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**Sunday 1 October 2023 to**

**Sunday 8 October 2023**

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Sunday 1 October 2023

**How about ‘Yes-then-yes’?**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***Which of the two did what his father wanted? (Matthew 21:31a)***

Read [Matthew 21:23–32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+21%3A23-32&version=NRSVUE)

We find ourselves back in Holy Week today. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem. By God’s authority, he has cleansed his house from greed and self-interest, clearing the way for divine prayer and connection. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' The question comes from jealous, sceptic, threatened religious elites.

Jesus isn’t stalling for time when he demands they answer his question first: ‘John’s baptism – where did it come from? Was it heaven or from men?’ It’s a not-too-subtle demonstration of his authority; ‘authority’ being his innate and sole right as God’s Son to do everything he has been doing, not least forgiving sin. His refusal to answer their question when they won’t answer him confirms his authority. So is his parable that follows.

In the parable, an initially disobedient son ends up doing his father’s will. A case of ‘no-then-yes’! The other son is obedient to his face but skives off. ‘Yes-then-no’! The first is a picture of ‘sinners’ initially rejecting the Lord, then believing and repenting. And the opposite is a picture for the religious types who have all the right words but don’t do the Father’s will.

Jesus rounds out his words with the hard-hitting verse 32 (ESV), ‘For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him’. Three times, Jesus mentions belief. Clearly, believing God’s message is what turns things around!

And us? We hate the duplicitousness of the religious elites. We identify more with the ‘no-then-yes’ of the repentant. In fact, it’s a tight summary of the Christian life. Disobedience, but the gift of belief turning things around. Yet it’s also a good time with this reminder of Holy Week to honestly examine our tendency to be the religious elite. We are ‘yes-then-no’ more often than we’d admit. ‘No-then-no’ too! And rather than settling on ‘no-then-yes’ as good a model of our reality and ongoing rescue by Christ that it is, couldn’t we be a little more ‘yes-then-yes’? Thank God Jesus was! ‘Yes’ to the Father’s plan and ‘yes’ to following through with it. A ‘yes-then-yes’ life is what he has won for us and calls us to.

***Dear Lord Jesus, keep me living in your Holy Week grace so that I continue to know my need for you and live out of your work on the cross. Lead me to repent and believe – then to be a ‘yes-then-yes’ as I serve you in your vineyard. Through your Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.***

*Pastor Matt Bishop serves the St Paul Lutheran Church and co-located primary school at Blair Athol in Adelaide. He delights in his wife Mel, three young adult daughters and, soon, a son-in-law. He would like to spend more time fishing but loves being a pastor and sharing the gospel with everyone God puts in his path, not least the nomads, prodigals, exiles and sceptics of the Christian faith.*

Monday 2 October 2023

**Who then will have faith?**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***He was amazed at their lack of faith (Mark 6:6).***

Read [Mark 6:1–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6%3A1-13&version=NRSVUE)

Jesus returned to Nazareth as a changed man with a vastly different vocation. His baptism in the Holy Spirit had ordained him in his earthly ministry (see Mark 1:9–11).

Nazareth hadn’t changed, though. Here was the carpenter. A brother in a big family. His siblings were likely adolescents and young adults, along with all the dramas accompanying that. Hence, Nazareth was content, even obligated, to take offence at him teaching them the ways of God. We are told Jesus ‘was amazed at their lack of faith’ (verse 6).

Yet Jesus was not content to leave it at that. It’s almost as if he asks the question, ‘Who then will trust me?’ For faith – trust – in him saves. Jesus has to keep giving faith a chance by getting his word to the people. And so he sends his disciples out in his authority to proclaim his kingdom. Yet it’s clear that he knows not everyone will believe, given his instruction to ‘shake off the dust of your feet as a testimony against them’ who do not welcome or listen to the disciples.

We can be like both the Nazarenes and the villagers who reject Jesus. Like the Nazarenes, we can treat him like he is still the kid we grew up with. He has little relevance to say to us. Although that’s because we’ve changed, not him. We’ve heard new things from others, had new experiences, conformed to the culture and are all ‘grown up’. Somehow, Jesus just isn’t relevant anymore. Or, like the villagers, we don’t welcome Jesus or listen to him (at least like we once did). You know, like when you once went to church pretty much every Sunday, participated in a home group, set aside your offering, or [insert discipleship thing(s) you no longer do here].

But it’s far from a lost cause. Jesus has to keep giving faith a chance by getting his word to the people. ‘Repent!’ is the chief message the disciples were to take out. Notice how they are the undeniable trusters in this account in the way they take him at his word and still go out, even though his hometown has rejected him?

