



30 January – 05 February 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

When Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown of Nazareth, the people listened attentively. When he claimed that he was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, they were amazed and questioned how it could be, but they were still open to Jesus' message. It was only when Jesus began to challenge their sense of entitlement, and when he pointed out God's concern for outsiders, that they got murderously angry. The radical inclusivity of Jesus was scandalous and offensive to these people. They wanted to believe that they were "in" with God, and that meant there had to be others who were "out". But, when Jesus suggested that outsiders were really the true insiders, they refused to let go of their stereotypes, their sense of privilege, and their need for exclusivity.

It's tragic when God's people are more like the people of Nazareth than Jesus. We love to talk about Jesus the Messiah, and to hear how God's Reign has come to us. But, sometimes, when we are challenged by the Gospel to welcome those whom we believe are "sinners" or "outside" of God's "chosen ones," we may prefer to attack the messenger rather than do the difficult work of opening our hearts. We all have those we struggle to love. We all have those whom we believe are undeserving of God's grace. But if God's favour could be earned – even by praying a "sinner's" prayer – it wouldn't be grace. The challenge of the Gospel is the way it calls us constantly to expand our welcome and inclusion until all people discover that they are actually "in" with God. This challenging journey into radical, inclusive grace is the focus of this week.

SUNDAY 30 JANUARY 2022

Read: Luke 4:21-30

Reflect: When we read the story of how Jesus was rejected in Nazareth, we can't miss the fact that Jesus brought the anger on himself. As the people wondered how one of their neighbours could possibly be the Messiah, Jesus changed the agenda. It's like he went out of his way to be confrontational and argumentative. He declared God's acceptance of outcasts apparently knowing that the reaction would be negative. In many churches, if such a message were preached, we would tell the person that they had not been gentle enough, or considerate enough. We would ask why he or she had not viewed the congregation with grace, and worked slowly with them to lead them into a more inclusive view. It's almost as if the worst sin for us now is to cause offense.

But consider the cost to Jesus' mission and integrity had he not confronted the people. If he had stayed away from these controversial topics those who heard about his inclusive behaviour later would have felt betrayed. They would have felt that he was inconsistent and changed his tune depending on whom he was with. Also, imagine how it would have felt for the outcasts when they heard that yet another religious leader had sold out to the status quo, and had written them off as undeserving of God's attention. Jesus was confrontational, but his integrity and mission, required it.

Are there any confrontations that you've been avoiding? Are there any issues on which you need to take a stand? How can you embrace the inclusive mission of Jesus more strongly today?

Do: It can be disturbing to see how confrontational the New Testament disciples could be. They confronted the religious leaders of their day, they confronted each other, and they confronted themselves with the Gospel challenge. Sometimes the most powerful witness is when we refuse to stay silent in the face of injustice. Can you try a little "Gospel confrontation" today?

Pray: Teach me, O God, to stand strong for the values of your Reign.

MONDAY 31 JANUARY 2022

Read: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Reflect: On first reading, today's passage sounds exclusive – like Christians are somehow better than others because we have God's Spirit and Christ's mind. But, if we look a little deeper, we discover that the opposite is actually the case. The "world's" wisdom is to separate – to create boundaries between nations, races, genders, generations, sexualities and any other characteristic we can think of. But this is not the wisdom of Paul. It was Jesus' confrontation of systems of oppression, inequality and exclusion that got him crucified. That's why Paul says that the rulers of this world cannot understand God's plan – inclusivity and grace make no sense against the exclusive and meritocratic values upon which our world is built. But, once we have been captured by Jesus' vision of God's Reign, once we have "bought in" to the quest for a more just, peaceful and equitable world, the sacrifice of Jesus makes the best sense. It stands to reason that, in order to confront the evil of human empire, Jesus would allow himself to be destroyed publicly by empire – and then would show that even death could not quench the power of love, grace, and justice.

The quote from Isaiah 64:4 that Paul references (rather freely) is actually part of a prayer of confession in which the people acknowledge how they have failed to live by God's values. Yet here Paul reveals that in God's Spirit, God has given us the power we need to live the Jesus way. Because of this, we have Christ's mind, which means that we are able to live from Jesus' gracious perspective and values.

