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**Sunday 5 November 2023 to**

**Sunday 12 November 2023**

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**Be prepared**

by Stuart Gray

***Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour (Matthew 25:13).***

Read [Matthew 25:1–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A1-13&version=NRSVUE)

How good are we at being prepared?  During the 2019–20 bushfires in Victoria, I spent time at an emergency relief centre as a Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry volunteer. My role was to be available to listen to people who were completely dislocated from their normal lives. Over the two days, I spoke with about 20 people. Most had made some fire preparations; some made very little preparation, even though at night, the sky was like an extended red sunset due to the fires. There was one young woman who came in quite distraught. Upon hearing her story, I told her that of all the people I had spoken to, she was the only one who had followed all the recommended preparations.

Despite all the exhortations to prepare, and with the fires raging around the district, in this sample, only one person in about twenty was fully prepared.

In this parable, Jesus says half the young women were prepared. It is interesting to note that initially, there is nothing to distinguish between the women, even to the extent they all fall asleep. But when the bridegroom comes, there is a very big distinction between the prepared and unprepared.

The wise were able to enter the banquet as they had fulfilled the requirements of their task to shine their light for the bridegroom.

The foolish couldn’t fulfil their requirements and were blocked from the banquet.

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, ‘Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’

I’ve often thought it was not very ‘Christian’ of the girls with the oil not to share it with the others. But the journey Jesus talks about is only something we can prepare for; no one else can do it for us. If someone wants to become a doctor, carpenter or priest, they have to do the study and take the exams if they want to qualify – no one else can do it for them.

We all have to discern the will of the Father for ourselves and be prepared.

How prepared are you?

***Father, we ask you to help us to be prepared to meet you at the eternal banquet. Make our light shine in this time of spiritual darkness so when our time comes to cry out, ‘Lord, Lord’, we may enter into your presence. Amen.***

*Stuart, with his wife Pamela Dalgliesh, lives in Mansfield, Victoria. Stuart has a background in agricultural science, rural journalism and corporate affairs. He loves living on a small farm in the beautiful High Country of Victoria, being involved in the Mansfield community and travelling, having in the last three years done extensive travels in Western Australia, Queensland, the United Kingdom and Ireland.*

Monday 13 November 2023

**Not a rebellion, but a transformation**

by Stuart Gray

***‘Am I leading a rebellion,’ said Jesus, ‘that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me?’ (Mark 14:48)***

Read [Mark 14:43–52](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A43-52&version=NRSVUE)

I have been fortunate this year to have had time travelling in the United Kingdom and Ireland, where you are never far from evidence of battles between Protestants and Catholics, whether it be the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the mid-1500s or the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in 1690 where deposed King James II, a Catholic, fought King William III, a Protestant.

There have been many times throughout history where Christians have taken up swords and clubs to impose their will on others or to defend themselves.

According to Mark, this was the method that the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders used to capture Jesus, but Jesus' response was the opposite of what they expected.

‘Am I leading a rebellion?’ Jesus asked. The answer was ‘no’, but, in fact, he was leading something greater and more significant than a rebellion. He was leading a transformation. This transformation occurred the next day when he was nailed to a cross in what looked like a total defeat. But through his death and subsequent resurrection, he transformed the way in which we could and do relate to God.

And the tool of this transformation is summed up in one word – love. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish be have eternal life’ (John 3:16).

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he said, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.’

With and through love, we need to transform ourselves each day so that we are a witness to the great love God has for us all.

***Heavenly Father, we pray that through the Holy Spirit, we can be transformed to be love in our families, communities, countries and the world. Amen.***

Tuesday 14 November 2023

**Gotcha**

by Stuart Gray

***Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ (Mark:14:61b)***

Read [Mark 14:53–65](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A53-65&version=NRSVUE)

A common form of interviewing politicians and leaders these days is the ‘gotcha’ question – a question designed so that no matter what the answer, the person is made to look foolish or seen to be denigrating a section of society or some other ‘crime’ that then leads to the next headline of how bad the person is.

The questions are not designed to elicit information or allow the person to argue a case. They are designed to trap the person into making a mistake.

In this trial of Jesus, there was a great determination to find fault with Jesus, but they struggled to do so:

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even then their testimony did not agree (Mark 14:55–59).

During this time, Jesus does not say much. He lets the confusion of the accusers destroy their arguments.

The high priest then came up with a gotcha question: ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’

In one of the few responses Jesus gave during his trial, he said (verse 62), ‘I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’.

The high priest’s response was dramatic. ‘“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death’ (Mark 14:64).

