



14 November – 20 November 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

How do we respond to the ways of power and dominance in our world? The most natural response is to retaliate, using force to overcome force and violence to deal with violence. It's tempting to place our faith in bigger guns, more money, and better power plays, but there is no peace or security to be found in that course. It doesn't matter whether it's conflict between nations or conflict between individuals, when we allow violence to beget more violence, we bring nothing but greater destruction, pain, and death into our world. It may feel good to dominate another, or to get revenge on an antagonist, but ultimately, when we make the quest for power the guiding force in our lives, we lose our souls.

Jesus had a very different way of living. When his disciples admired the grandeur of the temple, which had come to represent both political and spiritual power and wealth, Jesus warned them that such human power systems would not survive. The temple, and those who enjoyed power because of it, would be destroyed. Human attempts to claim power – whether through war or pretending to be great spiritual leaders (messiahs) – would ultimately bring nothing but destruction. What lasts is the way of powerless peace that Jesus lived and preached. As powerful as the Roman Empire was when it destroyed the temple (as Jesus had predicted), it could not withstand the power of the Gospel. It took a few hundred years, but ultimately love and peace remained, and the Empire collapsed.

Most of us will have little to do with the power plays of governments and nations, except as we use our vote or our voice to engage in political processes. But we all have to face power dynamics in our lives, our families, and our communities every day. Here is where we need to make the choice either to embrace the power games of the world, or to embody the "powerless" peace of Jesus, refusing to

retaliate, being quick to forgive, and quick to share whatever power we have with others. This is the theme we will explore this week.

SUNDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Mark 13:1-8

Reflect: At the start of the Church Year, at Advent Sunday, we read a section of Mark 13 that comes after today's reading. Next week we will celebrate the Reign of Christ on the last Sunday of this liturgical year. But just before we do that, we come full circle as we explore the first part of Mark 13 today.

The temple, which had been built by Herod in an attempt to appease the Jews who opposed his rulership, was a magnificent building. But it was also the centre of power abuse, corruption, and oppression – as is demonstrated by Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Mark 11. Yet, the disciples were taken in by the beauty of the architecture and admired the grandeur of the building. Jesus however revealed that this grandeur was temporary – as all human power is. Jesus could see the signs in his world of growing unrest, and he knew that the time would come when rebellion and war would break out. So, he warned his disciples not to be taken in by human power, but to remain true to his way of justice, peace, and love.

Ultimately our lives come down to this question: which values will we embrace – the power plays of our world, or the sacrificial service of the Gospel? As we interact with one another each day, our answer to this question makes all the difference. Power plays bring broken relationships and devastated people. Gospel living brings reconciliation, peace, and love. Which will you choose today?

Do: When we are concerned with holding on to our little kingdoms, we become harsh, judgmental, and exclusive. But, when we follow the ways of Jesus, we become welcoming and inclusive. Today, try to be open and welcoming with everyone.

Pray: I release my petty power plays, O God, and embrace your welcoming way of peace and love.

MONDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 13

Reflect: The Psalm for today is sometimes attributed to David. If anyone knew what it was like to be persecuted by powerful enemies it was he. Before he became king, he spent years hiding from his predecessor, Saul, who was committed to destroying him. Yet, even when he had opportunities to kill Saul and save himself, David refused to do so. He insisted on trusting in God and seeking peace with his foe. Unfortunately, he didn't treat all of his enemies this way, but he did try, in so far as he was able, to live in a relationship of trust with God.

Notice how, even though he was struggling and feeling abandoned, the Psalmist expressed trust in God, and committed to rejoicing and singing. He knew that, even when it feels like God is absent and our enemies seem to have the upper hand, praise connects us with God's presence and strength. And so, even though he may have had lots of good reasons to become depressed and cynical, he chose rather to live with hope and praise.

Where are you struggling or feeling abandoned in your life? How can you commit to hope and praise even in your suffering?