How can you open your mind to receive more of God's Spirit and of Jesus' mind, today?

Do: The Bible is often used to justify exclusivity, but, when we listen to the whole Bible, and not just a few selected verses, we cannot help but see God's inclusive grace shining through. Today, spend time reading as much of the Bible as you can, and allow its message of grace to touch your heart.

Pray: Give me the mind of Christ, O God, so that I may understand your gracious and loving mission.

TUESDAY 01 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Reflect: Today's story of Naaman's healing is almost comical in the way it is told. To begin with, there is the cryptic note sent from the king of Aram to the king of Israel, which seemed to imply that Israel's king was supposed to do the healing. This results in confusion, panic, and all sorts of assumptions that could have led to very serious consequences if Elisha had not intervened. Then, there is Naaman's national pride and personal arrogance which almost prevented him from following Elisha's instructions and receiving his healing. Fortunately, this military commander had servants who were wiser than he was, who convinced him to choose healing over his offense at Elisha's dismissiveness. Notice again how it is Naaman's assumptions about how he should have been treated, and how his healing should have been performed, that got in his way here.

It was similar assumptions about who the Messiah should be and how he should behave that tripped up the people of Nazareth, as we saw on Sunday. It was these same kinds of assumptions that prevented many people in Israel, including the religious leaders, from recognising who Jesus was. And, if we're honest, it is our tendency to make assumptions about God that keeps us from a truly transforming faith. It is our assumptions about other people and their motives that keep us from deep and intimate relationships. It is even assumptions about ourselves that keep us from truly knowing ourselves and doing the work of transformation and growth. One of the most powerful spiritual choices we can make is to distrust our assumptions, and to approach God and others with an open heart and mind, curious to know what they really feel, think, and desire.

How can you let go of your assumptions today?

Do: When we become aware of habits of thought and behaviour that are unhelpful, it can be tempting to deny what we see, and pretend that we're doing just fine. But this only drives our worst selves into the shadows, where our brokenness continues to hurt us and others. Today, use confession to acknowledge your assumptions and their negative influence in your life, and then ask God to help you to release them and be healed.

Pray: When my assumptions keep me from truth and life, O God, forgive me and heal me, I pray.

WEDNESDAY 02 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Luke 19:41-44

Reflect: In Luke's Gospel, as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was nearing its destination, Jesus paused, looked over the city and wept because he knew that his people were refusing to see the truth about the world and about God's desire for them. Then, he continued into the city, cleansed the Temple, and got into a debate with the religious leaders which finally sealed their intention to have him executed. But the lament in today's reading reveals both Jesus' deep compassion for his people, and his willingness to confront them strongly.

We should read this passage carefully so that we don't fall into thinking that the disaster Jesus foretold was an act of punishment by God. It was more likely that Jesus recognised that rebellion was brewing, and that Rome would respond with violent brutality, that caused him to speak about the trouble that would come if God's people refused to embrace the way of peace, justice, love, mercy, service, and simplicity. They had not heard his message that God's Reign was completely different from human empires, and so Jesus knew that they would attempt to use the same violent strategies to overthrow Rome that Rome had used on them, and they would fail dismally. History shows that Jesus was correct.

We too are faced with a choice between the Way of God's Reign and the way of power, wealth, dominance, and violence. Both ways will lead us into suffering, but the first helps to make the world more just, peaceful and loving, and leads us through the struggle to life. In the second way suffering is the result of the violence and manipulation of human empires seeking to grab hold of or hang on to power – and it creates a never-ending cycle of pain and violence.

Are there any power struggles in your life where you've failed to heed the call of God's Reign? How can you respond now?

Do: The act of giving is less about money, than about learning to let go of all that keeps us from following the simple, sacrificial ways of God's Reign. Today, whenever you find yourself trying to build an empire – for yourself or any other human person or organisation – try to give a little power and love away.

Pray: I embrace the call of your Reign, O God, to serve, give, and love sacrificially.

THURSDAY 03 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Numbers 20:22-29

Reflect: On Sunday the Lectionary turns to the theme of God's grace and God's call. This is both an invitation to experience God's grace for ourselves, and a challenge to be channels of that grace to others. In the light of this, today's reading may seem out of place. The reference to Moses and Aaron being denied entry to the Promised Land because of their disobedience sounds like the opposite of grace. However, in the minds of the people of the time, this was how God was understood. Fortunately, Jesus has given us a new perspective on the nature of God, and on how limitless God's grace really is.

