



26 September – 02 October 2021

### THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

We love to make faith about who is "in" and who is "out". We love to believe that we know how God works, and that we can easily discern when something is "of God" or not. We like to feel that we are in God's inner circle, and that we are beloved by God while others are not. We may say out loud that we know that God loves everyone, but in our hearts we easily start to feel like we, and those in our group, are God's favourites.

But this week, the Lectionary challenges these exclusive views of God's work. Just when it looks like we have God all worked out, God does something completely unexpected. If we don't keep our hearts and minds open to this surprising work of God, we may just find ourselves missing out on what God is doing. In the Old Testament, the story of Esther reveals how God can use serendipitous events and unexpected people to save those who are being oppressed and persecuted. In the Gospels, the disciples tell Jesus that they found someone casting out demons in his name, and they told him to stop. But Jesus tells them not to stop him because "anyone who is not against us is for us." Certainly God seems to be less worried about credentials and the right connections than we are!

This week, why not try to open yourself a little more to the surprising work of God in your life and your world?

### SUNDAY 26 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Read:** Mark 9:38-50

**Reflect:** Today's reading from Mark's Gospel connects a number of surprising features of God's work. There is the stranger who uses Jesus' name to cast out demons, but whom Jesus welcomes. There is the warning about causing a "little one" to stumble, which is about

making sure we don't live such that we drive others from faith. There are the various warnings about removing parts of our bodies if they cause us to sin (which, thankfully, were not intended to be taken literally). And there is the call to live as salt and be at peace. It can all sound quite confusing at first glance.

The key, here, is to recognise that Jesus is trying to show what it's like to follow him, to live out the values and mission of God's Reign. God's Reign does not reject someone who is doing good just because they aren't "with us". God's Reign calls us to nurture and protect faith in others, and to stay faithful in our own lives, even when it costs us. When we commit to the ways of God's Reign, we are willing to make sacrifices in order to become people who contribute flavour and life to the world, like salt. And this means that we will live in peace with others – even when they're different from us.

These are surprising values in a world where "it's not what you know, it's who you know." How can you embrace the surprising, peaceful, welcoming, life-giving ways of God's Reign in your life a little more today?

**Do:** In order to be ready to recognise God's surprising work in unexpected people, we need to live mindfully. In order to live as salt, and contribute life to the world, we need to listen carefully for God's guidance. Today, keep your ears open for God's surprising, peaceful voice.

**Pray:** I turn my ears to listen for your voice, O God.

### MONDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Read:** 1 Peter 1:3-9

**Reflect:** After years of living as an apostle, Peter had learned a few things about faith, and how surprising it is. In today's passage, he affirms some basic truths about faith – we receive new birth through Jesus' life and resurrection; God's power sustains us until we see God's salvation in fullness; trials are temporary, but God's joy lasts forever.

But then Peter starts to say some surprising things about faith. Trials purify and strengthen our faith, and enable us to bring glory to God.

When we stay faithful through tough times, we bring praise to God. But what makes this all so strange is that our faith is placed in a God whom we have not seen, and our joy is in a reality that we cannot express or perceive. It is a mysterious thing, this faith of ours!

But somehow we know that, when we place our faith in Christ – building our lives around the values and purpose of Jesus – we are truly saved. Our faith liberates us from all the pain-avoidance, vengefulness and despair that usually result from suffering, and our faith frees us to love and celebrate even in the darkest times, because we know that life always has the last word.

Can you allow your faith to shine even in the midst of any darkness you may be going through?

**Do:** Faith is not automatic. Even after years of faith, we need to choose daily to keep following Jesus. Today, whether your life is difficult or easy, renew your commitment to the ways of Jesus.

**Pray:** Even when it doesn't make sense, O God, I choose to place my trust in you.

## TUESDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Read:** Zechariah 8:18-23

**Reflect:** When the people of Judah returned to their land after years in exile in Babylon, their joy quite quickly turned to despair. They had been excited about going home, but when they got there, the land was devastated and the Temple had been destroyed. They faced a huge task of rebuilding, and they were still feeling the shame of their defeat and exile.

But, the prophet Zechariah, whose father had been one of the priests who returned with Nehemiah, was called by God to offer a surprising and hopeful message. He encouraged the Governor, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, the high priest, to stay faithful, and to commit to rebuilding the Temple (which they did). In today's reading, he also encouraged the people, calling them to move from mourning to rejoicing, and assuring them that, where they had been shamed before the nations, the time would come when God would restore their reputation. Though, at the time, it must have sounded impossible, he assures the people that others will come to

Jerusalem to seek God's blessing (which now happens all the time, of course), and that other nations would ask for God's people to help them to connect with God.

Even in our most difficult times, it's good to remember that God is still at work, and that, in surprising ways, God always leads us to life and to joy. How can you remember God's activity in your life today?

**Do:** The discipline of remembering is one of the practices of our worship – especially of Holy Communion. When we purposely remember God's presence and actions, our faith grows, and we can find joy even in tough times. Today, use every opportunity to remember God's grace.

**Pray:** I remember your presence, O God, and your work in my life.

## WEDNESDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Read:** Psalm 5

**Reflect:** It can be really hard to be as gracious and loving as Jesus, especially when we feel attacked by others. Thankfully, the Bible doesn't pretend that it's easy, and it doesn't deny the feelings of anger and hurt that come when we are persecuted. The Psalms, especially, reflect every experience and emotion that we feel in our human existence. When we read passages like today's Psalm it can be very comforting. But it also teaches us to give ourselves the permission to express our pain, and place our grief and anger in God's hands.

