



23 January – 29 January 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

One of the marks of Jesus' life was his strong sense of purpose. Christian scholars debate how much Jesus, in his humanity, understood his divine nature, the high cost he would pay to accomplish his mission, or the resurrection that awaited him after his death. But they all agree that Jesus knew he had been called by God to fulfil an important purpose. The centre of Jesus' message was the proclamation that the Reign of God was near and accessible to all. This week in the Lectionary, this mission of Christ to proclaim and establish God's Reign is the focus. The Gospel reading from Luke 4 describes Jesus reading from Isaiah's scroll about the servant of God who comes to bring justice and peace. When he finished reading Jesus proclaimed that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in him. This means that this passage gives us a clear idea of how Jesus understood his purpose.

As we explore the other readings for today, one of which is Paul's teaching about the body of Christ, we realise that the purpose of Christ is also to be our purpose. We are called, as individuals and as a community, to embody the message and mission of God's Reign as Jesus did. As we share our lives and work together to bring grace, love, peace and justice into our world, we become a manifestation of God's Reign. This week we will explore what this means for us.

SUNDAY 23 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 4:14-21

Reflect: It's common to hear people say and sing that, "Jesus died to save me from my sins". In this view sin leads to eternal death in hell, and so salvation means being rescued from this punishment and given a place in heaven – or God's Kingdom – after death.

While there is definitely some truth in this view, it is a very limited understanding of Jesus' mission. It is also not the primary way that Jesus defined his own ministry. In today's reading Jesus chooses to read a passage from Isaiah – actually as it is quoted in Luke, it is a combination of two passages, one from 61:1-2a and one from 58:6. The emphasis in this passage is on liberation. Although the words for liberation used here can refer to the forgiveness of sins, in this passage the meaning is more physical and practical – the liberation is from poverty, oppression, injustice, and physical afflictions. When Jesus spoke of God's Reign – and when he used Isaiah's prophecy to describe his ministry – Jesus was referring to something that happens in this life, this side of the grave. He was speaking about a new way of being in the world that helps to bring justice, peace, grace, and love to others.

But Jesus did not fulfil this ministry alone. He called disciples to follow him and work with him. Today, we are Jesus' disciples called to participate in this liberating work. This means that everything we think, say and do can be a contribution to the Kingdom. It means that the values of God's Reign should be the focal point of our lives influencing how we treat others, how we use our resources, and how we work, play and rest.

How does your life contribute to God's liberating agenda?

Do: The call of Jesus is to become participants in God's work of liberating the universe. This means that we need to be captured by a vision of God's Reign, and of what the world would be like if God's Reign was fully manifested in it. Today, allow the practice of praise to renew your vision of God's Reign and to allow this vision to penetrate the deepest part of you.

Pray: For your Reign of peace, love, justice and grace, O God, I praise you.

MONDAY 24 JANUARY 2022

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Reflect: On Sunday you may have read the famous passage about the Body of Christ from 1 Corinthians 12. Linked with that passage is a teaching about spiritual gifts. Today, in Chapter 14, this teaching

continues, but in between – in Chapter 13 – is the beautiful and profound poem about love. This is why today's passage starts with the exhortation to let love be our highest goal. Then the apostle addresses the controversial and mysterious gift of speaking in unknown languages (or "tongues" as it is sometimes known). With this gift, states Paul, an interpretation is necessary, because without it, no one understands what is being said, and so the church cannot benefit. In contrast, the gift of prophecy, which brings God's message in a known language, requires no such interpretation, and so Paul prefers it. It is not that Paul is against tongues. It's just that he wants to prioritise practices that bring benefit to the community. This is the loving thing to do.

Speaking in an unknown language can be a deeply uplifting and empowering experience for the individual who does it. But, unless there is an interpretation, it benefits no one else. If we are motivated by love, then, we should prefer gifts that benefit others, rather than ones that only benefit ourselves. This does not only apply to this one gift, of course. As followers of Christ, love should be the motivation behind every action, every interaction, and every attitude. When we place our own needs and desires over those of others, we violate the loving, self-giving values of God's Reign. But, when we seek to bring blessing to others first, then we embody the life-giving values of God's Reign.

