



19 September – 25 September 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

The challenge of our faith is to recognise our choices and choose wisely. One temptation is to make faith about what goes on in our heads, making righteousness about right ideas and wickedness about wrong ideas. Usually, this temptation leads us into legalism, finger pointing, angry debate, and exclusion. Another temptation is to strive so strongly for inclusion and acceptance that we become naive about wickedness, and forget that there is true evil in the world. Usually, this temptation leads us into a watered down form of faith in which we stand for nothing, accept everything, and pretend that all ways of living and believing are equal - which they clearly are not (just ask anyone who has been the victim of religious violence).

So, the challenge we face is to identify what righteousness and wickedness really are. The Scriptures are very helpful in this quest this week. James speaks of righteousness in terms of humility, peacefulness, gentleness, mercy, fairness, and authenticity. Jesus speaks in similar terms in the Gospel of Mark - the greatest in God's Reign are the ones who are willing to serve and to welcome the least and most vulnerable. To live righteously, then, is to allow our lives to reflect the character, the integrity and the servanthood of Jesus. Wickedness would be to do the opposite of these things.

Once we've identified the choice, we must make our decision. It may seem easy - we all want to be righteous. But, when it comes to the tough challenges we face in our world - when we are attacked by others, when we are judged and misunderstood, when we are weighed down with the busyness and routines of every day - it can be hard to live with the integrity and love of Jesus. This means that the choice to live as righteous Christ followers is not a once-for-all decision, but a daily commitment. This week will help us to practice making that commitment each day.

SUNDAY 19 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Mark 9:30-37

Reflect: In the New Testament, the cross of Jesus is often offered as an example for us to follow. It's not that we must all literally be crucified – although there may be times when we must be willing to embrace death for Christ's sake. Rather, the cross represents the absolute willingness of Jesus to lay aside his own needs and desires for the sake of others. It shows the lengths he was willing to go to in order to serve, love, and liberate others, and it reveals his total commitment to putting what he believed and preached into actions – no matter what the cost. To put it another way: Jesus loved loving so much that he chose to die rather than to stop loving.

It's significant, then, that Mark's Gospel puts together Jesus' prediction of his death with the disciples' argument about who among them was the greatest. This passage reveals a sharp contrast between Jesus' attitude and that of his disciples. To drive the point home, he brings a child – of little significance in the world of that time – and tells his friends that they must be willing to welcome children in his name. To follow Jesus means to follow this example of humility, servanthood, welcome, and compassion.

How can you take up your cross of humble service today?

Do: One way to serve others is to welcome them, in the same way that Jesus instructed his disciples to welcome children. Today, welcome everyone you encounter in Christ's name, and see if there's any way you can serve them.

Pray: As you have welcomed me, Jesus, so I will welcome others in your name.

MONDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: James 4:8-17

Reflect: It can be pretty tough to read some parts of James' letter. Today's passage is one of those parts. James confronts the believers with the ways in which their lives fail to match up to what they believe. He calls them to honest, heartfelt repentance, because, although they claim to be righteous and living with integrity, they are actually criticising each other, judging one

another, boasting about their grand plans, and living as if they were in control of their own lives. Their loyalty, he says, is divided between God and the world.

But there are also some wonderful promises here, if they choose to commit themselves fully to God's ways. God promises to draw near to them and to lift them up. The principle that this demonstrates is that, when we live as righteous – as followers of the ways and attitudes of Jesus – we will know God's presence and God's encouraging strength.

We all struggle with divided loyalties. Just when we think our hearts are completely devoted to Jesus, we discover that there is some other temptation that leaves us divided. This is why repentance must be a daily discipline that ensures that we constantly re-align ourselves with God. Is your heart divided in any way today?

Do: Although repentance is really a discipline for every day, today make a special effort to notice whenever your heart gets divided, and when you fall into unChristlike ways of being. Then, repent and turn back to God's ways as soon as you can.

Pray: When my heart becomes divided, forgive me and heal me, O God, I pray.

TUESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 128

Reflect: It can be difficult to read Psalms like this one. It is so certain about the blessings that come to those who follow God's ways. It makes it sound like it's so easy to choose to follow righteousness and shun wickedness, and that the benefits are immediate, lasting, and overflowing. But, it's important to remember that not all Psalms are as positive or as clear as this one. There are many Psalms of lament in which the writer complains that God has not blessed God's people in spite of their righteousness, and in which God seems not to be fulfilling God's promises.

This is what makes the book of Psalms so powerful - it expresses every nuance of human experience and emotion. Sometimes we do feel like today's Psalm - full of joy and optimism, close to God and enjoying God's benefits. But, sometimes, we feel exactly the

opposite – disappointed, disillusioned, and abandoned by God. The Psalms teach us that the full spectrum of human emotion is natural and can be brought to God in prayer.

One thing is clear though: the life that we experience when we choose to follow God's ways, although it may include suffering and deprivation, is the best life we can know. It brings stronger relationships, greater inner peace, and a sense of abundance even in the toughest times.

What emotions and experiences do you need to offer to God in prayer today?

Do: Although it's a hard discipline to put into practice, the Scriptures call us to praise and celebrate God at all times – even the darkest and most painful. No matter what you're facing today, try to spend the day in praise and allow it to strengthen and sustain you.

Pray: For the joy and blessing of knowing you, O God, I give you praise.

WEDNESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Reflect: Jeremiah was a young man when he was called by God to be a prophet and he doubted his ability to speak to God's people on God's behalf. We all know what a sense of inadequacy feels like when we hear God's call. Sometimes we worry about our age (whether too young or too old), or our giftedness, or our connectedness, or our circumstances, believing that if we were like someone else we could serve God more effectively and follow God more devotedly. But God tells Jeremiah that his age is not an issue. God will be with him and will work through him. God says the same to us. Our inadequacy is never an obstacle to God's work through us. Only our lack of willingness to follow or to be used can hinder God's work in us.

Notice how God, who created Jeremiah for this work, now equips him by placing God's words in his mouth. In the same way, God equips all those whom God calls – which is all of us! Jeremiah's task was not easy, but it was important. There were moments of "breaking down" – challenging what was evil in his society - and

there were moments of "building and planting" – nurturing and protecting the good in his nation. We need people like this in our world today – people who, in their daily lives, will work to stand against evil and nurture the good in their homes, neighbourhoods and communities. Can you be one of those today?

Do: The work of the prophet – which means each of us who follow Christ – is to speak God's message to people (in word and deed) and bring the needs of the people to God. One great way to do this work is prayer. Make today one of constant prayer for the people and situations you encounter.

Pray: Break down what is evil, and build up what is good, in my life and my world, O God.

THURSDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Acts 4:13-31

Reflect: This Sunday the Lectionary readings all point to the surprising and unexpected ways that God works in our lives. Today's reading is an example of this surprising work of God. In Acts chapter 3, Peter and John healed a crippled man who used to beg at the Temple. In the aftermath of this miracle and Peter's preaching, the two apostles were arrested and brought before the council of the religious leaders. The miracle had been unexpected – the whole scene has the feeling of a spontaneous response by Peter to an unexpected situation – but the apostles seized the opportunity to witness to the grace of Jesus. Now, the religious leaders were up in arms. They didn't know what to do with these two Christ-followers, so they threatened them. But, of course, this had no effect, and Peter and John were released.

When they returned to their friends, the group of disciples turned to prayer. Notice how they didn't ask to God to protect them or to deliver them from their persecutors. Instead, they prayed for boldness to keep preaching. Then, another surprising thing happened: God's Spirit came on all of them and the entire place shook with God's presence. This must have been a wonderfully affirming and encouraging experience for this group of believers.

Where do you see God's surprising work in your life today?

Do: What made it possible for God's surprising work to happen through the disciples was their willingness to be used and their openness to God's leading. Today, renew your commitment to be an instrument of God, and invite God's Spirit to fill you again, and lead you through the day.

Pray: Fill me and lead me, O Spirit of God, so that I may be your instrument.

FRIDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Esther 2:1-23

Reflect: On Sunday one of the Lectionary readings is from the book of Esther. It tells of how Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai stopped a plot to have the Jews in Persia exterminated. Today's reading shows how it was that these "foreigners" – Jews in a Gentile land – came to be in a powerful enough position to exert such influence over the king and his people. It's a story that is full of the serendipitous work of God – which is probably why Esther was included in the Canon of Scripture even though God's name is never mentioned in the book.

In today's reading we discover that the king, who has rejected his queen who displeased him, has begun a search for women to fill his harem. The Jewish girl, Esther, ends up as one of these mistresses, but when her time comes to be with the king, she so impresses him that he makes her his new queen. Shortly after this, a plot to assassinate the king is uncovered by Mordecai, which ensures that he, too, is in the king's favour. There is a moment in the book, when the Jews are being threatened, that Mordecai says to Esther, "Who knows if you were made queen for just such a time as this?" It's a statement of faith in God's surprising work on behalf of God's people, and it convinces Esther to trust in the surprising ways of God to liberate her people. Needless to say, the story ends well for Esther and the Jewish immigrants.

Where can you see God's serendipitous work in and through you today?

Do: As followers of Christ, our bias is always to believe that God is at work in our lives and in our world. To recognise God's work,

though, is not always easy. That's why we need to learn to watch and listen – to the Bible, to our own hearts and to what is happening around us. Today practice this watching and listening in each moment.

Pray: Open my eyes and my ears, O God, to see your work and hear your voice.

SATURDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Matthew 5:13-20

Reflect: The Sermon on the Mount is one of the ways that Matthew seeks to reveal Jesus as the "new" Moses, bringing the "new" law to God's people. This "new" law is not intended to be a rejection of the old law, however. Rather, it is the fulfilment of the law. Jesus teaches the heart of the law – the essence of what it means, and how God wants us to live it out.

Sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking that, because we're saved by grace, our works are not important. But Jesus begins today's passage by challenging his hearers to live as salt and light in the world and to let everyone see their good *works*, so that they will give glory to God. Then, he calls his followers to embrace a righteousness that goes beyond that of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were very good at rules. They could list them, and they could fulfil them to the last letter. But they had forgotten the meaning of their laws, which was to become people who loved God and others from a compassionate, gracious and just heart. Their righteousness was all "outward" with little awareness of the importance of the "inward". But the righteousness Jesus calls us to *begins* in the heart, and then overflows into a life of service and celebration.

Living from the heart is much harder than living by rules. It's unpredictable, uncontainable and spontaneous in its response to opportunity and need. God seeks hearts like this that are open to God's surprising works of grace. How can you move from law to living with an open heart today?

Do: One of the ways we learn to love is to open our hearts to God's love through acts of devotion. When we take time to allow ourselves to experience God's love, and then respond in prayers and acts of love for God and others, we grow more and more loving. Make today a day of devotion and commitment to God's love.

Pray: Today I open my heart to your love, O God, so that it may overflow out of me.

