



16 – 22 February 2025

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

This week in the Lectionary we are faced with the daily choice of how we choose to live. In Jeremiah, those who trust in human wisdom and strength are said to be cursed, but those who trust in God's ways, are said to be like trees planted near a river, with green leaves and much fruit. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, there is a similar message, except the recipients of the blessings and curses are slightly different. It is the poor, the hungry, and those who weep who are blessed, and the wealthy, the prosperous, and those who laugh who are cursed.

Of course, we have to be very careful, when we speak about God blessing and cursing certain people. It doesn't matter what criteria we use, it is unwise, in the light of who Jesus is, to think of blessings and curses as things God does to us depending on whether we are good or not. Instead, the Scriptures seek to lead us to view consequences more carefully and seriously. Our actions, our words, and even our thoughts, have consequences. Whatever we do creates chains of reactions and responses and sets in motion patterns that lead to outcomes – for better or worse. As someone once said, we can choose our actions, but we cannot choose the consequences. So, how we live does make a difference to how we experience life. What we reap, we do sow in one way or another.

This choice – to live in ways that either lead to positive or to negative outcomes – is at the heart of our reflections this week.

SUNDAY 16 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: Luke 6:17-26

Reflect: Luke's Gospel does not spiritualise the Beatitudes quite like Matthew's does. Matthew's version is longer and can be seen as less directly subversive toward the power-structures of Jesus' day.

In Luke, Jesus does not mince his words. The Beatitudes are short, direct, and challenging – including both blessings on the poor, the hungry and the weeping, and woes on the wealthy, the prosperous, and the laughing.

The point of the Beatitudes is not to give us categories by which to judge or celebrate others. Nor are they meant to be a set of rules for us to follow. They are a window into God's values and priorities. In Jesus' day those who were poor, hungry, and weeping were considered to be cursed by God, and those who were wealthy, prosperous, and laughing were considered to be blessed. Jesus turns that value system upside down and shows that God is on the side of those who suffer. It's not that God is against the wealthy per se. But in God's eyes, there is a responsibility on the wealthy to care for the poor. We can choose to follow society's values, placing greater value on those with higher net worth and greater outward "happiness", or we can follow God's values, placing greater value on the poor, the humble, and the grieving. This is not about some people being better than others. It is about recognising that when we prioritise caring for 'the least' our whole world becomes kinder, and we all enjoy greater security, equality, and peace.

What do these values mean for you today? How can you embrace God's values more intentionally?

Do: Nothing reveals our values more than what we do with our money, and how we view those who have lots of money. When we give preference to the rich, and when we use our money purely for our own benefit, we reveal that we embrace society's values. When we treat all people with equal dignity and respect, and when we are generous with our resources, we embrace God's values. Today, find opportunities to be generous, and to treat all people with dignity and respect.

Pray: Teach me to embrace your values and treat all people as your children, O God.

MONDAY 17 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: Psalm 120

Reflect: Today's Psalm gives a reflection of life when we choose the course of our lives unwisely. The Psalmist speaks about the pain of living with those who choose war instead of peace, and the consequences of being deceitful. The two geographical locations the Psalmist mentions, Meshech and Kedar, are intended to convey that the Psalmist is far from home, and has strayed, or been driven, into a territory far from the temple where the presence of God was believed to dwell. Perhaps the Psalmist choose a way that led to this barren, unsafe place, or perhaps it was the choices of other people that had brought the Psalmist to this place. Either way, the choice to live in ways that opposed God's love and grace had brought the Psalmist great pain and suffering.

This Psalm is classified as a *Song of Ascent*. These were Psalms that were used by pilgrims to Jerusalem as they ascended the mountain to the temple. As they drew nearer to God, these pilgrims would sing songs like this to remember the pain of being far from God's presence, and to appreciate again the ways of God that lead to intimacy and union with God.

Of course, God's presence is with us always and everywhere. But sometimes the choices we make and the way we live robs us of our awareness of God's presence. When have you felt like this Psalmist – in a distant and painful place far from God? How have you found God's grace and presence even in those times? Can you let God's presence lead you back into wise choices, and the way of life?

Do: Repentance is the practice of being honest about where we have made unwise or destructive choices, and then choosing to make different choices in the future. We all have times when repentance is a necessary practice, without which we cannot find life and wholeness. Is repentance what you need today?

