



19 – 25 January 2025

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

If your church is following the Revised Common Lectionary, you will probably hear the story of Jesus changing water to wine from John's Gospel today. You may also hear Paul's teaching about the gifts that God gives to God's people through God's Spirit. This passage about spiritual gifts comes just before the famous teaching about love in 1 Corinthians 13. The message that comes through these readings is clear: we are called to be people of love, and true lovers are always givers. Even the gifts God gives to each person are not for individual benefit, but for the good of the whole community.

There is an inseparable link between loving and giving. As Victor Hugo once said, "You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving". When we truly love another person, we cannot help but share our time, our resources, and, most importantly, ourselves with our beloved. God is the primary example of such extravagant self-giving, and it is significant that, in John's Gospel, Jesus chose a wedding to be the scene of his first miraculous sign. Our Divine Lover seeks to give us life in abundance. But, as we journey deeper into the love of God, we soon discover that we are called to be extravagant givers just as Jesus was. This week we will be exploring some of the ways that God has given God's Self to us in love, and how we can respond by learning to love in the same way.

SUNDAY 19 JANUARY 2025

Read: John 2:1-11

Reflect: The miracle of turning water to wine is well known. It has probably been preached and written about from every possible perspective. But it remains a significant moment in the ministry of Jesus, and an important window into understanding the character and mission of God. Throughout the Scriptures God's relationship

with God's people is described as a marriage relationship. This reveals that God seeks an intimate connection with us in which we can love and be loved, know and be known. Such intimacy not only provides us with meaning and security, but it also changes us.

Intimacy always calls out our most compassionate, most generous, and most sacrificial selves. As Jesus used his ability to celebrate the love between the couple in Cana, he proclaimed that such love is at the heart of God's desire for all human beings. God seeks to draw us all into deeply connected relationships of love with God, with one another, and with ourselves. For us to cooperate with this dream of God, we need only open ourselves to love and celebrate love, as Jesus did, wherever and whenever we encounter it.

How can you open your heart wider to love today?

Do: One of the greatest obstacles to love is fear. When we allow ourselves to be controlled by fear, we become self-protective and suspicious. But, if we are willing to risk being open and welcoming to others, we discover that love can set us free. Today, avoid any temptation to use blame or stereotyping to keep others at bay, and choose to welcome others into your heart.

Pray: As you have loved and welcomed me, O God, so I choose today to love and welcome others.

MONDAY 20 JANUARY 2025

Read: Romans 12:9-21

Reflect: If we allow our view of love to be too strongly influenced by what we see on our television screens, we will probably come to the conclusion that love is nothing more than a rather untrustworthy feeling over which we have no control. We may long for the butterflies in our tummies, the breathless excitement, and the passion of such feelings, but we will also worry about what will happen when they change or end.

Today's reading gives us a completely different picture of love. The apostle describes love as something practical. Love is something we choose, and it filters through every part of our lives. This may be less romantic than the Hollywood image, but it is far more reliable and lasting. Notice how this description of love speaks about how

we work (not being lazy), how we deal with others (with generosity and hospitality), how we face the future (with hope and patient prayer), how we face conflict and struggle (rejecting vengeance, and returning good for evil). This is love that heals and liberates both the lover and the beloved. It's the kind of love God demonstrated in Jesus, and it's the kind of love that leads us to abundant life.

How can you live your love in practical ways today?

Do: The essence of love is always to seek the best for the other person. This is easy with people we like, and who return our love. With enemies and antagonists it is much harder, but the truth remains that love is a choice, and it is practical. Today, try to act with love in every situation, no matter how difficult it may be.

Pray: Give me the strength and wisdom to act with love in every circumstance, O God.

TUESDAY 21 JANUARY 2025

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:3-17

Reflect: It can be comforting to see that the earliest Christian communities struggled with divisions and conflicts. In spite of their experience of God's grace and strength, and in spite of the spiritual gifts they had received, they fell into competing factions, with groups of people forming around different church leaders. But Paul was not willing to condone this behaviour. He spoke strongly against these divisions and called God's people to unity and love. He reminded them that God's love and grace are far stronger and far more important than their petty issues, and he challenged them to place love for one another over any doctrinal or practical disputes they may have had.

Human beings are no different today. We easily find excuses, both within the church and outside of it, to divide ourselves up and fight with one another. It doesn't matter what "issue" we might choose to divide us; we have no excuse for allowing anything to stop us from loving one another as Christ loved us – no matter how many Bible verses we may quote to support our lovelessness. Rather, we are constantly challenged, as the Corinthian Christians were, to learn to love above all.

Where have you excused your lovelessness toward others? How can you allow love to be your primary motivation today?

Do: Love does not guarantee that we won't disagree and hurt one another. But it does teach us how to find healing, through the powerful acts of confession and forgiveness. Take time today to reflect on those with whom you have been in conflict and find ways to ask for and offer forgiveness.

Pray: As you have forgiven me, Jesus, teach me to forgive those with whom I disagree.

WEDNESDAY 22 JANUARY 2025

Read: Song of Songs 4:9-5:1

Reflect: A woman once told me that her mother had forbidden her from reading the Song of Songs when she was young. She was allowed to read any other book in the Bible, but because of the explicit sexuality of the Song, she was not allowed to read it. After reading today's passage, you may understand this mother's concern. Such open and detailed celebrations of sexual love are unfamiliar in many Christian circles. Yet, the language here is beautiful, and the poetry is deeply moving. Perhaps one of the reasons our society has become over-sexualised is that we have forgotten how to celebrate the beauty and sacredness of our sexuality – and of our bodies – in this way.

