



24 October – 30 October 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Although it does not remove the scars of Job's suffering - he would always carry the grief of his dead children, and the emotional residue of his sickness and humiliation - his story ends with God restoring him way beyond his original prosperity. It's important to remember that Job is considered one of the books of Wisdom Literature along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. This means that it wasn't meant to be a documentary of one person's life, but a parable of human suffering and restoration. The message, then, is that when the innocent suffer, God will ultimately vindicate, heal and restore them. This is one of the readings for this Sunday. In Mark's Gospel, as we will see, there is another restoration – that of the blind man, Bartimaeus. It's good to be reminded that, although we will all endure suffering, God is in the business of restoration. Even when our suffering is the result of our own foolishness or wrong choices, there is always the opportunity to begin again. There is always a second (or third or fourth) chance. There is always the invitation to new life.

What is significant in the restoration passages this week is that God's restoration is never just an individual thing. It always involves restoration to new relationships – with God, with family and friends, with our community, and even with ourselves. The wonderful gift of this is that, as our relationships are restored, our healing is sustained by a supporting and protective network. But this renewal of relationships also means that when any individual is restored, the healing extends through that person to others.

This week we will explore the amazing, restorative, grace of God.

SUNDAY 24 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Mark 10:46-52

Reflect: In the Gospel of Mark, we meet one of the few people who receive healing from Jesus who is actually named – a blind man named Bartimaeus. Only Mark names him, but the writer gives us none of his history. All we know is that he is blind, he is a beggar, and he is sitting beside the road in Jericho.

However, what happens when Jesus passes by is the real point of the story. As a result of his shouting, Jesus calls him near and in response he throws off his cloak and goes to Jesus. In the New Testament the cloak is often a symbol for the person (which is why Paul instructs us to "put on Christ" in Galatians 3:27). So here, Mark is telling us that Bartimaeus is about to become a new being. Then when Jesus heals him, we read that he followed Jesus on the way. The way is one of the terms for the new community of believers (followers of the way – see Acts 22:4). So here, Mark is describing Bartimaeus as a new believer.

The point that Mark is trying to make is that Bartimaeus' healing is not just about his eyes. It's about his life, his whole person, his relationship with God, and his connection with his community. Where before he was an outcast, he is now part of the community of faith. Where before he was broken and rejected, now he is healed and included. It's a wonderful parable of restoration – and an invitation to us to be restored in a similar way.

Where do you need to become a new person on the way today?

Do: The Scriptures are full of the cries of those who felt broken and needed God's restoration. When we are beaten down by life, or by our own foolishness, it is comforting to know that we can place our lives in God's hands, and trust in God's restoring power. Today, pray for any areas of your life that need restoring.

Pray: Where I am broken, O God, please heal and restore me.

MONDAY 25 OCTOBER 2021

Read: 1 Peter 2:1-10

Reflect: This letter, that bears the name of the Apostle Peter, was written to a persecuted church in order to give them hope and encourage them to stay faithful to God's way. In it, the believers are encouraged to open themselves to God's restoring and strengthening work in two ways: in their behaviour, and in how they understand themselves, and their place in the church and in the world.

The behaviour is common sense – avoid everything that lacks integrity. This is because any deceit, dishonesty or unkindness creates barriers to restoration and to being open to the Spirit of God and the community of faith. The understanding part is really striking, though. The believers are called "living stones" being built into a temple – a dwelling – for God. They are priests who, in their suffering, are offering spiritual sacrifices to God. All of this is possible because they are rooted in Jesus who was, himself, persecuted, killed, and restored. And, as the believers learn to live according to this new identity as people who are indwelt by God, they proclaim God's goodness to the world.

How do you understand your identity in Jesus? How does that impact how you live?

Do: The words of today's passage are so encouraging and strengthening because they are filled with praise. Praise reminds us of who God is and, by extension, who we are in God. Make today a day filled with praise.

Pray I praise you, O God, because you have called me out of darkness and into your wonderful light.

TUESDAY 26 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Acts 9:32-35

Reflect: It's always challenging to read New Testament accounts of healings like this. It all seems so easy, uncomplicated and certain. Some, in seeking to be faithful, have taken these scenes at face value and have tried to make similar healings happen today. Sometimes these attempts bring great comfort and restoration, and

sometimes they have very painful or destructive results. What is important, when we read the Scriptures, is to remember when they were being written and why. Here, we are reading an account that is meant, along with the Gospel of Luke, to demonstrate who Jesus was, and the legitimacy of the church as the bearers of Christ's message. You can imagine the reader or readers asking about Peter and Paul and whether their testimony about Jesus could be trusted. The focus, then, is not so much on the healing itself, but on the impact of it, and on the way it confirms Peter as Christ's apostle. This is not to say that the healing didn't happen, but to remind us that such events always point beyond themselves to Christ.

Notice how, as a result of this healing, an entire region responds to the Gospel. Notice also how Peter emulates the healing message and practice of Jesus (compare, for example, Mark 2:1-12). Finally, notice that Peter does not claim healing power for himself, but states that it is Jesus who heals. This short story reveals Peter as a true messenger of Jesus, who is God's agent of restoration to this region.

While we are certainly called to pray for the healing of others, our results are not always this dramatic. That shouldn't deter us. Our calling is not primarily to bring physical healing to others, but to be agents of God's restoration – which is a different thing. Sometimes restoration includes being cured, sometimes it doesn't, but always it means that God's life and grace touches others in meaningful ways through us. How can you be an agent of restoration today?

Do: One thing that is clear from Peter's ministry is that he noticed people and cared for them. This made him willing to reach out and touch them with God's grace. It was an attitude of compassion and service. Today, commit to treating everyone you meet with this same servanthood and compassion.