The real focus of today's passage, though, is on the commissioning of Aaron's son, Eleazar as high priest. The call of Moses to be the deliverer of God's people is well known and often referenced. The call of Aaron as the first high priest to minister alongside Moses is just as familiar. But, now for the first time in the journey of the Israelites from slaves to a free people we see the passing of a calling from one person to another. Aaron's priestly garments, the symbol of his authority and function as high priest, are removed from him and placed on his son. Along with them, the calling and authority are transferred. This idea of passing a calling and a ministry along is common in both Old and New Testaments. And it reveals how calling is not just about individuals but is about community. God calls people as part of a community, to function within that community. This does not just apply to those in leadership, like a high priest, but to all.

Every person has a part to play in God's saving purpose. We are all called to participate in bringing the cosmos to unity and wholeness in Christ. Jesus has passed his ministry and spirit on to us. And everything we say, do, or even think, can either be a sharing in the work of Christ or in opposition to it. How can you fulfil your calling to share the grace of God in your world today?

Do: Whenever God calls, a response is needed. Not all who are called accept the call, and not all who accept the call are faithful to live it out. If we are to fulfil our calling to be channels of grace, then we will need to renew our commitment to that call daily. Today make time to rededicate yourself to God's call.

Pray: Make me a channel of your grace and love to those around me, O God.

FRIDAY 04 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Acts 9:26-31

Reflect: Saul, who became the apostle Paul, was not an easy person to get along with it seems. As we read his story, we often find him in conflict. At first, he was at the centre of the movement to persecute the early church. Then he became a follower of Jesus and, in today's passage, we find him debating with the Hellenistic Jews, making them angry enough that they wanted to kill him. This helped his cause with the believers who had been wary of him at first, but it also reveals something of Paul's character – that he was a strong, confrontational, and opinionated person. These are not qualities we usually associate with those who are called by God. In fact, generally we expect those who are called by God to be gentle, compassionate, gracious, and kind.

There are two elements of today's reading that teach us about the intersection of God's grace and call. Firstly, when the believers are afraid of Saul, Barnabus takes him under his wing, and draws him into the community of believers. It was the grace and courage of Barnabus that enabled Saul to be integrated into the church and eventually find and fulfil his call as an apostle. Secondly, the character of Saul, which we've already explored, did not get changed in order for him to fulfil his call. It was exactly who he was that God used to grow the early church.

We are all called to participate in God's saving work, and we are all called as we are. Perhaps we are like Barnabus, graciously welcoming people into the faith. Or perhaps we're like Saul, challenging people. Whoever you are, can you accept God's call?

Do: When we take time to reflect on ourselves in the light of the Spirit's discernment, we can learn who God has made us to be and find what God calls us to do. Today, try to spend some time in Spirit-guided self-reflection.

Pray: O God, show me who you have made me to be, and teach me accept your call to share your grace.

SATURDAY 05 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Judges 3:7-11

Reflect: The Book of Judges can be tough to read. There is a lot of violence, and even the judges are often a confusing mix of good and bad. If we take today's reading literally, then God caused God's people to be conquered by an enemy nation, and then raised up a leader to free them. This is once again an ancient perspective on God, from a time when gods were fickle and unpredictable.

Nevertheless, in their time of suffering, a leader did rise up to help God's people to find freedom. Othniel went to war, conquered the king of Aram, and then ruled over God's people for forty years in peace. If we lay aside the details of the story for now, one thing stands out that is a common characteristic of the way God calls – we are never called for our own sakes. God's call is always to serve, liberate, and bring life to others. As we follow Jesus, the best way we can live as called ones is to share with those around us the same grace Jesus has shared with us.

How can you show grace to the people in your life today?

Do: Acts of service, even when they are small and seemingly insignificant, can be incredibly powerful. Simply taking the time to show someone grace or making the effort to serve them in some small, kind way, can not only bring life to the other person, but it can also lead us deeper into God's grace and love ourselves. Commit to doing one simple act of service for someone today.

Pray: You have called me to share your grace, O God, and I accept that call.