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**Sunday 19 February 2023 to**

**Sunday 26 February 2023**

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Sunday 19 February 2023

**God’s glory**

by Dr Kirsten Due

***A voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my own dear Son … Listen to him!’ When the disciples heard the voice, they were so afraid they fell flat on the ground (Matthew 17:5,6).***

Read Matthew 17:1–9

What a passage – full of bright imagery and mystery.

Peter’s response to this display of glory is: ‘I can add to this wonderful situation – contribute by building something that captures the moment.’

Leviticus tells us about the type of tabernacle Peter wanted to build. In the festival of Booths, the Israelites built temporary outside shelters (booths) in remembrance of God’s sustaining grace to them in them in the wilderness. Then they lived in tents under the open sky, with God’s tent (tabernacle) in the middle of their camp.

Peter couldn’t resist the impulse to contribute by doing something similar, perhaps trying to re-capture the history of Israel in a moment. We might laugh at what seems inappropriate and ineffective, but Peter acted from what he knew. He followed ingrained tradition which told him a tabernacle was a place to welcome and honour the glorious grace of God. Peter was trying to worship in the way he knew how. That’s exactly what we do: We get a sniff of God’s glory and want to contribute; want to contain it; add to it; preserve it and understand it in terms of our familiar traditions. It’s hard to worship when things don’t match our accustomed ways.

God’s ways are mysterious, unfathomable – like the creation of the world and the redemption of a sinful humanity. It is only when the ‘shining cloud’ overwhelms, and a voice booms from within, that the disciples fall on their faces. They are floored, rendered speechless and humbled before the presence of God. Thrown on their faces by The Voice, they have nothing to add. Nothing to grasp. They stop wanting to build a physical church to contain God. They forget their centuries of tradition and ‘how things are done here’. They worship. They realise their attempts at contributing are a way of resisting the Spirit in his glory – of compartmentalising him to fit in our pocket. The disciples learn; ‘Heaven is his throne; the and the earth his footstool … ‘‘What kind of house will you build for Me’’, says the Lord, or where will My place of repose be? Has not My hand made all these things?’ (Isaiah 66:1–2a).

***Father, your glory overwhelms us. Sometimes your ways seem strange to us. Sometimes they are frightening. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your glory – to know you just as you are and not as we think you should be. Dispel our fears and give us unfettered hearts to worship you in spirit and in truth. Amen.***

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Monday 20 February 2023

**God’s abundant life for us**

by Dr Kirsten Due

### *****I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places***** *–* *****firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry (Isaiah 58:11).*****

Read Isaiah 58: 1–14

Joy is found in doing what matters to us – in getting the desires of our hearts. Peace and meaning are found in pursuing and conquering our dreams … so says Instagram Chapter 1:1–5. Facebook and Dr Google say something similar … take time to appreciate yourself; remove your own barriers to happiness. Spend time looking inwards and build your self-esteem.

Sounds good? It is NOT the gospel. It is a road to pride, despair, suffering, quarrelling and ‘chasing after the wind’ (Ecclesiastes 2:11). But it is a mantra that drives our lives.

We are built for God’s joy and the fruit of his Spirit (which cannot be separated from knowing him). The places we search for joy reveal the brokenness of our hearts – the Mercedes car yard, Realestate.com, the TAB or the MCG. God knows none of these things are bad in themselves – but they cannot bring any lasting joy. Doing 'good deeds' can’t bring any lasting joy either, whether that be trying to build Christian community, going to church, or cleaning up after that exhausting and mammoth Easter production.

Isaiah 58 tells us that when we chase our dreams instead of God’s, we cut ourselves off from real joy. We can be so certain that what we are doing is right that we rebuke God for not answering our prayers and get angry when barriers block our path. But in Isaiah 55:8,9, God says, ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.’

We need to be prepared to consider that all the good WE have decided to do may not be that which God has given us to do. We may ‘seek God’ daily so that we can tell him our desires and how he should go about fulfilling them, but by sheer grace, God does not abandon us to our own dreams and feelings. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said something along these lines: ‘Every human dream we try and force into life is hindrance to genuine life and must be banished [1].’ The way of the Spirit is in surrendering to God’s plans and trusting him to do his best for us.

The wonder of it all is that even when we make mistakes and follow our own ways, God makes everything beautiful. He will ensure that despite everything, we will be like a well-watered garden, a bubbling spring that never runs dry. That’s his gift to us in Christ, who experienced our dryness and was broken by our sin. In doing so, he defeated sin and rose victorious to give us his abundance.

