to hear God's voice.

On Sunday we will be exploring the way God comes to us and writes God's law on our hearts. Persistence in prayer is a big feature of this encounter with God, and, of course, our words have much to do with prayer. As we open our hearts for God's law to be written within us, our words begin to change to reflect the new values that guide our lives. But, as we begin to speak from a deep experience of God's values and purposes, so this helps God's law to be engraved even more deeply on our hearts. This means that every conversation has the potential to be a prayer.

How can you begin to make every word you speak a form of prayer like this?

Do: A lot of the power in prayer is not in getting God to do what we want, but in transforming our values and desires to align with God's. The different kinds of prayer that have been passed down through the ages all teach us how to use our words in Christ-like ways - to become people of praise, confession (apology), thanksgiving and intercession for others. Today, spend time in prayer, and then allow your prayers to shape how you speak to others through the day.

Pray: May the words I offer to you in prayer, O God, become the foundation for every word I speak.

SATURDAY 15 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Jeremiah 31:15-26

Reflect: After so many prophecies of judgement, it's not surprising that Jeremiah slept so well when he received this word of comfort and restoration from God. The first verses of today's reading are very familiar because we often hear them in the Advent and Christmas seasons referring to the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth. For Jeremiah, these words were a reflection of the grief that God's people had experienced as a result of the conquest of their nation. But, once again God proclaimed that grief and death do not have the last word. Even in the midst of their rebellion, and the painful consequences of rejecting God's ways, God never stopped loving God's people, and now God promised to bring them home and enable them to rebuild their lives.

There is a poignant moment in these verses where Jeremiah hears Israel confessing her foolishness and recognising the destructiveness of her ways. This is all it takes for God to respond and restore. Here again, we see the power of prayer - not just in the words we speak, but in the way we live our lives. When our lives are based on our own self-interest and fearful self-protection, we inevitably bring pain on ourselves and others, no matter what we may say in prayer. But, when we allow God's ways to form the foundation for our lives, then our entire lives become a prayer. Sometimes the prayer needs to be confession, but sometimes the prayer is praise, thanksgiving or intercession.

How can you allow your whole life to be a prayer today?

Do: What is not acknowledged cannot be healed. This is why, if we want to experience God's presence and make our whole lives a prayer, we need to acknowledge the things that get in the way. Today, make time to reflect on what keeps your life from being a prayer. Then, confess it and allow God to heal it.

Pray: Whatever keeps my life from being a prayer, O God, reveal it and heal it.