



10 October – 16 October 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Two words come together in the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary this week: compassion and suffering. You may read about Job's feeling of being abandoned by God this Sunday, or possibly the call of the prophet Amos for God's people to live with compassion. Alternatively, you may hear the story of the wealthy ruler who was told by Jesus to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. Whichever reading is the focus for your worship this week, they all highlight what theologians call "God's preferential option for the poor" – God's deep concern for justice, equality and the end to poverty and unnecessary suffering in our world.

It's tempting, when confronted with suffering, to intellectualise it. We can debate for hours why God allows suffering, and what we should do with those who suffer. But all our theories simply create distance between those who are not suffering and those who are. Suffering is not a problem to be solved. It's a reality that every human being must face to a greater or lesser degree. Suffering is a call to compassion and connection. When we are the ones who suffer, we are invited to experience God's presence and grace within our pain, and through those who show compassion and support. When others are suffering, we are called to be the embodiment of God's compassion as we serve and care for our struggling sisters and brothers. Either way the most appropriate response to suffering is loving action.

This week, we will explore the Gospel's challenge to embrace suffering – for the sake of our faith, for the sake of others, as a normal part of human life, and as a call to be Christ's hands and feet.

SUNDAY 10 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Mark 10:17-31

Reflect: There are two ways we can miss the message of today's reading. The first is to take Jesus' response to this one particular person and make it a legalistic law for everyone to follow - which would basically be impossible. The second would be to assume that, because Jesus was dealing with one specific person, his words have no application to our lives. The point of this passage is Jesus' explanation to his disciples that it is hard for those who are wealthy to enter the Reign of God. Remember that Jesus is not speaking about life after death. The Reign of God is about a radically different way of living before we die.

The struggle that the wealthy have is that the values and principles of God's Reign are so completely different to those of the human systems of our world. Human systems of power and wealth always tend to favour some and ignore others. They always end up perpetuating injustice, because human beings are broken and sinful. But God's Reign is about equality and generosity. It is about "living simply so that others may simply live". It is about sharing power, resources and opportunities. The problem is, the more wealth we have, the more we are invested in the human systems of this world and the harder it is to live according to the values of God's Reign.

The crunch is that, if you are able to access this Daily Worship resource, you are probably among the wealthy. How can you reduce your investment in human empires and increase it in God's Reign today?

Do: The reason the Bible teaches us to give is not so much because others need us to. It's because we need to. The only way to stop wealth taking hold of our hearts, and leading us to the greed and hoarding that causes so much suffering, is to give it away. Today, find every opportunity you can to give.

Pray: Help me today to give what I must to heal my heart, and to ease the suffering of others, O God.

MONDAY 11 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Revelation 7:9-17

Reflect: The vision, which John describes in today's reading from his Revelation, would have been tremendously comforting to his readers. John was writing to the small, persecuted churches of the first century, and they knew what it was to suffer for their faith. They had hoped that the return of Jesus would come soon after his ascension, and, when it didn't happen, they started to lose heart, especially as their persecution increased. John himself was writing from solitary confinement on the island of Patmos – not unlike an ancient Robin Island.

Yet, the suffering he must endure does not dismay John. Rather, he recognises it as an opportunity to let his faith shine more brightly in the world. To encourage his fellow believers, he shares this vision in which he sees martyrs, who have been executed for their faith, gathered around God's throne in celebration and worship. As much as they might have suffered, ultimately their suffering is temporary, and they find healing, joy and abundance in God's eternal presence. This is the hope of those who suffer. It is also a good motivation to demonstrate the grace and restoration of God by being agents of God's care when we face the suffering of others.

Who needs you to shelter, restore and protect them today?

Do: When we pray for others, we invite God's grace to bring healing and comfort to them in their pain, but we also hold up the vision of hope that God's salvation will one day be revealed in fullness among us. This hope can offer great strength when we are at our weakest. Today, try to offer this hope to others as gently and sensitively as you can.

Pray: Thank you for your presence in our pain, God, and for the hope of the time when pain will be no more.

TUESDAY 12 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Obadiah 1:10-16

Reflect: Where Israel was descended from Jacob, the people of Edom were descended from Jacob's brother Esau. These two nations were connected by their ancestry, and there was the

expectation that they would support and care for one another. But, when the Babylonian conquest and exile happened, Edom stayed away and gloated over its fallen sibling. The message of the prophet Obadiah is one of judgment on this lack of compassion. It is common to hear such words of judgment from the Old Testament prophets. Compassion was a value that was held in high esteem by God's messengers, and, when it was absent from the nations, they were outspoken in their condemnation.

It's tempting, when we see people suffering, to gloat, or to find reasons to blame them, so that we can stay uninvolved in their pain. It may be tempting to call poor people "lazy", or AIDS sufferers "promiscuous", but these stereotypes are both dishonest and lacking in compassion. At the very least, when faced with suffering, we should "do no harm". But wherever we may find an opportunity to provide some comfort, support and protection for those who suffer, we find life, meaning and connection if we respond.

Who needs your compassion today?

Do: One of the practices that the Scriptures highlight as a necessary ingredient of our faith is hospitality. Hospitality is the discipline of welcoming friends and strangers into our lives, and sharing our resources and our compassion with them. Why not extend hospitality to someone who is struggling today?