While gotcha questions about our faith don’t have the same dire consequences Jesus faced, they can still hurt and wound us.

How do you respond to gotcha questions?

***Heavenly Father, help us to be prepared for the difficult questions about our faith so that we can confidently proclaim your name and the love that Christ gives the world through his death and resurrection. Amen.***

Wednesday 15 November 2023

**Let’s learn from Peter**

by Stuart Gray

***He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man you’re talking about’ (Mark 14:71).***

Read [Mark 14:66–72](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14%3A66-72&version=NRSVUE)

This was a low point in Peter’s life. Not long before this time, Jesus had asked his disciples, ‘Who do you say I am?’ and Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’.

Jesus said of this response, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Peter … on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven’ (Matthew 16:16–19).

Later, when Jesus said all the disciples would desert him, Peter was adamant that he would not be a deserter (Mark 14:29).

Yet here he is, not long later, disowning Jesus. Even though he was warned of the events to come, that Jesus would be handed over to the authorities and put to death, Peter did not understand what was happening and what his reaction to the unfolding drama would be. His denial of Jesus was also a denial of who he was, one of the foremost disciples of Jesus. No wonder he wept at the realisation of what he had done.

However, Peter did become the rock on which the church would be built.

It is comforting to note that discipleship is not destroyed by our own foolishness, weaknesses, failings and inabilities. We do and will stumble, just as Peter did. But beyond our stumbles and frailties is the risen Christ who gives all believers the gift of salvation from sin and eternal life. In our failures, we come to rely even more on God’s forgiveness so we can continue to hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

***Heavenly Father, you know our weaknesses and how they derail our discipleship. We pray for forgiveness, and despite our failures, we pray for the courage to be a witness to you in all that we do. Amen.***

Thursday 16 November 2023

**Silence amidst turmoil**

by Stuart Gray

***But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed (Mark 15:5).***

Read [Mark 15:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15%3A1-11&version=NRSVUE)

The world is very unsettled at the moment. We are faced with great uncertainty and division. The recent horrific events in the Middle East and the subsequent conflict leave us in despair and questioning whether there will ever be peace in that region.

In Australia, the divisiveness caused by the recent referendum continues to divide families, communities and the country. There are many other issues causing much concern about our future. And we are often at a loss as to what to do.

But unsettled times have always been with us, and this passage in Mark describes in part a major event that changed the world forever.

The drama of the trial of Jesus always grips me. The events unfold during the evening. Everyone is talking about what is happening; even a slave girl is engaged in the events and observes that Peter is one of the disciples. The chief priests, elders, teachers and the whole Sanhedrin are so determined to get rid of Jesus that they work right through the night to achieve their goal. They whip up the crowd, who are calling out, ‘Crucify him’. The governor, Pontius Pilate, is imposed upon in the middle of the night, and even Pilate’s wife offers advice on how Pilate should deal with Jesus.

Accusations against Jesus are coming in thick and fast; the whole scene is tense, confusing and volatile.

Yet what does Jesus do? He remains silent and makes no reply. In doing his Father’s will, he is calm and composed, even though he knows what he has to endure. This behaviour was such a contrast to the turmoil around him that Pilate was amazed.

I have never experienced a cyclone, but at the centre of the storm, there is calm – the eye of the storm.

Jesus is like the eye of the storm. In him, we can find calm when everything around us is in turmoil. In Christ, we find peace and meaning in our lives.

We so often think we have to fix the things that are broken. Maybe the best we can do is be calm, silent and alive to God in our lives.

***Heavenly Father, we pray that through your word, we may bring peace and calmness to this world of turmoil. Amen.***

Friday 17 November 2023

**The power of the crowd**

by Stuart Gray

***Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified (Mark 15:15).***

Read [Mark 15:12–21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15%3A12-21&version=NRSVUE)

Wanting to satisfy the crowd is a very powerful motivator. Many leaders fall into the trap of pleasing the crowd even though it may not be the best line of action or act of leadership.

It is often easier to follow the crowd rather than stick up for what you might believe in or think is right – such is the power of the crowd.

The crowd Pilate wanted to satisfy with their cries of ‘Crucify him’ only a week before was proclaiming Jesus with shouts of ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming of the kingdom of our father David. Hosanna in the highest’ (Mark 11:9,10).

In the first section of Mark 15, Jesus is handed over to Pilate, who is confused as to why the crowd wants to crucify Jesus. ‘What crime has he committed?’ Pilate asked (verse 14). But Pilate also recognised the motivation of the chief priests, ‘knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him’ (verse 10).