Do: The practice of praise is not just about saying words that stroke God's ego. It is about opening our hearts and minds to the presence and power of God. When we commit to praise, we move from being people who engage in destructive power plays with one another, to being people who trust in God's ways of peace, patience and love. And in this simple act we free ourselves from anger, hatred, and vengeance. Try to make today a day of praise – whatever you may be facing.

Pray: Even when I feel far from you, O God, I choose to praise you.

TUESDAY 16 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Deuteronomy 26:5-10

Reflect: The section from Deuteronomy, which we read today, is part of God's instruction to God's people for bringing the first fruits of the harvest to God in thanksgiving. This offering was made in thanksgiving for God's provision and for the new land that God had given as a home to God's people. But it was also an exercise in remembering the suffering and oppression that God's people had

endured. Although it is not specifically mentioned here, offerings like these usually included a call to be compassionate and generous to others, because God's people knew what it was like to be oppressed and marginalised. God instructed the people to practice generosity and compassion because these simple acts are effective antidotes to the diseases of power hunger and abuse of others. When we remember our own suffering, and practice sharing with others, it is very hard to oppress or ignore others.

We all have gifts and resources that we can share. Whenever we become afraid that we will not have enough, and whenever we feel that we must compete with others for scarce resources, that's when we are tempted to hoard what we have, and to discriminate against those who are different from us. But we do not live in a universe of scarcity. There is more than enough to go around, if we can just learn to make generosity a habitual practice of our lives – just as God instructed the Israelites.

What abundance do you have to share today?

Do: The practice of giving is important, not just because it provides for those who do not have, but because it keeps our souls healthy. When we give, we remember the abundance we enjoy, and we recognise the many ways that our lives are connected with others. Find as many opportunities as you can to give to others today.

Pray: In gratitude for your generous love, O God, I share my abundance with others.

WEDNESDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Mark 13:9-23

Reflect: Today's reading is a continuation of Sunday's Gospel. It's a tough passage to read, because of all the suffering and trauma that is described here, and because, the way it is written, it looks like God could stop these events, but chooses not to. This is why we need to exercise caution when we read passages like this. We need to recognise that Mark was writing to people who had just seen Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed by the Romans, and who were wondering whether they had been mistaken to trust in God's Reign. They were frightened by the violent power struggle in their

homeland, and they were tempted to lose faith. Mark's response is to remind them that Jesus had prepared them for this moment, and to encourage them to stay true to the peaceful, loving, serving Reign of God, even though it looked like the violent powers of the world were winning. That's why the command to watch out is so important – if we stay alert we will always see the signs of God's Reign at work in even the most terrifying situations.

It is always tempting, when we see the constant power struggles at work in our world, to align ourselves with the powers-that-be. It's always tempting to seek safety in human institutions, in wealth or in grabbing power where we can. But ultimately none of these things bring life or security. Even though following Jesus can mean that we are persecuted or attacked by those in power, it promises a life of wholeness, connectedness, and freedom that not even death can quench. The question is whether we can find the courage to believe it.

Where can you see God's Reign at work in the trauma of the world today?

Do: Faith is no guarantee that life will not be difficult for us. In fact, sometimes living the Jesus way can make life more painful and difficult – especially when we find ourselves in conflict with powerful and violent people. This is why prayer is such an important practice. It reminds us that God is at work in our world, and it helps us to be aware of the signs of God's Reign in the most unlikely places. Today, try to pray without ceasing.

Pray: Whatever struggle or suffering I may face in this world, O God, help me to trust in your life and your Reign.

THURSDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: Acts 7:54-8:1

Reflect: This coming Sunday is the last Sunday of the Church Calendar, and it's a celebration of the Reign of Christ. Today we see how Stephen – the first Christian Martyr – faced the oppressive powers of his day, and how he encountered the Reigning Christ in the process. We have explored various parts of Stephen's story through the year. He was a simple servant, helping to distribute the

food parcels that the early church gave to those in need. But, because of his faith and compassion, he made a big impact on his community. This caught the attention of the religious leaders, and they brought him in for questioning. Then, because he proclaimed Jesus as God's Messiah, they declared him guilty of blasphemy and stoned him to death. It might seem like a tragic story, were it not for Stephen's courage and faith through it all, and for the outcome which changed the world.