Pray: As you have opened your heart to me, O God, so I open my heart and my life to those who suffer.

WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Luke 16:19-31

Reflect: Today's reading is one of the toughest parables of Jesus. For the time, it was a deeply subversive and prophetic story. Where it is usually the wealthy who are noticed and named, and the poor who remain unidentified in our world, in this story it is the poor man who has a name – Lazarus – and the rich man who is nameless. It is tempting to over-spiritualise this story. Some have even tried to use it as a description of the afterlife. But, to do this is to miss Jesus' point. What Jesus is saying here is that the wealthy man had so little compassion that he refused to give Lazarus even the scraps from

his table. But, where Lazarus is excluded from human society, he is included in God's Realm. And where the rich man is respected in human society, his lack of compassion means that he has no place in God's Realm.

Strangely even in death the rich man in Jesus' story still doesn't get it. He still wants Lazarus to be his servant, and go to his family to warn them. But Abraham, who was renowned in the Old Testament for his faith and his hospitality, refuses, explaining that even ghosts cannot coerce compassion. It must flow from a commitment to God's ways - the ways of the prophets.

Who needs you to show compassion by noticing and naming them?

Do: The act of awareness – of noticing others, and taking time to respect and honour their humanity – costs us nothing, but it is a powerful act of compassion. Today, try to address people by name, and to notice them as God's beloved children.

Pray: As you have called me by name, O God, I seek to honour those around me.

THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Romans 15:7-13

Reflect: Flowing out of this week's examination of compassion, the Lectionary shifts, on Sunday, to exploring what "greatness" means in God's Realm. The definition is very different from that of human systems and hierarchies.

Notice two things in Paul's words to the Roman Christians. Firstly, there is the call to accept one another because God, who is the greatest of all, accepts us. Secondly, Christ is portrayed as the one who came as a servant to both Jews and Gentiles. While our world defines greatness as being accepted (or adored) and as having servants, God's greatness is shown in offering acceptance to us, and in serving us. It's an upside-down way of viewing greatness - or is that right side up?

As long as we think of ourselves as "better than" others, it will be difficult to show them compassion. As long as we are concerned about preserving our privileged place in society (or within our group),

we will find it hard to be compassionate. But, when we are willing to be great in God's terms – serving and accepting others – compassion will flow naturally. And, if Paul is to be believed, this is where we will find hope, joy and peace through the power of God's Spirit.

How can you find greatness in your life today?

Do: One of the ways we can nurture compassion in our hearts is by meditating on and celebrating God's compassion for us. Today, whenever you are reminded of God's grace, offer a prayer of praise.

Pray: I praise you, O God, for your grace that softens and opens my heart.

FRIDAY 15 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Isaiah 47:1-9

Reflect: The Bible is filled with examples of people who thought they were great only to be brought low. It is also filled with empires that followed the same route. The Babylonian Empire is one such nation. At its height it was powerful, large and wealthy. It conquered many smaller nations, including the Kingdom of Judah, which was all that remained of the once proud kingdom of David. Today's passage was probably written while the Israelites were still in exile, and Babylon was still powerful, but it foreshadows a time when this would not be the case. Babylon, like other proud nations and people, would face its own time of humility, and not even the most powerful magic would save it.

When Empires are strong, like some of the most powerful and wealthy nations of our time, they cannot imagine a time when they will no longer rule the world. When people are wealthy and influential and strong, they cannot imagine ever being weak or poor. But, when we define greatness according to how much money we have, or how easily we can vanquish our foes, or how many people we influence, we will always face a time of collapse because these things are all temporary. That's why Jesus calls us to embrace a very different kind of greatness - the greatness of simplicity, generosity, service and compassion. This kind of greatness is

eternal, because it multiplies through the lives of those who are touched and blessed by it.

What kind of greatness are you embracing today?

Do: The discipline of service is not very popular, but it is one of the best ways to embrace the humble greatness that Jesus taught. Today use every opportunity you can to serve someone else.

Pray: I do not seek greatness in wealth or power, O God, but in humble, Christlike service.

SATURDAY 16 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35b

Reflect: Today's Psalm praises God's greatness. God is robed with honour and majesty and dressed in light. God has created the stars and the heavens, the wind and flames, the earth, the waters, the mountains. And God commands and controls all that God has created. This may all sound rather like God's greatness is the opposite of the greatness that Jesus taught and embraced. Where Jesus spoke about humility and service as the marks of greatness, here God is described in terms that appear to be anything but humble and serving.

That is, until we read the Psalm more carefully. There is a gap in the reading that is set for today, in which God is revealed to be a servant to the whole of creation. Go back and read the rest of the Psalm, and you'll see God providing food and shelter for birds and animals, and even for people. As great as God is, God has "diminished" God's Self to create a world on which to lavish love. As majestic and powerful as God is, God is mindful of the tiniest creatures, protecting and providing for them. As glorious as God is, God still seeks relationship with women and men.

If our great God is so committed to humility and service, how much more should we embrace the same characteristics as we seek to follow and worship God? How can you recognise God's humility and service in the world today?

Do: One of the best ways to notice how God serves and loves the world is to watch and listen carefully to see God's activity around us.

Then, as we seek to follow God, we can use the same skill of listening to hear where others need us to serve and love them. Try to be a good listener today.

Pray: Open my ears, O God, that I may listen well to the needs of others.