



29 August – 04 September 2021

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

It's easy for faith to become about what goes on in our heads. We speak of believing largely in terms of having the right ideas about God, and following Jesus as adhering to a set of rules. Especially when we've been people of faith for some time, we can fall into religion as a habit, with little of the power and passion remaining.

But this week the readings speak directly to our hearts. In the Old Testament, we read a beautiful love poem from the Song of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs). The scene in today's reading is of two young lovers enjoying the beauty and warmth of the springtime world, but if we were to keep reading, we would discover some pretty explicit erotic poetry! Yet, through the ages, many Jewish and Christian scholars have interpreted the Song as an allegory about God's love for God's people. This means that our relationship with God is not just about what happens in our heads, but is meant to be a passionate love affair with our Creator.

In the Gospel reading for this week, the religious leaders confront Jesus because his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat. Immediately Jesus points out that such legalism results from hearts that have grown cold. The religious leaders, Jesus implies, have lost their passion, and all they have left is a set of religious rules that they must defend. Whenever we see religious people pointing fingers at others, defending rules and ideas, or claiming some sort of special privilege with God, you can be sure that you're dealing with a heart that has grown cold. The challenge this week is for us to keep the flame of passion alive in our hearts as we worship God and follow Jesus.

SUNDAY 29 AUGUST 2021

Read: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Reflect: Rules are easy to work with. That's why relationship with God so often deteriorates into a religion of rules. Rules can become like a "to do" list, where all we have to do is put a check mark next to each item to feel like we are good people who deserve to be rewarded by God. Throughout the history of the church there have been people who began with humble and passionate hearts, but became cold and heartless as their faith became legalistic and rigid.

This is what Jesus faced with the religious leaders of his day. The law had always been the heart of the Temple's worship, but it had become an instrument of power and control, and a way to divide those who were "in" from those who were "out." The ministry of Jesus challenged this legalism, and called God's people to return to the spirit of the law, which was a passionate love for God and for God's grace and justice. That's why, when the religious people were upset about Jesus' disciples failing to wash their hands before eating, Jesus taught that what comes from outside is incapable of defiling us. Rather, it is what lies in our hearts that makes us clean or unclean. If we harbour hatred, judgment, jealousy, violence, greed, or pride in our hearts, we will be "unclean" and our lives will stain and harm those around us. But when our hearts are filled with love, grace, humility, joy, peace, generosity, and compassion, we are "clean" and our lives will bring life to others.

Where is your heart "clean" and where is it "unclean" today?

Do: In any love relationship, our hearts grow cold and "unclean" when we refuse to admit when we've been wrong. The same is true of our relationship with God. Today, take time to confess the "uncleanness" in your heart, and allow God to cleanse you and reignite your passion.

Pray: Create a clean heart in me, O God, so that what is within me will bring life and grace into the world.

MONDAY 30 AUGUST 2021

Read: Deuteronomy 4:9-14

Reflect: It may be tempting to use the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments to justify a legalistic view of faith. After all, didn't God give his people a set of rules to follow? But if you look a little closer you will discover that the Ten Commandments are less about rules, and more about relationships.

To begin with, in today's reading, Moses calls the people to remember their encounter with God. The Ten Commandments flowed out of this passionate, awesome experience of God's presence and power. Then, you may also notice that the Ten Commandments are the basis for a covenant - a binding commitment to relationship - that God enters into with God's people. It's probably a more accurate translation to refer to the commandments as the "Ten Words". They were principles that God gave to the newly liberated nation to teach them how to live well as free people in strong relationship with God and one another. Which brings us to the third important thing to notice about the giving of the law. The "Ten Words" can be summarised in Jesus' Great Commandment to love God and love neighbour. The first four are all about loving God, and the last six are about loving others. So, at its heart, the biblical law is really only about one thing: love - which is about passion, connection and relationship.

How can you embrace the "law" of love more deeply today?

Do: One of the best ways to love well is to learn to listen. Love - including the love expressed in the "Ten Words" - is all about putting the needs of the other first. This requires us to listen well, and then respond. Today, love God by listening carefully to God's word, and love others by listening carefully for what's in their hearts.

Pray: Teach me to listen, O God, so that I may love as you love me.

TUESDAY 31 AUGUST 2021

Read: 1 Peter 2:19-25

Reflect: Let's face it: Sometimes as Christians we are "persecuted" not because of our faith, but because, in our self-righteousness and judgment of others, we have made ourselves a right pain in the

neck. That's what Peter addresses in this letter. There is no credit for suffering when we are "beaten" for doing wrong. Rather, we should follow Christ's example of passionate obedience. When he was persecuted, it was not because of his arrogance or legalism or self-righteousness. He suffered because he loved loving so much that he upset the callous and unloving systems of government and economics of his day. Then, when they executed him he refused, even then, to stop loving, but responded with grace and forgiveness.

Peter calls all followers of Christ to live with such passionate love. We have turned to Christ as our Shepherd and Guardian, and we have committed to follow Jesus. That means that we seek to live as Jesus did, and to allow the character and purpose of Christ to be seen in our own lives. The only way this can happen is if we commit daily to making love our first priority, and if we stay passionately true to this commitment.

How can you be more passionately committed to love today?

Do: Notice how Peter praises the life and attitude of Jesus in his letter. When we take the time to express our praise for Christ's life and character, we are shaped into Christlikeness. Make today a day of praise for the grace and love of Jesus.

Pray: For your patience, grace and love, I praise you, Jesus.

