



12 September – 18 September 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

There are so many ideas that come together in the Lectionary readings for this week: wisdom, the power of the tongue, and taking up the cross. What holds all of these ideas together is the call to live with integrity. Integrity is not the easy choice - which is why it so easily gets put aside when we face the tough moments in our lives. Perhaps the greatest threat to our integrity is the siren call of expediency and consumerism. It's far easier to seek out "sexy" worship services that make us feel good, but leave our garbage unchallenged, than it is to hold ourselves accountable to the Gospel. It is far easier to "go with the flow" than to stand up for truth, justice and love, especially among our own family members and friends. But we all know the power of a life of integrity. We have all been touched in positive ways by people of integrity. This week, the Scriptures will call us to raise the "integrity quotient" of our lives.

We live with integrity when we embrace God's wisdom and live it out, rather than just speaking words that we do not put into action. We live with integrity when we stay faithful to God's ways, and speak God's message, even though it may result in suffering, struggle and sacrifice. We live with integrity when we acknowledge who Jesus is and proclaim him as the Christ, while understanding that he is a crucified God who calls us to take up our own crosses. We live with integrity when our lives reflect the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and when our words are filled with praise, blessing and wisdom, rather than cursing. When our words, our thoughts, our attitudes and our actions all align with one another, and with the ways of God that were taught and lived by Jesus, then our lives are lives of integrity and they are lives that add value and make a life-giving contribution to the world.

SUNDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: James 3:1-12

Reflect: We hardly need James to remind us that our tongues are powerful organs - for good and ill. We all know the regret of speaking in haste and wishing we could take back our words. We all remember words that have been spoken to us in praise, encouragement, love, or support. Make no mistake - the things we say have a profound and lasting impact on our world and our lives. But our words also need to be connected *with* our lives. When our actions consistently contradict our words, people stop listening to us and take their cue from what they see us do.

The Gospel reading for this Sunday is one that we've encountered before this year. It tells of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ - profound words, indeed. But then when Jesus speaks about what that means - dying on a cross - Peter rebukes him. He knows the word "Christ" but he doesn't really understand what it means. But then Jesus teaches that it's not just him, but his followers, who will have to get used to crosses.

When it comes to using our words, being willing to take up our cross is essential. It can be painful to bite our tongues when we really want to defend ourselves. It can cost us dearly to stay silent when we would rather use our words to attack or control someone else. It can be difficult to speak kindly to another person when we would rather reject or accuse them. But these sacrificial uses of our tongues are exactly what Jesus and James call us to.

How can you use your tongue to heal and welcome today?

Do: James points out that our tongues should not be used for praising God while they are also cursing others. We all have those we want to curse, though. Today, can you confess this temptation, and offer your tongue for God to heal it and turn it into an instrument of praise and grace alone?

Pray: Forgive me when I speak what harms, O God, and teach me to speak only what heals.

MONDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 73:21-28

Reflect: The quest to live with integrity can be disheartening when we realise that we so often fail – as we all do. Sometimes we strive so hard for perfection that we set ourselves up for failure. And sometimes when we fail to meet our own standards – or those we believe God has for us – we become so disillusioned that we are tempted to give up altogether. The Psalmist also knew what this felt like - in verse 21 he speaks of being "torn up inside" when he saw the bitterness in his own heart.

But there's an encouraging message in this Psalm today. Even at our worst; even when we let ourselves and others down; we still belong to God - and God isn't letting go. That's when it's good to remember the words of one wise person: "Never allow your weak grasp of God to become more important than God's strong grasp of you." Our strength is in God. Our ability to live with any wisdom or integrity flows from God's presence in our lives. Our capacity to live with grace and love comes from God's presence in our every moment. That's why it's important to remember that even when we fail, we always have the chance to get up and try again. Even though we fail – physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually – God remains our strength, and we can draw on that power to change and learn to live better each day.

In the end it's not about how perfect we are. It's about how willing we are to acknowledge our failures and keep working to become more like Jesus. How willing are you to work on your Christlikeness today?

Do: In our moments of weakness we may be tempted to beat ourselves up. But a more helpful and effective response is simply to cry out to God for help. Today, whenever you find yourself struggling to be the person you know you can be, take time to pray and open yourself to God's strength.

Pray: When I am weak, O God, you are strong, and you help me to live the Christlike life I desire.

TUESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Colossians 3:1-11

Reflect: If you were looking for a description of a life of integrity, you could do worse than turn to Paul's teaching in today's reading. The foundation of our life is Christ, and in Jesus we are called to a very different kind of life. When Christ is revealed in us, we reflect his glory, and our lives are freed from the greed and lust, the anger and malice, that bring so much destruction and bondage into our world. The Christlike life is honest, inclusive, restrained and connected. In fact, when we choose this life it's not just that we're like Jesus. It's that Jesus actually lives in us!

Two words that appear here must be treated with caution. The first is "world." Paul is not talking about the earth with its peoples and creatures. He is referring to human systems of power and self-interest that war against the grace, love and justice of God's Reign. The second word is "anger" particularly God's anger (as mentioned in verse 6). It's tempting to view God as a Being who gets angry when we disobey, and who then punishes us. This view has led some Christian leaders to blame all sorts of people (like Muslims, atheists or gay people) for all sorts of natural disasters. This is a view of God that cannot be supported from the Gospels. It's more helpful to view "God's anger" as consequence rather than punishment. When we choose to live according to our selfish desires and attitudes, we inevitably bring grief on others and ourselves. But, when we live with Christ's integrity, we bring joy and healing to others and ourselves. This is the benefit of living with integrity, even when it feels like it hurts.