How can you seek to bless others first today?

Do: At the end of every worship gathering (in many traditions) there is a short "benediction" or "good word". This is a word of blessing spoken over us as we go out to live our faith through the week. It is an empowering and encouraging word, and it teaches us to speak "good words" over others. Today, practice loving others by speaking "benedictions" over everyone you meet.

Pray: As you have blessed me with your love, O God, so I speak love and blessing over others.

TUESDAY 25 JANUARY 2022

Read: Psalm 119:89-96

Reflect: It's impossible to speak about human purpose without also considering God's instructions. The whole of Psalm 119 is a celebration of God's law, and in the section we read today, the reason becomes clear. God's commands are true. They sustain God's people in joy. They give God's people life, and they connect us with God's faithful love. There are many things we can choose as the focus for our lives, but not all of them can claim to give us such goodness and meaning. It makes sense, though, that if God created us, God should offer us guidelines for how to live the life God designed for us. It's tempting to think of the law as something restrictive and oppressive – and if we make the law an idol it can be. But, in this Psalm we see another way to experience the law – as a liberating, life-giving source of wisdom, guidance, and strength. And as we follow God's direction, we discover the lives we are created for, and our days are filled with purpose and fulfilment.

Notice that following the law doesn't protect the Psalmist from suffering. There are still people who seek to do harm, and there are still times of pain and struggle. But God's instructions show us how to navigate even the darkest times.

How can you allow God's law to guide your life today?

Do: Like the law, the Bible, which contains God's law, can become an idol. But, if we allow the Scriptures to lead us to Jesus, and to show us how to follow Jesus, they can become a source of purpose, meaning and life. Today, spend time with the Bible, and allow it to guide your thoughts, words and actions.

Pray: I choose to keep my mind on your law, O God, for in it I find meaning and life.

WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 4:38-44

Reflect: It didn't take long, after Jesus' proclamation of his mission in the Synagogue at Nazareth, for him to begin doing what he had said he would. Jesus knew that he had come to liberate people from everything that oppresses them, and so he set about setting people free. Just before today's reading, we see Jesus casting out a demon. Now, he goes home with Simon and heals Simon's sick

mother-in-law. Then, as the whole village crowds around, Jesus liberates them from whatever afflicts them. But it doesn't end there. The next day Jesus declares that he must go on to other towns and villages to liberate other people. His words – “because that is why I was sent” – are a clear indication of Jesus' sense of purpose. He knew what he had come to do.

Unless you have experienced the difference between aimlessness and purpose, it is hard to understand the power of living a life in which we know what we are to do. When our lives are unfocused, we become scattered and confused, and unsure of what to do or where to go. But, once we have found our calling, our purpose, every decision and action is guided by that focus. But remember that it took Jesus thirty years before he was ready to live his purpose out. It can take time to find our calling – but it's always worth the work and the wait to find it.

How clear is your sense of purpose? How can you allow your calling to direct you today? Or how can you open yourself to clarify your calling a little more today?

Do: Jesus kept his sense of purpose strong by regularly spending time in quiet meditation and prayer, listening for God's direction. Notice how in verse 42 Jesus did this. He also did it whenever he was facing an important moment or decision. Today, set aside some time to listen and meditate on God's calling on your life.

Pray: I am listening for your call, O God – please guide me.

THURSDAY 27 JANUARY 2022

Read: Acts 10:44-48

Reflect: On Sunday the story of the start of Jesus' ministry continues. After proclaiming that Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled in him, Jesus then informed the people of his hometown that God's grace was often rejected by God's people, but received by outcasts. This made the people so furious that they tried to kill Jesus, but he managed to slip away. Right from the start Jesus had a sense that his work would cross boundaries and include those who were usually rejected. But, as is often the case, the religious insiders

couldn't stand this idea. God's scandalous grace brought out the worst in them, and they became violent, angry and judgemental.