Pray: When I choose unwisely to stray from your path of life, O God, I turn back to you.

TUESDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: 2 Corinthians 1:12-19

Reflect: In contrast to yesterday's reflection in which straying from God's path of life brought about painful consequences, today we see

what it's like to follow God's way. Paul speaks with great confidence about the way he and his companions have followed God's way. They have been clear and honest in their communication and have a deep trust that the believers in Corinth will understand why their plans have had to change. They wanted to visit the Corinthians on their return from Macedonia, but it seems this was not possible. Just before this section Paul speaks about great trouble that he and his friends have endured, and how by trusting in God they were rescued. They continue to follow the way of Jesus because their reliance on God remains strong.

While some of the Corinthians may have had questions about why Paul had changed his plans, he is very clear that it is not because of fickleness or a lack of responsibility. As God is faithful, Paul's word is faithful. If we were to continue reading, we would see that it was for the sake of the Corinthian believers that Paul changed his plans. His choice was based on grace and kindness toward the believers.

Sometimes following the way of grace takes us in surprising directions and leads to unexpected choices. Sometimes this may be misunderstood by others. But ultimately, if we remain true to God's ways of grace and love, we will generally experience consequences of grace and love. That is not to say that Paul avoided all challenge and criticism from the Corinthians. He didn't. But, in himself he knew his motives, and he knew the peace that he was following the way of Jesus. And that was enough. What tough, gracious choice do you need to make today?

Do: Discernment is a spiritual gift, but it is also a spiritual practice. While some of us are more naturally able to discern what is wise, the rest of us can learn discernment through reflection, remembering past decisions and consequences, Scripture reading, and consulting with wise and insightful companions. Try to nurture your discernment today.

Pray: Teach me your ways, O God.

WEDNESDAY 19 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: Jeremiah 22:11-17

Reflect: In the Old Testament the well-being of the people was tightly bound to the character of their king. When the king was good things went well. When the king was evil things went badly. This is not God's punishment, it is simply the consequence of leadership, which is either corrupt and selfish, or selfless and wise. Josiah was a good king, and the prophet speaks of God blessing him for this. In truth, Josiah's concern for justice and his care of the poor and vulnerable in his kingdom ensured that life was better for all his people. So, things went well for him, but also for the nation. But Jehoahaz did not follow his father's example. He was corrupt and greedy and so the prophet predicted the inevitable consequence that would follow – destruction for the king and for his people.

This is the constant refrain of Scripture. It is not that we have to jump through some hoops of "goodness" in order to convince God to "bless" us. Or that if we have "sin in our lives" then God will punish us. It is simply that certain ways of living increase beauty, truth, and goodness in the world, and bring blessing on us and others, while certain other ways bring the opposite and lead us into pain and division. If we can grasp this basic principle of life, we can learn to follow Jesus' ways of life much more easily, until the way of grace and love becomes second nature. We have the world we have because we have chosen to live the way we do. If we want a different world, we need to make different choices.

What different choices can you make today that will help to bring more beauty, truth, and goodness into the world?

Do: Prayer is often seen as talking to God, bringing our needs to God, and then waiting for God to swoop in to answer our prayers. However, prayer is much more than just this. Prayer is about aligning our values and priorities with God's and then living by these values and priorities so that we become God's answer to the prayers we have prayed. Try praying like this today.

Pray: Teach me to pray with my whole being and with my whole life, O God, and not just my words.

THURSDAY 20 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: Romans 8:1-11

Reflect: One of the most significant consequences of following the way of Jesus is resurrection. On Sunday this theme is picked up in the Lectionary, but in a much deeper way than we generally think. Resurrection is not just an experience that awaits us after death but is a quality of living we can embrace and experience now. We get a strong sense of what this resurrection kind of life is like in Romans 8. In Paul's systematic presentation of the Gospel through this letter, we discover that there are ways to live that lead to death and ways that lead to life. We all have times when we make choices that rob us and others of life. We all have regrets and things of which we are ashamed. But fortunately, Paul reminds us that in Christ there is no condemnation. God does not want to punish us but restore us. That's why Jesus showed us a different, life-giving way to live.