Although Stephen was killed by powerful people, he received a vision of the glorified Jesus, and knew that his life would continue beyond the grave in God's eternal Reign. The leaders may have killed him in this life, but they couldn't touch his life in God. Nor could they prevent the impact of his life on others – like on Saul who watched him die, but soon afterward came to faith in Jesus and became a great apostle. Even when it seems that God's Reign has failed, we always discover that it remains undefeated!

How can you open yourself to a vision of the glorified Jesus and allow it to inspire and strengthen you today?

Do: Every part of Stephen's life proclaimed the Jesus way of being. Even though he was not important or prominent, his commitment to Jesus, and to serving other people, meant that he made a big, healing impact on the people around him. Today, through your words and actions, allow your life to proclaim the saving message and mission of Jesus.

Pray: May your Reign be proclaimed in all that I say and do, Jesus.

FRIDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Reflect: This section from the first letter to the Corinthian Church gives us a glorious and challenging vision of who Christ is – and of who we are in Christ. Christ has been raised from death, but he is just the first of the harvest, which includes us. Although things must die, in Christ all things also receive a new life that cannot be quenched by death. And then, when life is revealed in fullness in the universe, Christ submits all things – the Kingdom – to the Father.

Christ is revealed here to be God's glorious king who reigns over all that exists.

Verse 25 is a difficult one if taken on its own. It sounds like Jesus has decided that the cross didn't work, and so he must adopt the same strategies of oppression and dominance that human empires do – “humbling” his enemies beneath his feet. In Scripture, though, whenever God humbles someone, it is in order to raise them (and others) up to a new just, peaceful, and loving life (See James 4:10). The intention of God is not to humiliate or destroy, but to heal and bring to life. What is destroyed is not the universe or human beings, but the powers of evil and death that bring destruction. The Reign of Christ, which we celebrate on Sunday, is not an oppressive regime, but a healing, loving, and life-giving reality. And we can begin to enjoy this life now – we don't have to wait for death.

How can you enjoy the life-giving Reign of Christ today?

Do: If we take the time to look around us, we will see signs of resurrection and of the life-giving Reign of Christ. When we practice thanksgiving, we are constantly reminded of these signs, and we open ourselves to God's life. Make today a day of thanksgiving.

Pray: For your life-giving Reign, O Christ, I give you thanks.

SATURDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2021

Read: John 3:31-36

Reflect: The person speaking the words of today's reading is John the Baptist. These words come just after his disciples had expressed concern that more people were following Jesus than John. But John was not concerned. He knew that he was only a forerunner, and that Jesus had to become more prominent. Although even John struggled with the way Jesus proclaimed and lived God's mission (see Matthew 11:2,3) he realised more than anyone that Jesus was unique. He recognised, in Jesus' words, a vision of heaven and a connection with God's Spirit that no one else could have imagined up to that point in history. The Gospel of John, which is the last Gospel to have been written, offers a perspective that had been gained after years of reflecting on who Jesus is, and so an

awareness of Jesus' divinity comes through very strongly in this account.

Along with the revelation of Jesus' divine nature, this passage also reflects on the authority of Christ. All things are in Christ's hands, and Christ gives life to all who believe in – who orient their lives around – him. Those who fail to believe are never able to experience the life that comes from following Christ's ways. As much of Scripture shows, this is actually less about God deliberately judging people, and more about people simply having to face the consequences of their choices.

How can you choose to follow Christ's ways of life a little more today?

Do: The decision to respond to Christ's invitation to life is not a once-off choice. It's something we must face every day. As the world changes, and our faith is challenged by evil and suffering, we have to constantly reaffirm our commitment to follow the life-giving ways of Jesus. Go through today with a constant prayer of commitment in your heart.

Pray: You are the one who offers life, Jesus, and I gratefully receive it again today.