



16 – 22 March 2025

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Today's reading is a strange one, which takes some careful thought to understand. It begins with a group of Pharisees warning Jesus of Herod's intention to kill him. We are not sure why they would do this, but their words are significant: "Get away from here if you want to live!" What they didn't realise is that *living* was not the first priority on Jesus' agenda - *loving* was. Jesus uses metaphors, in his response, that show where his commitment lay.

To begin with he refers to Herod as "that fox" and the people of Jerusalem as "chicks." Of course, foxes are predators for chickens, and so this is a clear warning of the danger Herod posed to the people of Israel at that time. Herod ruled as king under the authority of Rome and was seen as a traitor to his people. Any resistance to his rule would be quickly and ruthlessly dealt with. Jesus, on the other hand, seeks to be like a mother hen to the people – protecting them even with his own life. Yet, the people seem determined to avoid his way of peace and life and embrace their own destruction.

Nevertheless, what is amazing here is the way Jesus, reading the signs of the situation very clearly, remained committed to love, knowing it would take him to his death. The challenge this raises for us this week is this: To what extent are we committed to love above all things? How can we embrace the call to love in a stronger way?

SUNDAY 16 MARCH 2025

Read: Luke 13:31-35

Reflect: Most of us, when faced with people who reject our help and end up in trouble, would say they deserved it. We would feel justified in writing those people off and turning our attention to our own needs and concerns. But this is not the way of Jesus.

In today's reading, Jesus expresses his longing to protect and care for God's people. But he also recognises that the people are not interested in his offer. They prefer the ways of collaboration with power, or rebellion against power, to the way of peace and love. Jesus knows that the people will ultimately reject his message of simplicity, generosity, justice, and peace, and that they will reject him. He knows that if he continues on his way of love he will die, and that for most of the people of the city, his death will mean nothing. Yet, in spite of all this, he refuses to reject the people and protect himself. Not even the people's rejection is enough to make him stop loving and serving them. When Jesus preached that love for God and for neighbour (including enemies) was God's highest command, he meant it, and he lived it all the way to the cross and beyond.

It may not feel like it but choosing to love others irrespective of their attitude or actions toward us is a tremendously liberating and healing thing. This is the way that Jesus demonstrated for us, and to which he calls us. How can you practice this relentless love in your own life today?

Do: Forgiveness often feels like weakness. It can seem like we're allowing others to take advantage of us, and we're failing to demand the justice we need. But the truth is that failing to forgive is what makes us weak and unjust, and leaves us at the mercy of others. Today, whenever you are tempted to choose justice, vengeance, or rejection over love, speak words of forgiveness, and cling to love even more.

Pray: When I am rejected or attacked, Jesus, teach me to follow your example of relentless love.

MONDAY 17 MARCH 2025

Read: Exodus 33:1-6

Reflect: After yesterday's meditation on the relentless, sacrificial love of Jesus, the God that is described in today's reading sounds rather angry and unloving. This is another one of those situations where we need to remember that the writers did not have the benefit of God's Self-Revelation in Jesus, and so their understanding of God was still rather limited. Nevertheless, the God that is shown here was very different from the gods of the nations surrounding

Israel. The idea that God would choose to stay at a distance from a disobedient people – this passage comes just after the golden calf incident – in order to avoid destroying them was probably amazing for the people of the time. Other gods, in their view, would simply have wiped the people out. Following this passage, Moses' intimate relationship with God is described – revealing that God was still available to God's people, in spite of their rebellion.

One thing that stands out here, though, is the call for the people to respond with signs of humility and repentance. Their mourning, and their decision not to wear jewellery or fine clothes, were meant to show a change of heart, a humbling of themselves, and a renewed commitment to be devoted to God and not their own pride and desires.

Sometimes, when we face tough times, especially when we have brought them on ourselves, we may start to think that God has abandoned us and is no longer available to us. Yet, from the earliest times of faith, God revealed that nothing could separate us from God's love. Acts and attitudes of humility are not for God's sake. They open us to the unfailing love and mercy of God. Are there any ways in which you need to humble yourself and open to God's love today?

Do: It is easy to allow other things to become more important to us than following God's way of love and justice. This idolatry ultimately robs us of life and freedom, which is why God confronts and challenges us. Thankfully, confession and repentance are effective disciplines which lead us to healing and restoration. Why not give them a try today?