For those who reject Jesus' wisdom, the death and pain continue – this is the consequence of choosing the way of death. But when we allow God's Spirit to lead us into the way of life everything changes. We are no longer controlled by our worst selves, or by the values of the society around us. Rather, we are free to live by God's values and priorities, sharing grace and love in every aspect of our lives. This is in itself a kind of resurrection, a movement from death to life, brought about by the Spirit of resurrection. We don't have to wait to die before we can be raised to life. We can know resurrection today!

How can you embrace the Spirit's gift of resurrection in your life?

Do: When our focus is on death and evil, then our lives will be bleak, empty, and devoid of life, even if we try to live "good" lives. But, when we focus on the beauty, truth, and goodness that Jesus brings, our lives are filled with abundance, vibrancy, and life, even when we make mistakes or do unwise things. One of the most powerful ways to keep our focus on God's beauty, truth, and goodness is to practice the discipline of thanksgiving. Today, give thanks for every good thing you see or enjoy.

Pray: Thank you, God, for the all the beauty, truth, and goodness in my life.

FRIDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: 1 John 2:12-17

Reflect: If we thought that following Jesus would make life easy and that everything would go well for us, today's reading shows that this is definitely not the case. The writer of the First Letter of John speaks of three levels of maturity in faith – children, those who are mature, and those who are young. To the children there are wonderful words of assurance: their sins are forgiven, and they know God as a loving parent. To the mature there are words of simple truth: they know Christ who existed from the beginning. Here the whole journey of Christ, including the cross and resurrection, is implied. To the young in the faith the words are comforting and reassuring: they have won their battle with the evil one and have become strong through having God's word living in their hearts.

This reveals that the journey from new birth to maturity in faith is a difficult one in which we often confront the evil in our world and where we face difficult battles. In order to enjoy the fullness of God's life, we need to hold God's word of truth deep in our hearts, and we need to cling to Christ who has suffered with us but also leads us to resurrection. This sounds more mystical than it is. The battle with evil is often waged in our own hearts where we have to choose either to remain true to Christ's path of grace and love or reject it and choose self-preservation and self-centredness.

It's good to have God's promise that if we cling to Christ and his word, we will find the strength to choose life, and we will move continually into deeper experiences of life. What battles do you face today? How can you cling to Christ and his word?

Do: The simplest way to cling to Christ and his word is to spend time in reflection on the Scriptures. As we immerse ourselves in the truth of Christ's life, we learn to value what God values and we begin to live the way of Christ more naturally. Spend time in prayerful Scripture reading today.

Pray: As I face my unique battles with the evil within me and around me, O God, help me to cling to your word.

SATURDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2025

Read: Genesis 44:18-34

Reflect: Tomorrow the Lectionary includes the next episode in the saga of Joseph – that moment when he reveals his identity to his brothers. Today we read about the last part of the game Joseph had been playing with them. Having planted his silver cup in Benjamin's luggage, he made a big show of finding it and accusing the boy of theft. Then, Joseph declared that Benjamin would now become his slave. Perhaps Joseph wondered whether his brothers would be relieved that they had been spared and would leave Benjamin to his fate. But instead, Judah stepped forward and pleaded for Benjamin's life, even offering himself in the boy's place. Benjamin was Joseph's only full brother, and so Joseph may have wondered if Benjamin had experienced the same bullying he had endured as a boy. Judah's speech convinced him that his brothers had changed and were now protecting their younger half-brother.

For Joseph this moment may have felt like a kind of resurrection. Where he had been isolated and rejected by his brothers, now he saw a chance to be reconciled with them. Somehow, he was free from the need to punish them or seek revenge for what they had done to him. Grace and love flooded through him, and he entered into a new life of forgiveness. His family was restored to him, and he was vindicated since his dreams were now seen by his brothers to have been true. The power of forgiveness and love to lead us into these kinds of resurrection experiences cannot be overstated.

How can you let forgiveness and grace lead you into life today?

Do: We speak a lot about confession and absolution. But mostly we see these practices as things that happen between us and God. However, when we learn to speak absolution over those who have hurt us, we discover a new life and a freedom from the burden of anger and resentment that can be nothing short of a resurrection. Today, try to practice speaking forgiveness and absolution over those who have wronged you.

Pray: As you have forgiven me, O God, so I choose to forgive those who have wronged me.