***Dear Father, teach us what is important to you. Help us to let go of chasing our dreams and so fill us with yourself that we forget about looking inside for happiness and chasing after the wind. Thank you for saving us from ourselves and sending your prophets and preachers who tenderly remind us of your healing truth. Amen.***

 [1] paraphrased from Bonhoeffer, D, 1939, ‘On the divine reality of Christian Unity’, Chapter 1, Community, Life Together, Part 3

Tuesday 21 February 2023

**God our saviour**

by Dr Kirsten Due

***He couldn't believe what he saw: not a soul around to correct this awful situation. So he did it himself, took on the work of salvation, fuelled by his own righteousness (Isaiah 59:15,16).***

Read Isaiah 59:1–21

Imagine being in a leaky boat off the Somali coast. There are enormous waves, strong winds and pirates – not the sort with parrots and swords – but with machine guns and explosives. You try to bail out the water, but there’s always too much. You call on the radio – it’s dead. You send out a flare – it’s wet. There is no one to save you.

It is a bleak picture. It’s a picture of the toxic destruction sin causes – not just sin ‘out there’ but in our own lives. Sin is not just what we do but who we are from the moment of birth.

It is impossible for anything you do or anyone you know to save you from yourself and place your feet on solid ground. Sin is so toxic that unless your conscience knows it has been killed, it will sink you and all those around you even as you try and patch things up.

We need more than a nice cup of tea and some Bible verses about love to cut the throat of sin. To paraphrase PT Forsyth: the great word of the gospel is not *just* ‘God is love’. That is too small. It produces a life unable to cope with crises. But the word is this: love reigns not as an emotion or a feel-good thought, but because God’s love is a holy and cleansing fire. It is the voice of Christ setting the universe right at immeasurable cost to himself, enduring the holy fire of love. Because of his great mercy we are not consumed, and by faith we believe his promise: ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you*.*’ God has won the battle. Our faith is faith in *his* saving grace.

We can use a hymn verse from pastor and author Geoffrey Bingham as our prayer today.

***Ah, Face of love that smiles upon
The anguished spirit filled with guilt,
That sets it free and makes it strong,
And washes clean all memory’s silt;
Ah, pain that floods our hearts with love,
That draws us by Your Cross above.[1]***

***We cannot sink when it is you who hold us so tenderly and so tight. We give you thanks. Amen***

*[1] Lyrics from ‘Ah Tide Of Love’ by Geoffrey Bingham © 1990 Bingham, Geoffrey (Admin. by Mary-Grace Bingham), from New Creation Hymn Book. Used with permission from New Creation Teaching Ministry.*

Wednesday 22 February 2023

**The King has come. Worship him!**

by Dr Kirsten Due

 ***When you pray, don't be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They do this just to look good. I can assure you that they already have their reward (Matthew 6:5).***

Read Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Who would have thought the Bible knew anything about social media? The God of the Bible knows about the human heart – about posing for Instagram and air-brushing pictures for Facebook. In today’s passage, we read that people in Jesus’ day were posers, too. When we pose for the audience, we already have our reward.

There is something addictive about knowing that someone knows you are doing a good thing­, especially if it looks like you don’t want them to know! How glad we are when it just slips out, and we are seen in a good light. It boils down to our desire to be worshipped. We want to be loved, accepted, valued. We want our bodies to be adored, our actions to be commended and our kids to win awards.

God’s word tells us about a different way – a private way of being before God.

Every time we say the Lord’s prayer, we pray, ‘Your kingdom come’. God’s kingdom is his reign and rule. What does that mean in a fallen world except that our fallenness is undone by the presence of our Redeemer? Unless God sets us free to worship (honour) him, we seek to be honoured in the eyes of others, or honour others instead of God; all in a vain attempt to reinvent ourselves.

Our hearts are not fulfilled until they are filled by him. Anything else leaves us empty. When we see that his kingdom has come, we have no desire for the foolish things that we once needed. We can laugh at our frailties and imperfections. We can spend time alone before God – being the children of God and doing the things of God without needing an audience to applaud us.

***Dear Father, teach us the truths of your kingdom. Our righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. We have nothing to boast of before anyone – especially not before you. But you are our righteousness. You have begun to reign and by your presence as Redeemer, you have undone our fallenness. May your kingdom come. Amen***

Thursday 23 February 2023

**You are a new creation – the old has gone**

by Dr Kirsten Due

***You were hated and deserted, rejected by everyone. But I will make you beautiful, a city to be proud of for all time to come (Isaiah 60:15).***

Read Isaiah 60:1–22

A book’s meaning is often revealed in the epilogue. Think of Aslan’s return to Narnia after the white witch had condemned the country to an eternal winter. Aslan’s arrival is like an epilogue – his conquering presence precipitates the coming of spring as warm sunshine begins to melt the Narnian tundra. We don’t understand the significance of the melting and radiant light without the preceding darkness. Likewise, we can’t understand Isaiah 60 without reading of the darkness in Isaiah 59.