Pray: Whenever I allow other things to take your place in my life, O God, forgive and heal me.

TUESDAY 18 MARCH 2025

Read: Numbers 14:10b-24

Reflect: Today's reading is a strange one to fit into the way we see the world. Here we find Moses persuading God not to destroy the people of Israel after they failed to believe the report of Joshua and Caleb that they were able to conquer the Promised Land. In their

fear, they had considered stoning the two spies who gave a favourable report (while the other ten echoed their fear), and God was angry about their faithlessness and disobedience. The strange thing about this is that Moses' argument essentially boils down to "what will people think if you do this?" Remember that the worldview of the time was based in the idea of competing gods, with the most victorious god shown to be the greatest. So, Moses appeals to a perceived need for God to prove God's greatness to the world in order to show that God truly is the almighty God over all. In the light of this, Jesus' willingness to embrace the cross as a way to reveal God's glory and greatness is a startling and powerful shift in understanding.

What does stand out in this whole story, though, is the way it was the fear of the people that kept them from receiving what had been promised. The journey from Egypt to Canaan should have taken about ten days, but because of their fear, it took forty years! In contrast, Jesus' willingness to die reveals what can happen when we defy our fear and embrace the power of love – resurrection!

In what ways is fear robbing you of life and love today?

Do: If love is what conquers our fear – and the Bible teaches that it is – the best way to overcome those things that frighten us is to connect more deeply with God through practices that strengthen our relationship with God. One of those is the particular form of praise known as adoration. This is when we express our love for, and commitment to, God, and open ourselves to God's love for us. Try to allow adoration to overcome your fear today.

Pray: As I lose myself in love for you, O God, my fear is stilled.

WEDNESDAY 19 MARCH 2025

Read: 2 Chronicles 20:1-22

Reflect: Jehoshaphat was one of the good kings of Judah. Today's story, which is fairly well known, reveals a number of ways that Jehoshaphat exercised a healing faith in God, and good leadership to his people. When the king heard that a large army was coming to invade his land, he was understandably afraid. In similar circumstances other kings of Israel and Judah had chosen, in their

fear and inability to trust, to make alliances with some of the surrounding nations in order to take on their enemies with equal force. Almost every time, these alliances ended up backfiring. Even Jehoshaphat, in other times of difficulty, could not resist the temptation to address his problems in his own wisdom and strength and entered into such problematic relationships.

In this situation, though, Jehoshaphat does two things that are key to understanding how faith and love can overcome the mistakes that our fear drives us to. Firstly, the king called all the people together, invited them to share in addressing the situation, and listened when one of them offered a word of wisdom. Secondly, the king ensured that his primary response was prayer and affirmation of his trust in God's ways. It must have taken great courage for the musicians to march out in front of the army on that day!

Of course, it would not be wise to use this story to justify war, or to claim that if we only "have enough faith" God will fight all our battles for us. What we can learn, though, is that, like Jesus, when we learn to trust the ways of God's Reign, we can face our struggles with courage and worship, and stay true to our convictions no matter the outcome. What do you need to learn from Jehoshaphat's example of faith and humility today?

Do: The act of prayer is one that shifts our perspective away from the size of the problem to the truth and wisdom of God's ways. When we share in prayer with others, our ability to stay true to God in the midst of our difficulties is greatly increased. Today, try to pray with others in some way and allow God's presence and grace to sustain you.

Pray: Hear my prayers, O God, and strengthen my courage and my faith.

THURSDAY 20 MARCH 2025

Read: Revelation 2:8-11

Reflect: The seven churches to which the letters in the book of Revelation are addressed were actual communities of Christ-followers living in a time of great persecution. They were questioning where God was in all of their suffering, why Christ hadn't returned,

and when God would release them from their struggles. In order to proclaim Christ's sovereignty, and declare God's presence and purpose, the apostle had to use language that would make sense to them, but not to their persecutors. And so he chose the language of the Old Testament prophets. Revelation is filled with images, metaphors, and word plays that can be found in Ezekiel, Daniel, and the other prophets.