There are two other messages for us in this passage, though. The first is that such celebrations of love have the power to reveal the depth, passion, and commitment of God's love to us. Throughout the ages God's love for God's people has been described using sexual language, and many commentators have applied the words in today's reading to God's relationships with God's people. The other challenge in today's reading is for us to allow such passionate, sacred love to overflow through our entire lives. While for most of us the deepest intimacy is always reserved for the one person to whom we give our deepest selves, we are, nevertheless, called to acknowledge all people as sacred and worthy of love, and to learn to celebrate the beauty and "belovedness" of every person. There is no question that this was how Jesus lived, and it is the way to peace, joy, and justice for all of us.

How can you celebrate the sacredness and beauty of everyone you meet today?

Do: While the practice of praise is usually directed to God, in acknowledgment of God's glory, grace, and majesty, it also teaches us how to appreciate every person we encounter each day. Today, make a point of praising and celebrating something good, true, or beautiful in everyone you meet.

Pray: As I praise you for your goodness and glory, O God, so I celebrate the sacredness of all people.

THURSDAY 23 JANUARY 2025

Read: Isaiah 61:1-7

Reflect: Today we shift our focus toward this coming Sunday, and the theme moves from loving and giving to the purpose of Christ. Of course, love for God and for others was at the heart of Jesus' mission, especially as that love leads us into a commitment to justice. On Sunday the Lectionary takes us to a synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus read a portion of Isaiah's prophecy and then claimed that prophecy for himself. Today, we read the words from the prophet himself.

These words were most likely written to the exiles who had returned from Babylon and were trying to rebuild their broken nation. They had experienced the pain of oppression and displacement, and knew what it was like to live in despair. Now, although they were a liberated people, they still had to face the brokenness of their homeland. These words would have been comforting and encouraging, and the reference to the Jubilee (the year of the Lord's favour) would have offered the people a vision of a new, just, and peaceful nation. Notice the words of restoration, healing and blessing that the prophet offers to God's people.

Jesus clearly understood his ministry as a continuation of this prophecy and when he called disciples to follow, he wanted them to embody this new community of love and grace. Today, as we read these words, we, too, are called to participate in making this vision a reality in our world.

How can you offer your life to God as an instrument of peace, justice, and restoration in your small corner of the world?

Do: The practice of prayer remains an important way to cooperate with God's restoring mission in the world. As we pray, we invite God to work in our world and in our hearts, and we also listen for God's voice of direction that shows us how we can be part of the answer to our own prayers. Try to pray like this throughout today.

Pray: As I pray for my world, O God, anoint and direct me to be a participant in your saving work.

FRIDAY 24 JANUARY 2025

Read: Romans 12:1-8

Reflect: There is so much in this famous passage from Paul's letter to the Romans that we could spend weeks unpacking it all. After speaking, in the earlier chapters of this book, about our human condition of brokenness and sin, and God's solution in Christ, Paul affirms God's love and the power of God's Spirit that enable us to live the new life which Christ offers us. Then, in Chapter 12, Paul begins with the words "And so..." or "Therefore..." It is because of all that God has done for us in Christ, and because of the power God has given us through God's Spirit and love, that we can now hear the call of God to be living sacrifices. It is this offering of ourselves that is our true worship, and it inevitably overflows into lives of humility, cooperation with others, and using our abilities to participate in the mission of Christ. This passage makes it clear that faith is not an individual, personal thing at all. Our love for Jesus always drives us into connection with, and service of, others.

It is easy to think of worship as singing, or as meeting every week in church. But our worship gatherings are simply meant to teach us how to give ourselves to God and become part of God's called community in service of the world.

How can you offer yourself as a living sacrifice in service of God and others today?

Do: One of the most important practices in our worship, and in our lives, is that of listening. If we are to become "living sacrifices" we will need to listen carefully to God in order to hear God's call, to

others in order to see how we can best serve them, and to our own hearts in order to recognise and use the gifts God has given us. Make today a listening day, and then allow what you hear to direct your life.

Pray: As I offer myself to you, O God, I listen for your wisdom and guidance.

SATURDAY 25 JANUARY 2025

Read: Nehemiah 5:1-13

Reflect: After Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon, it was mostly the wealthy and important people who were carried away into exile. Many of the poor and unimportant people were left behind to make whatever life they could from the ruins of their nation. When the exiles returned, they faced the difficult task of trying to rebuild the country with those who had remained behind. But, even in this challenging time, divisions occurred between rich and poor. The poorest had been forced to sell their children into slavery just to ensure that their sons and daughters would have food and shelter. But often it was their wealthy Jewish neighbours who were charging exorbitant interest on loans that caused their bankruptcy in the first place. Even though the prophets had cited such injustice as one of the causes of the exile, the people's hearts remained unchanged. But Nehemiah was not prepared to ignore this situation, and so he called a meeting and confronted those who were still oppressing their neighbours. In that time of struggle, the people needed to work together, and be generous and gracious to each other if they were to survive. There was no place for greed and detachment.

In many ways our world is in a similar place. We have the means to eradicate extreme poverty, yet children still die of hunger, and many poor people still live in slavery to wealthy bosses, creditors, and landowners. For those of us who are not directly involved in these unjust systems it may be tempting to feel there is nothing we can do. However, as we take little steps each day to share what we have with others, and to use our voice and our vote to work for justice, we help to heal our world. Today, think of one small act of justice you can perform, and then don't let the sun go down until you've done it.

Do: The act of giving – of time, of our expertise, or of our resources – is always an act of justice. Even small contributions to organisations that help those who are poor and oppressed can make a big difference. In these tough economic times, we need to give more rather than less to support the work of justice in our world. Today, make a contribution in some small way.

Pray: Whatever I have, O God, I share with those who have less in order to bring justice to the world.