Pray: As you have restored me, O God, so I offer myself as an agent of restoration.

WEDNESDAY 27 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Jeremiah 33:1-11

Reflect: The people of God did not want to hear Jeremiah's message. He saw the destruction that was coming on his people, and he didn't try to pretend it wouldn't happen. In the worldview of that day, God had abandoned them for their wickedness. In the light of Christ, we might now think of it differently – they had chosen ways that were unhealthy and dangerous and would face the consequences of those choices. Nevertheless, there is also a message of hope. There would be a time of rebuilding. Joy and laughter, love and family would all return.

But notice the wider impact of this restoration. God would be honoured before all the nations, and all people would notice what God had done for God's people. Sometimes we think that, in order to witness to others, we have to have lives of health, wealth and happiness. We think our witness depends on portraying a life free of struggle, but it doesn't. What really witnesses to others is when we trust in God's restoration, no matter what. When we can face suffering and failure with calm assurance of God's presence and strength, and when we can hold on to the hope of future restoration, even when it seems impossible, that is what witnesses to others.

How can you witness through unwavering trust in God today?

Do: Every person proclaims something through his or her life. When we hold fast to Christ, and trust in God's presence and restoration, our lives proclaim a message of hope, which brings life to others. Today, try to allow your hope to radiate through your life.

Pray: No matter what, O God, I choose to hope in you.

THURSDAY 28 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Psalm 119:1-8

Reflect: Psalm 119 is famous, both for its length and for the verse (105) that speaks about God's word as a lamp for our feet. Today's reading shows how this long song begins. What a direct and inspiring proclamation the first words offer: "Joyful are people of integrity, who follow the instructions of the Lord." There is a mix of elements here that offer a recipe for a life of meaning and fullness. It is God's instructions that teach us integrity. Those instructions are given, very clearly, in the readings for this coming Sunday. Both in

the Old Testament and the Gospels we will hear the command to love God and others. Jesus calls this the greatest commandment and says the whole of the law is summarised in it. So, integrity is about living in love. And, when we live in integrity, we discover joy.

The psalmist obviously recognises that, as wonderful as this promise is, it's not always easy to follow God's command to love. That's why he expresses the wish that his actions would consistently reflect God's decrees. But he also trusts that he can learn them and come to live as he should. We can also hold on to this hope. We can learn to live in love if we will just do the work each day.

How can you commit to learning the way of love today?

Do: One of the easiest ways to learn to love is to speak well to others. Our words can build up or break down. But, if we learn to fill our words with benedictions (good words, or words of blessing) this touches others with love in a simple, but profound way. Today, speak blessings over others at every chance.

Pray: As you have spoken words of love to me, Jesus, so I speak love to others today.

FRIDAY 29 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Leviticus 19:32-37

Reflect: The instructions in today's reading seem very commonplace. They are much like the "manners" we are taught to observe as children. It may surprise us to see these simple directions listed in the law of God, but what should surprise us even more is that we need them to be listed. These are the actions we should be following as a matter of course as we seek to honour the humanity, and the image of God, in every person we meet. But we so often fail to do them.

For the newly liberated slaves of Israel, the law was intended to teach them how to live as free people who are loved by God. The core of each of these instructions is to act in love for the other person. It is likely that they had little chance to learn this while they were in Egypt, but now God makes sure that they know what God expects from God's people, and it's a life of love. Showing respect for the elderly, not taking advantage of foreigners, being honest in

business – these are simple acts of integrity and humanity that bring peace and joy to everyone. It's amazing, then, that we, who have never been slaves, still find it so hard to treat one another – especially the "foreigners" of nationality, religion or beliefs who are different from us – with humanity and respect.

Who needs you to treat them with more respect today?

Do: Simply choosing to greet and welcome one another is a profound way to honour and respect each other. Yet, we so easily ignore or exclude each other. Today, commit to bringing honour and respect to others by greeting them warmly in Christ's name.

Pray: You have honoured and respected me, O God, and so I commit to giving respect to others.

SATURDAY 30 OCTOBER 2021

Read: Luke 10:25-37

Reflect: Tomorrow the Gospel reading is from Mark, and it speaks about the Great Commandment. Today, we read the same commandment as told from Luke's perspective. What makes Luke's version interesting is that he puts it alongside the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke's account, Jesus tells this parable because he is being tested by a religious expert, who wants to know the "definition" of a neighbour (perhaps as a way of wriggling out of the command to love – we know all about that, don't we?). The idea is that the parable is to reveal what love for God and neighbour, (which are two parts of the same love) looks like.

The story is so well known. A man is beaten by bandits and left for dead. The religious leaders, whom we would expect to show compassion, simply pass him by. But, a hated Samaritan, who would have been expected to ignore the man, comes to his rescue. But here is where Jesus turns things around. He asks which of the men was a neighbour to the wounded man. Suddenly loving neighbour is not about extending love only to those who are near us or like us. Like the Samaritan, we are expected to *choose* whom we will consider to be our neighbour – and for Jesus this means that we must choose everyone, even those who are supposed to be

enemies. After all, this is what the Samaritan did, and Jesus instructs us to "go and do likewise".

Who needs you to choose them as your neighbour today?

Do: When we consider ourselves to be neighbours of others, we connect our lives with them. We give of ourselves and our resources in order to share the blessing we enjoy, and to bring blessing to our friends. Imagine if we treated strangers as neighbours and learned to share something of ourselves with them. Try to be generous in giving of your time, abilities and resources to both friends and strangers today.

Pray: I recognise that all people are my neighbours in you, Jesus, and I treat them accordingly.