Just before chapter 60, we have one of the songs of the ‘Anointed Conqueror’ – the warrior who comes to do battle for God. He comes to do battle because the people are defeated, oppressed and under a cloud – a cloud of their own sin. They had broken God’s covenant and been unfaithful by chasing other sources of pleasure. They had forgotten his *By-faith-alone-through-grace-alone* salvation and said ‘no’ to his Spirit. They looked for the light but walked in self-inflicted blindness. They were in a mess and couldn’t blame anyone else.

Because of God’s great love, they were not consumed even as his finger unmasked their failure. Instead, he gave a promise: there would be a coming Covenant Redeemer. And, just as God put his words in the Redeemer’s mouth, the Redeemer, Jesus, puts that word in ours. It is a creating and accomplishing word that brings new life. This word permanently changes us and we ourselves become agents of change. The great thaw takes place, and instead of darkness, we find light. We find he has made us beautiful.

Being a Christian is not like making New Year’s resolutions with the same old heart and motivations. It is to have a work of God take place that totally reverses the direction we were headed and the kind of person we were. Our entire life simply goes on, more and more, in this radical transforming faith. In the words of an old song, ‘Faith received the Holy Spirit and is faithful unto death. Faith rise up to fight with Satan! Faith be strong to quell the flesh! God has done it; faith believes it. None must falter, doubt God’s word. He gave promise: He fulfilled it in his Son the Living Word’.[1]

***Dear Father, you have treated us with mercy. You brought an end to our dark ways by sending your Son, the Light of the World. You have removed the barren wasteland of our hearts and healed our humiliation and brokenness. You completely reversed the mess we got ourselves into. Forgive us when we forget how radical a change you have wrought in us. Let us hold onto you – because, indeed, 'It Is Finished'. Amen*** *[1] Lyrics from ‘God Has Done It’ by Geoffrey Bingham © 2002 Bingham, Geoffrey (Admin. by Mary-Grace Bingham), from New Creation Hymn Book. Used with permission from New Creation Teaching Ministry.*

Friday 24 February 2023

**What’s the good news?**

by Dr Kirsten Due

***The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor (Isaiah 61:1a).***

Read Isaiah 61:1–9

We all know what it is like to long for good news. But is Isaiah 61 only about God bringing a happy word to somewhat depressed people? Is the message of Isaiah a political one about how good societies function to help the disadvantaged? There is nothing wrong with these things, but the gospel is far more.

Isaiah 61 involves us very personally. Isaiah is not describing the life of a prisoner in Alcatraz, a person in poverty, or a grieving widow. But he is drawing on powerful imagery to describe a whole people cut off from fellowship with God because of their sin. His aim is to bring a people alienated from God by sin back to himself by the defeat of that sin. ‘That is, that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them’, but cancelling them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The people Isaiah was speaking to didn’t feel poor or needy or imprisoned as they sat under their tent flaps, admiring the view, knowing that they had a holiday on the horizon and an Audi in the garage (or a good barley crop and some prize-winning grapes). But feelings can be deceptive. God said to them, ‘There’s something you’re not aware of and I’m sending my son, the Anointed One, to fix you’.

‘There’s nothing wrong with us!’, they protested.

God disagreed. If he were speaking to people like that today he may have pointed out Revelation 3:17, ‘You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked (NIV).'

Then as you begin to get annoyed, he says, ‘Come now, let us settle the matter, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’ (Isaiah 1:18).

The people couldn’t argue with God, and neither can we. He was (is) so concerned about our state of alienation towards him that he promised to stop at nothing to restore us to the joy of knowing him. Yet it is not primarily for our glory – but for his. When he restores us, and the world sees that radical transformation, they praise God! We don’t need to worry about backsliding and stuffing it up again because it is God’s faithfulness in Christ that has accomplished it and God does not change.

***Dear Father, you have adorned us in garments of righteousness and cleansed us from sin. We live eternally in your fatherly embrace. Your gift of righteousness means that we, who once hated you, reflect your righteous image to a suffering world. Your transformation extends from the top of our heads to the tip of our toes and from our outside 'clothing' to the inner grief in our hearts. You pierce right through to our innermost need. Thank you. Amen.***

Saturday 25 February 2023

**Come into the light**

by Dr Kirsten Due

***Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered (Psalm 32:1).***

Read Psalm 32

Here is a paraphrase of Psalm 32 you may not have heard:

Blessed is the one
whose children drive Mercedes
Whose lawns are always green
Blessed is the one
who can travel business class to Phuket
And those who live in leafy suburbs
whose churches have coffee machines.