Sometimes we are tempted to hide our worst selves from God. We know that God calls us to Christlikeness, and so, when we don't feel very loving or gracious, we become afraid that God will judge or reject us. But that's not the case. As Richard Rohr says, "Pain that is not transformed is transmitted" – and the only way to transform our pain is to acknowledge it, experience it, and release it into God's gracious care. This means that, like the Psalmist, we can be completely honest with our worst feelings and desires when we pray. Then, as we open ourselves to God's healing, we discover a new trust in God's protection, and a new ability to rise above the pain and anger.

How can you be more honest in your prayer life today?

**Do:** The practice of lament is not about confession or intercession, although it can include both of these practices as well. Lament is really about being honest with God about our pain and anger. It flows from the faith that God can handle our worst and can transform and heal it. Try to turn your anger and grief into lament today.

**Pray:** Hear my anger and grief, O God, for I offer it to you.

### THURSDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Read:** Galatians 3:23-29

**Reflect:** As we begin our preparation for Sunday, we turn our attention to what it means to be faithful to God. This was a question with which the Galatian church wrestled at length. As the new community of faith began to bring Jews and Gentiles together, it became more and more difficult to define what it meant to follow Jesus faithfully. Some of the Jewish believers insisted that the law was the guide for godly living, and that all believers should be held to that standard. The Gentiles were not convinced of this. The law was strange and difficult for them, and they had come to Christ to find freedom.

Paul's letter challenges both of these factions in the church. On the one hand he disagrees with the Jews that the law is the standard for Christ followers. Paul teaches that the law was just the minimum requirement for godly living and it was given only as a stopgap until Christ came. On the other hand, he also teaches that freedom from the law doesn't mean the Gentiles can do what they like. Rather all the believers are held to a higher standard – the life of Christ. Faithfulness to God is not about “law or no law”. It's about embracing, and living by, the values and purposes of Jesus – justice, peace, grace and love.

How can you rise above the law in your life?

**Do:** It is very hard to become legalistic when we immerse ourselves in the life and teachings of Jesus. As we allow the “Jesus kind of life” to take hold of our hearts, we no longer need to be legalistic. The love and grace of Jesus guide us. Today, allow the practice of praise to fill your heart with a vision of Jesus.

**Pray:** I praise you, Jesus, for your holy life of grace and love.

### FRIDAY 01 OCTOBER 2021

**Read:** Romans 8:1-11

**Reflect:** The Book of Romans is sometimes called the Gospel of Paul. In it the apostle explores the brokenness of our human condition, our need of a Saviour, God's provision of grace and life in Christ, and the life of following Christ together in the power of God's promises. It's a glorious book, and today's section is one of the best-known parts of it.

In the famous Chapter 8 Paul speaks about two kinds of life and calls his readers to choose. On the one hand, there is the choice to live from our own sinful nature. At worst, this life leads us into addiction, and opposition to God - whether by accident or on purpose. At best, we can try to control the sinful nature by following the law, but this works for very few people. The law just doesn't have the power to change us. You can legislate against sin, but you can never legislate for goodness. And it is not enough just to avoid sin.

So, there's another alternative that is available to us in Christ. It's a life that is guided and empowered by God's Spirit. It is a life that is transformed by God's grace and power, and that no longer needs the law, because it automatically strives for what is most loving toward God, others, and ourselves. And, the best part, is that when we've embraced this life of the Spirit, it is eternal – not even death can ultimately defeat it!

How can you choose to live by God's Spirit a little more today?

**Do:** Jesus promised that anyone who asks for the gift of God's Spirit receives what he or she asks for. This is not just a once-off experience, but a daily sense of being connected to, and empowered by, God's Spirit. Remember this today and keep asking for God's Spirit to fill you throughout the day.

**Pray:** Fill me with your Spirit, O God, so that I may live the life of the Spirit today.

## SATURDAY 02 OCTOBER 2021

**Read:** Psalm 8

**Reflect:** When it comes to faithfulness – which is one theme that arises from the readings for tomorrow's worship – it's often all about relationships. When our relationships are strong, respectful, loving, sacrificial and selfless, it is much easier to be faithful than when our relationships are based on personal gain, expediency, manipulation or self-preservation. This is as true of our relationship with God as it is of our relationships with other people. That's why God willingly gave God's Self to us in Christ.

In today's Psalm, we get a wonderful picture of the kind of relationship that God seeks to have with us, and that God desires for us to have with our world. Although God is so great and majestic, God takes notice of women and men. Though we are insignificant in this vast cosmos, we are not insignificant to God. God inspires us to celebrate God because in our worship, God is able to reveal God's Self to us, and connect with us intimately. In addition, God fills us with God's image, God's glory!

When it comes to the world, God appointed human beings as stewards or caretakers of creation. Tragically, we have taken this to mean that we can exploit the world and its creatures for our own gain. But what God intended was that we would care for creation and develop a deep, loving relationship with all that God has made.

When we enjoy true relationship with God and our world, we need no law. Our love guides us to seek the best in every situation. What is your relationship with God like today? And with the world?

**Do:** The best relationships are born when we truly see and appreciate the other person. Words of affirmation and thanksgiving are important to enable this appreciative connection to happen. Today, give thanks for God's presence and love in your life, and give thanks for the wonderful world that God has given us.

**Pray:** Thank you, God, for giving me a home in this world and in your love.