WEDNESDAY 01 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Song of Solomon 8:5-7

Reflect: In this section of the Song of Solomon, love is described in strong and passionate terms. Love arouses. It is like a seal over the heart. It is as strong as death, and as hot and bright as fire. Love cannot be quenched by rivers of water, nor can it be bought with great wealth. Those who have loved well know all of this to be true.

But if we remember that this love poem has long been interpreted as a picture of God's love for us, and ours for God, all these passionate words take on a whole new meaning. Now we can begin to see how God longs for our faith to be - arousing us to worship and Christlike action; a seal that keeps us faithfully committed to God's Reign; as strong and hot as a fire toward God and others; unable to be quenched by the worst of storms, or bought by the greatest wealth.

This kind of faith, this love for God, does not need the law to teach us how to live. It doesn't require prophets to call us to care for the poor, or live in Christlike ways. When our love for God is as passionate as this, we will automatically live as God desires, bringing life to ourselves and others. We will automatically seek to serve and bless those around us, and make God's gracious Reign visible in the world - because when we love like this, we cannot help but do what brings joy to our Divine Lover.

How passionate is your love for God and others today?

Do: Sometimes, in our worship, we need moments when we can just lean into God's presence and love, and express our devotion in return. Today, as you experience God's love, God's beauty and God's presence, respond with passionate prayers or songs of devotion.

Pray: As you have loved me passionately, O God, so I respond to you in love.

THURSDAY 02 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Psalm 146

Reflect: On Sunday all of the readings speak of God's care for the poor, the least and the most vulnerable. They also call us, as God's people, to care actively for those in need, to be the embodiment of God's grace, love and justice. This Psalm echoes that same sentiment. In the midst of the praises of the Psalmist, God is celebrated for giving justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry, for opening blind eyes, and lifting up those who are weighted down, for protecting the foreigner and caring for widows and orphans. This is the God we serve and the God we praise.

But our praises are not just words spoken from our mouths. Our praises are the practical outworkings of passionate hearts. The best way we can praise God is to let others see God's grace, justice and compassion in us as we work passionately on behalf of the needy and vulnerable. This may mean serving food at a homeless shelter, or counselling abused women and children, or speaking out against injustice, or voting in favour of upliftment programs, or buying from fair trade companies, or recycling our waste. In so many daily

activities, we can allow God's love and justice to shine through us, if we will just choose to do so.

How can you embody God's love and justice today?

Do: Today, choose just one act of service that you can carry through the day to make the world a more just place. It may be serving someone, signing a petition, recycling, or visiting someone in need. Whatever it is, do it in Christ's name.

Pray: Make my life a reflection of your love and justice, O God.

FRIDAY 03 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Isaiah 32:1-8

Reflect: There are many prophecies in the Old Testament in which righteous kings and rulers are promised to God's people. This is an indication of how often the people suffered under wicked and unjust leadership - which may be comforting or frustrating when we realise that the same is still true for us. What is important here, though, is how Isaiah describes the righteous king, and the honest princes who are his deputies. They are a shelter and a refuge for their people, refreshing and secure. They proclaim truth and help people to communicate more effectively. Unlike wicked people, who speak falsely and deprive others of basic human needs, righteous rulers are generous.

This Sunday the Scriptures are clear that God's "agenda" for the world is justice and peace, equality and sharing of resources. It doesn't take great wisdom to recognise that leaders who embrace these qualities lead their people into lives that are more abundant and peaceful. Yet, we still live in a world where injustice is often maintained by our political and economic systems.

What does this have to do with us, though – we are not "kings" or "princes"? There are two messages for us today. The first is to use our power - our vote and our voice - to hold our leaders to account. The second is for us to live as just and righteous people – generous, peace loving and gracious – with those around us.

How can you live God's righteousness in your world today?

Do: The Scriptures call us to pray for our leaders. These prayers remind us of the standards of justice to which we must hold our leaders accountable. They also remind us of how God expects us to live. Today, offer short prayers for God's justice to prevail whenever you see injustice or suffering.

Pray: May your justice prevail, O God, in our world, and in my life.

SATURDAY 04 SEPTEMBER 2021

Read: Proverbs 8:1-31

Reflect: Proverbs 8 is one of the most beautiful and enigmatic passages in the Old Testament. It belongs in a group of writings known as "Wisdom Literature" which includes the books of Proverbs, Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Proverbs 8 is a celebration of Wisdom, in which this quality is personified as a feminine being of divine nature. Some scholars view the last few verses of today's section (from verse 22) as an Old Testament version of John's *logos* (word) in the first chapter of his Gospel.

From the perspective of this week's journey, Wisdom is offered to all people as the gift that enables us to live well and abundantly. When we live wisely, the Proverbs teach, we will also live prosperously and justly. The connection between prosperity and justice here makes it clear that the Scriptures do not mean simply the accumulation of material wealth. Rather, true prosperity is to have sufficient, but not more than we need, while using our resources to meet the needs of others (which is justice). Notice, also, how close the relationship is between God and wisdom. When we live wisely, we live in close relationship with the God of Wisdom.

How can you open yourself to God's wisdom a little more today, and allow it to lead you into a life of justice and prosperity in your corner of the world?

Do: The book of James tells us that if we lack wisdom we need only ask God for it and we will receive it. So, today, give thanks for God's wisdom that is available to you, no matter what you may be facing.

Pray: For your creative wisdom, O God, I give you thanks.