Today's reading shows a very different response to this inclusive message. Peter, who as a good Jew would never have entered the home of a Gentile, was convinced by a vision that he should go to the home of Cornelius and preach to the Gentiles gathered there. As he spoke, God's Spirit came upon his listeners, and Peter realised that they too were included in God's salvation. So, he made sure that these new believers were baptised. Later, though, he had a lot of explaining to do to the Church leaders back in Jerusalem. However, when they heard Peter's story, they rejoiced and opened their arms to welcome their Gentile sisters and brothers. This is the inclusive purpose of God's Reign at work – and we are called to participate in it.

Who needs you to welcome and include them today?

Do: One of the marks of Jesus' ministry was his welcoming of all who came to him. In worship, as we gather together, we greet each other as a way of welcoming each other. This act teaches us to live with a spirit of welcome. Today, welcome everyone you meet, greeting them with grace and respect.

Pray: As you have welcomed and included me, O God, so I welcome and include others.

FRIDAY 28 JANUARY 2022

Read: 2 Chronicles 35:20-27

Reflect: We need to tread carefully as we read today's story. We need to remember that God's nature is progressively revealed through the Scriptures. So, when we read of things like God commanding kings to hurry into war, we must note that this speaks about how the writers of this story understood God, and not about how God actually is. With the greater revelation we have in Jesus, we now know that God does not take sides in war.

But, even with this in mind, this passage reflects a view of God that would have been startling in its time. Josiah, who was one of the good kings of Judah, heard that the Egyptian king, Neco, was seeking to travel through Judah on the way to fight the Assyrians.

Neco claimed that God had spoken to him, and that Josiah must not oppose him. Whether Josiah had aligned himself with the Assyrians is not clear. What is clear is that Josiah, as would have been expected from a faithful Israelite, did not believe Neco's claim of divine guidance. But the writer of this story tells us that Neco had indeed heard from God. For the first readers of this story, who lived after the return from exile, the idea that God could speak to Gentiles would likely have been shocking, perhaps even offensive. Like the people in the synagogue in Nazareth (which we will read about on Sunday), they would have been deeply challenged by the inclusive implications of this story.

As Christians we can be tempted to adopt this same exclusive view of God – that God is "ours" and only speaks to us. Do you find seeds of this in your faith? How does this story challenge that idea for you?

Do: One thing Jesus made clear is that God loves "the world" including all its peoples. Throughout the New Testament, whenever people forgot this and became exclusive in their faith, they were called to confess, repent, and turn to inclusive love. If there is any exclusivity in your faith, or your view of others, for any reason, consider confessing it, repenting of it, and turning to inclusive love today.

Pray: Forgive me, O God, when my love is exclusive, and teach me love inclusively, as you do.

SATURDAY 29 JANUARY 2022

Read: John 1:43-51

Reflect: Today's reading from the Gospel of John shows how easily bigotry can influence our attitudes and behaviour. One of Jesus' first disciples, Philip – who was always inviting people to meet Jesus – tells his friend, Nathaniel, about the Messiah. But Nathaniel is sceptical at first for one simple reason – Jesus comes from Nazareth. His response seems to indicate that Nazareth was one of those places that was often derided in jokes and proverbs. No one believed that anything good could come out of Nazareth. Yet, in typically surprising form, it is this rejected town that God chooses as the home for the Messiah. Somehow Philip got Nathaniel to meet

Jesus in spite of his reluctance, and when he did, it took only one short conversation to change his mind.

Notice, that even though Jesus may have sensed Nathaniel's antagonism, he didn't respond in kind. Instead, he saw to Nathaniel's heart, and praised him as a "genuine son of Israel - a man of complete integrity". This willingness to look beyond the stereotypes and first impressions got through to Nathaniel and opened him to Jesus' promise that he would see God's glory revealed in Jesus (which is what the image of the angels and the stairway mean).

When people are unkind to you, how do you respond? What can you learn from Jesus' response here? And what can you learn about seeing past stereotypes to the heart of other people?

Do: Some people may say, "My attitude to you will be based on how you treat me." But this is not Jesus' way. Jesus did not allow the behaviour of others – no matter how bad – to stop him loving them. So, perhaps our attitude to others should be based more on Jesus' love for them and us, than on how they treat us. Try to serve and love everyone you meet today, like Jesus would.

Pray: As you have loved and served me, Jesus, so I choose to love and serve others.