How can you allow Christ to live in you a little more today?

Do: The best way to remember and enjoy the life of Christ within us is to take time to give thanks. As we express our gratitude for Christ's life, we open our hearts and minds to become aware of this life even more. Make today a grateful day.

Pray: Thank you, Jesus, for your life that is in me and shines through me.

WEDNESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 119:169-176

Reflect: This last section of Psalm 119 is such an interesting prayer. On the one hand the Psalmist seeks God's help for a difficult time of trial, while, on the other, he celebrates God's commands and instructions. It's the word of God that the Psalmist trusts to lead him out of the struggles he is facing – even though the last verse seems to indicate that he is (at least partly) responsible for his predicament.

Notice all the benefits that the word of God offers: discernment, praise, help, delight and joy, and the security of being found by God. The principle that the Psalmist demonstrates here is that, even as he asks for God's help, he does not expect God to swoop in like Superman and do all the work. He is willing to pray, to sing, to offer praise, to follow God's commandments, and to study God's ways. He wants to be found by God again, but in order for this to happen, he commits to remember God's ways. It's not that our obedience manipulates God into helping us. It's that God has already given us everything we need to find our way through whatever challenges life may throw at us. So, as we put God's word into practice in our lives and relationships, so we find the salvation we seek.

Where do you need to apply God's word to your life today?

Do: We can't apply God's word if we don't read it and listen to what it says. In worship we do this through Scripture reading and preaching, but each day we can continue to read the Bible, prayerfully and thoughtfully, and allow its message to speak to us anew. Make today a reading and listening day.

Pray: As you speak to me through your word, O God, I am listening.

THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Reflect: This Sunday we will be faced with a choice. After our exploration of integrity, we now have to choose whether this is the way we will live. We are free to choose to reject this way, and embrace the ways of "wickedness" (selfishness, expediency, power-games and jealousy), but there is always a cost. There is a cost in

following Jesus, too, but it's a cost that leads us to life, rather than one that leads us to death.

In this short section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle demonstrates what a life of humility and integrity looks like. As an apostle, he had every opportunity to use his authority to dominate and control the believers. He could have chosen to become like the "super apostles" that were common in Corinth – people who used their faith as a way to gain status, power and fame. But Paul rejected using Christ or his faith in this way. Rather, he laid aside impressive rhetoric and human strength. He gave up trying to impress anyone or prove anything, and he allowed God's Spirit to work through his weakness and simplicity.

It's hard, in a world which constantly asks us to prove our worth through some great skill or achievement, to live a simple life, but that's where wholeness and joy are found. How can you embrace the humility and simplicity of Christ, and allow God's Spirit to work through you, today?

Do: It's impossible to open ourselves to God's Spirit if we believe we need to do everything in our own ability. But, if we are willing to allow God's strength to fill up our weakness, we can invoke God's Spirit knowing that God will fill us and empower us. Make today a day of simplicity and invocation.

Pray: I do not trust in my own abilities, O God, but in the presence and power of your Spirit.

FRIDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 1

Reflect: The book of Psalms begins with a short and well-known song. It outlines the basic choice that every God-seeker must make, and reveals the consequences of our choices in metaphors that are found in many places in the Bible. On the one hand there are the "righteous." These are people who refuse to behave in the cynical, mocking and self-centred ways of the "wicked." Righteous people delight in God's law, keeping it in their hearts at all times. This is not "self-righteousness." It is not about pointing fingers at others, or about being proud of our "holiness." On the contrary, being

"righteous" is about knowing that God's ways – humility, grace, peace, justice and love – are the only path to a "fruit-bearing" life, a life that makes a positive contribution to the world. And it is this "fruit-bearing" that is the definition of abundant life.

The "wicked" on the other hand, are concerned with immediate gratification, and with their own desires. A life like this cannot bear fruit. It cannot make a contribution to the world, because it has nothing to give. Rather, the "by-products" of such a life are like chaff blown away by the wind.

Once again the Scriptures invite us to embrace the seemingly contradictory truth that life and joy are found not in going our own way, but in selflessly following the way of Jesus. Choosing this way can sometimes be much harder than we expect. But it's always worth the struggle.

Do: Meditating on God's word day and night does not mean reading the Bible 24 hours a day. It means that God's word is held in our hearts, and we live as those who are committed to God's ways in all things. Today, hold God's word in your heart by renewing your commitment to follow Jesus.

Pray: Today, O God, I commit again to living according to your word and your ways.

SATURDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

Reflect: You may wonder how such a depressing passage made it into the Bible! In the book of Ecclesiastes we read that the author has tried out all that life has to offer, but has found it all meaningless. The book offers a powerful picture of the consequences of our choices. It all boils down to the values around which we build our lives. If we choose the values of the world, we discover that they cannot give us the eternal meaning we long for. But, if we choose the values of God's Reign, we may not have all the "bright, shiny things" that this world offers, but we will have a life of meaning and fulfilment in Christ.

It's surprising, really, that millions still pursue wealth, fame, power and pleasure and still find them to be meaningless. That's why

God's Reign calls us to a different set of values - those of simplicity, humility, service, generosity and love. From the outside, these things may look unable to bring us happiness, but the testimony of so many people is the opposite. Giving ourselves for something bigger than ourselves always leads us to the best life – and that's what God's Reign is all about. So, which set of values would you rather build your life around?

Do: We are all tempted by the things of this world. We would all love to have lots of money, or the power to shape the world the way we think it should be. But, these temptations, if we feed them, lead us away from life. Today, confess any ways you are tempted to embrace values that are opposed to God's Reign.

Pray: When I allow myself to be enchanted by the things of this world, forgive me, O God.