But even though Pilate was in charge, he did not use his authority and gave in to the crowd. ‘When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility”’ (Matthew 27:24).

In today’s Western world, the crowd has little time for God and religion. The crowd mocks believers; it wants to deny the influence Christianity has had on the lifestyle we now enjoy, and it wants to further tear down the vestiges of Christian observance in our institutions, like starting sittings of Parliament with the Lord’s Prayer.

It takes courage to resist the crowd, as there is a great risk of being isolated, ridiculed and ‘cancelled’. Through God’s love, we have the power to be in the world but not of the world.

***Heavenly Father, help us to resist the crowd that wants to eliminate you from our lives. Through your Holy Spirit, give us the courage and wisdom to stand apart from the crowd and be a true witness to you in the world. Amen.***

Saturday 18 November 2023

**Where is wisdom?**

by Stuart Gray

***Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).***

Read [Psalm 90:1–8,(9-11)12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+90%3A1-12&version=NRSVUE)

This psalm contrasts the permanence of God, ‘You have been our dwelling place before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God’ (verses 1 and 2), with the frailty of humanity, ‘Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death— they are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered’ (verses 5 and 6).

To contemplate and resolve this contrast and human dilemma, the psalmist asks God to give us a heart of wisdom.

Wisdom. How often do you hear the word these days – he or she is a wise person; that leader made a wise decision; the wisdom of our elders? It’s a while since I have even heard or read the word. Even in church, I don’t hear ‘wisdom’ mentioned very often.

Maybe that’s a reflection of how the Western world has largely turned its back on religion, particularly Christianity. Proverbs 9:10 says, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’.

We don’t fear God anymore. Despite the ups and downs of our economic, personal and political life, we live comfortable lives over which we believe we have full control. Many people are more concerned about which ‘group’ they belong to – identity – than they are about fearing and loving God.

God values wisdom. When Solomon asked for a ‘discerning heart’, God gave him wisdom as well as riches and honour.

In Proverbs, wisdom is extolled. ‘Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold’ (Proverbs 13: 13–15) and ‘Her [wisdom’s] ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace’ (Proverbs 13:17).

As Christians, we have access to God’s wisdom through the Bible. I particularly like the description and value of wisdom described in the first four chapters of Proverbs. Let us proclaim that wisdom in the world.

***Heavenly Father, we pray that through your word, we can be wisdom in the world. Give us hearts of wisdom that give witness to your saving grace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.***

Sunday 19 November 2023

**God’s strange economy**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them (Matthew 25:14).***

Read [Matthew 25: 14–30](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A+14-30&version=NRSVUE)

It seems strange that God would use money (before we came to use the term ‘talent’ to mean a thing we’re good at, it was a Roman unit of currency) to help us understand the kingdom of heaven. Money is more commonly associated with earthly realities, like power and opportunity for gain at another’s expense. Furthermore, how can God require us to produce a certain return on heavenly investments when we know that our salvation is only through God’s grace? That sounds like works righteousness.

Is the man who goes on a journey in today’s parable supposed to be Jesus? It seems that the man is setting up the third servant for failure by giving him only one talent when the others receive five and two, respectively. That doesn’t sound like Jesus, but this I know to be true: each of us has times when we imagine God to be that unfair and loves others more than he loves us or even sets us up for failure.

As we compare ourselves with those around us, do we identify with one of these servants? If so, do we forever see ourselves as that same servant? Or can you see yourself in any of the three servant roles in the story?

I can be any of those servants on any given day. Not only that but sometimes, when I think I am being extremely faithful to Jesus, my master, I find that I have, in fact, been hurting myself and others. At other times, when I feel without hope or direction, I later discover that my frailty has touched someone else’s soul. That’s God’s economy for you!

Today’s story, like any parable, raises a lot of questions. However, the money analogy does help remind us that something precious has been entrusted to us while we wait for Jesus to return and that we are called to do something with it.

The man in the parable who received ‘just one talent’ received the equivalent of 15 to 20 years’ salary for an average worker. That’s a lot! That’s how generous Jesus is, and he invites us to participate in his abundance.

But we go on our way knowing that, unlike the servants in the story, we have the freedom won by Jesus and God’s Spirit going ahead of us to multiply our heavenly treasures.

***Dear Jesus, thank you for inviting me to join you in your kingdom work. May your amazing generosity be evident in my life and flow to all I meet. Amen.***

*Kathy Matuschka serves within the LCA Queensland District as Assistant Director for Mission. Kathy and her husband Mark have three wonderful adult children, one lovely son-in-law and another officially joining the family next month.*