Today's reading is the letter to the Church in Smyrna. This community was experiencing great suffering, and so they were called to faith, and to trust that, though they were being persecuted, their pain would end. The call was for them to stay faithful in the midst of their trial. On Sunday, we will read of Jesus teaching that suffering can come on the innocent, and that faith is not a guarantee of a pain-free life. Yet, no matter what we may experience, life is found when we stay faithful and bear fruit – which means to bring life to others – as this church did.

How can you stay faithful and kind even in times of struggle?

Do: When we greet other people in worship, we're not just saying "Hello". We're taking the time to see and acknowledge them and open ourselves to their stories. This connects us and strengthens us and brings life to all of us. In times of struggle this simple act can be powerfully healing. Try it today.

Pray: As I welcome others into my heart, O God, help me to see you in them.

FRIDAY 21 MARCH 2025

Read: Psalm 63:1-8

Reflect: The ascription at the start of today's Psalm attributes these words to David in the time when he was hiding from Saul's persecution in the wilderness. The Psalm falls nicely into two sections. In the first, the Psalmist expresses longing for God, and for the protection of the Tabernacle sanctuary. In the midst of this longing is an expression of praise, acknowledging that God is all that can satisfy the thirst in the writer's soul. The second section (which continues past the final verse (8) in today's section) recognises that God's presence and protection are with the Psalmist even though

the Tabernacle is out of reach. In meditating on God's presence, and in finding shelter in God's care, the Psalmist is able to sing and celebrate.

This Psalm does a good job of preparing us for the focus of this coming Sunday. The situation in which the Psalmist finds himself shows that suffering comes to God's people as much as to anyone. But, in the midst of the pain, the Psalmist offers the "fruit" of praise and trust, remaining true to the call of God and the ways of God. As we will see in Jesus' teaching this Sunday, it is often when we face the darkest time that our "fruit" is most clearly seen. And, when we are able to remain faithful and connected to God, we enjoy peace and security, even in the most insecure and traumatic circumstances.

How do you usually respond to difficult times? What fruit does your life produce in times of suffering?

Do: Notice how the Psalmist, in this difficult time, speaks of "seeing" God in the sanctuary. This could be a memory of a time past, or an expression of hope for the future. Either way, the sense of thanksgiving for God's presence and care sustains and strengthens the writer. Today, allow thanksgiving for times of deep connection with God to sustain and strengthen you.

Pray: For your presence and care I thank you, O God, my refuge.

SATURDAY 22 MARCH 2025

Read: Luke 6:43-45

Reflect: As always, Jesus was way ahead of his time in his understanding of human nature. He is very clear that the fruit our lives produce flows from our hearts. Today, researchers are discovering more and more evidence to suggest that it is our hearts and their desires, far more than our minds and their ideas, that shape and direct our lives. The actions, reactions, relationships, and circumstances of our lives are a reflection of the state of our hearts. While we all have to respond to the different situations and events that life throws at us, the impact of these experiences is determined more by our response than by the events themselves. This is why Jesus teaches that a "tree" can be identified by its fruit. "Good"

people, even in the worst of circumstances, respond with goodness, truth, and beauty. "Bad" people, even in the best of situations, respond with violence, deceit, and self-centredness. What we see reflected in our lives is a mirror of what is stored in our hearts.

The challenge of this passage – which resonates with the one we will read tomorrow – is to give the time and attention to study and understand the fruit of our lives. It is all too easy to blame the world, or God, or others for our circumstances. It is all too easy to shift our gaze away from what our lives reveal about our hearts. To notice our fruit is to face the truth about ourselves, and once we have seen it, we have to decide what to do with it – which, since we are all a mixture of "good" and "bad", usually involves making changes. If this work is too hard, or too painful, we may be tempted to avoid it. But, unless we are willing to do this work, we will never know abundant life, and our lives will never produce really life-giving fruit.

What does your life tell you about your heart today?

Do: Sometimes, in order to understand ourselves, we need something to which we can compare our lives. James tells us that the Bible is a mirror which reflects our true selves back to us, and which offers us guidelines for "fruitful" living. Today, spend some time allowing the Bible to show you the truth about yourself, and to lead you into fruitfulness.

Pray: As I meditate on your Word, O God, show me how you see me, and how to live fruitfully.