It is easy to think of our sins being forgiven as one among many ‘blessings’. Christians and non-Christians use the word ‘blessed’ all the time. But in this psalm, the description applies to someone who trusts in the Lord (see Psalm 84:12), makes him their refuge (see Psalm 2:12; 34:8; 40:4), has their sins forgiven (see Psalm 32:1,2) and is drawn near to God (see Psalm 65:4; 84:4).

The trouble is, that the word translated here as ‘blessed’ has lost its anchor. To some, it means luck, good karma, bliss, or ‘gratefulness to the universe for my fate’. Likewise, the word ‘sin’ is also completely foreign to many people. It’s a word even Christians avoid using. David, on the other hand, knew he had sinned against God. He knew sin’s desolation in his mind and body. But he also knew the great joy – the happiness and blessedness – of forgiveness.

Our natural impulse is to cover up sin: to work hard, to party, to turn up the noise and activity to avoid God’s quietly insistent voice. We become isolated from ourselves and Christian community, even while religiously going to church or Bible study. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, ‘Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin … shuns the light … poisons the whole being’ [1].

Psalm 32 (see also Psalm 51) tells us that sin causes exhaustion, insomnia, wasting syndrome (cachexia), neurosis and shame. We feel shattered, unclean, dirty and cast out, with only dust to quench our thirst. Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* gives us a terrifying picture of the destructiveness of sin.

But Psalm 32 is not just one of penitence (God’s gift) but also, ‘The song of a ransomed soul rejoicing in the wonders of the grace of God. Sin is dealt with; sorrow is comforted; ignorance is instructed’ (G. Campbell Morgan, 1946, *Searchlights from the Word*).

Coming into God’s light is not a ‘work’. It is not a prerequisite for forgiveness – it comes from a heart already moved to repentance by God’s gift of mercy.

***Dear Father, we confess that we trust in you – the one who justifies the ungodly. We come to you openly in prayer in times of distress because acts of loving rescue are what you are about. You are the deliverer. Let us approach you, our hiding place, with confidence, because you, the Great High Priest sympathise with our weakness. In you, we find grace on top of grace to help in our time of need.***

*[1] Bonhoeffer, D, 1939,* Life Together

Sunday 26 February 2023

**Holding fast to God’s words**

by Dr Pauline Simonsen

***Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil***

***(Matthew 4:1).***

Read Matthew 4:1–11

At his unexpected baptism, Jesus was powerfully affirmed in his divine identity as the beloved Son of God. And straightaway, the Spirit who fills him leads him out into the wilderness for 40 days of solitude and fasting – and temptation by the devil.

This testing was crucial to Jesus’ human identity. Temptation was part of Jesus’ experience as a full human being. He was ‘tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin’ (Hebrews 4:14–16).

Temptation itself is not a sin; it is a typical experience for every human being living in a broken world. Jesus joins us in it. His temptations come when he is deeply vulnerable – also a very typical human experience! When we are tired, hungry, disappointed, or hurt – that’s when the enemy is sure to show up. Do you know your vulnerable times, when the tempter will try his luck? Ask the Holy Spirit for words of Bible truth that will confound Satan’s tempting. Ask the Spirit to help you learn them, so they are hidden in your heart, ready for the crucial moment!

Satan’s deepest temptation of Jesus was to doubt God’s word about Jesus’ identity. Jesus has just heard God’s proclamation about him: ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’ (Matthew 3:17). God’s declaration is the very bedrock of Jesus’ being. From this reality will come all Jesus’ ministry. So it’s this reality that Satan tempts Jesus to doubt. ‘If you are the Son of God’, he sneers, twice. Luring Jesus to doubt God’s word; making him feel he needs to prove his divinity with flashy performances. After all, the strategy worked so successfully with Adam and Eve way back in the garden of Eden: ‘Did God really say … ?’

Satan does his most devastating work when he gets us to doubt what God has said about who we are. What did God say over you at your baptism? That you were redeemed by Jesus Christ on the cross; that Satan’s power over you is broken and you are washed by God, rebirthed to new life as a child of God. God has declared it and sealed you in the family name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That is who you are and no-one can take that name and identity away from you. You are hidden in Jesus Christ for eternity.

Just remind yourself – and Satan! – of this reality, next time you are vulnerable and tempted to believe his lies.

***Gracious God, defend us from the subtleties of Satan. Hide your word in us that we may grasp it in the time of trial. Lord Jesus, walk with us and give us your strength and victory. Amen.****Pauline leads a Bible college and offers spiritual direction in Palmerston North, New Zealand. She’s married to Roger – who is recently retired – and she enjoys having him home a bit more. When she gets some free time, Pauline loves cooking and reading and likes nothing better than sitting with a cat on her lap and watching the birds in her garden.*