Repent is still a keyword for us. Except, now, it can be understood in the full gospel revelation of his life-giving resurrection. Still going to take offence, not welcome him and not listen to him?

***Lord Jesus, we aren’t as smart as we think we are. Please save us from taking offence at you. Or not welcoming you or listening to you. Forgive us when we have, and give us hearts to receive your faithful commission, just as the disciples did. In your name. Amen.***

Tuesday 3 October 2023

**Heady tales in the kingdom**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter (Mark 6:27b,28a).***

Read [Mark 6:14–29](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6%3A14-29&version=NRSVUE)

*Warning: This reflection references an image from a violent biblical account.*

Children’s illustrated Bible storybooks are a lot tamer than the one I had as a kid. It left little to the imagination. I particularly remember the grotesque picture of John the Baptist’s pasty, severed head sitting upright on the platter, eyes and mouth still open. (Sorry if you are eating breakfast at present!) Herodias looked satisfyingly on, delighted in her trickery.

I’ve got mixed feelings about its graphic depiction. But on the upside, it’s helpful for the way it illustrates the extent of the underlying sin in this story. Herod has taken what is not his in marrying his brother’s wife, who was most likely also his niece by another brother. Then there is the alcohol-fuelled ogling and lusting at Herodias’ young dancing daughter. And the stupid pledge made by Herod – no sense of stewarding God’s good gifts there. Also, there was the scheming request by Herodias, using her daughter in a different way than the onlookers did. It ends with the murder of a righteous and holy man sent to point the way to the Messiah. In some ways, the grizzly picture of John’s plattered head is the least of this sorry tale’s depravity.

The crucifixion of Jesus later in this same illustrated kid’s Bible is also graphic. What can be appreciated, though, is the way John’s beheading points to Jesus’ own death. Both are prophets. Their teaching riles the elite. They are taken captive and bound. Pilate, examining Jesus, is greatly puzzled like Herod was with John. Both die so as to not have the ruler lose face. Both die a bloody death. And, in a touching act of care, bravery and railing against the injustice that has occurred, both have disciples claim their remains and lay them in a tomb.

However, the big difference between Jesus and John is that my illustrated picture Bible shows Jesus risen from the dead that first Easter Sunday. His gruesome wounds no longer define him. There was no resurrection (yet) for John. But there will be on the last day, as there will be for us. Our sin – gruesome as it is– will not have defined us either.

***Lord Jesus, you paid a terrible penalty for my sin. Thank you for John and his preaching, witness and faithfulness. Let me learn from these accounts so I may trust you, receive your good gifts, and then shun evil and live your way. In your name, I pray. Amen.***

Wednesday 4 October 2023

**Three gifts for satisfied living**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***They all ate and were satisfied (Mark 6:42).***

Read [Mark 6:30–46](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6%3A30-46&version=NRSVUE)

In this next section of Mark, the disciples return from their mission trip to tell Jesus all they have done and *taught* in his name. The debrief occurs in the shadow of John the Baptist’s martyrdom. The mood is one of excitement mixed with heaviness. Tiring stuff.

In the following verses, Jesus gives three gifts essential for sustainable living and discipleship.

The first is rest. Jesus invites the disciples, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest’ (verse 31b). The rest of mind, body and soul were built into our bodies as a recovery mechanism by our creator. Getting enough rest? This episode of Australia’s leading Christian podcast [*Undeceptions* by John Dickson](https://undeceptions.com/podcast/resting-well/) is all about rest. It’s a beauty.

The second gift is teaching about God. When Jesus sees the crowds, he is moved with compassion (literally ‘kicked in the guts’). His response? To teach. Not anything else but to teach. And not just a little but ‘a great many things’ (verse 34). I see lots of things that make me wonder if the church is still teachable. People also report being tired and worn out in the faith. A good question to keep in front of ourselves is, ‘Am I still teachable by Jesus?’ It might help alleviate that sense of pushing it all uphill.

The third gift is a good feed. Jesus doesn’t send the crowd away hungry. He draws his disciples into his work of feeding the crowd, just as he had with teaching the villagers and inviting the disciples to learn about rest. Jesus still continues providing earthly nourishment for us and, at the same time, drawing us into his work of feeding.

Thank God for his very earthly human understanding of what we need. Rest. Teaching. Food. Are you making the most of them?

***Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you made me and all creatures. You richly and daily provide me with all I need to support this body and life. All this you do out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For this, it is my duty (and joy) to thank and praise, serve and obey you. Amen.***(Based on the Explanation to the First Article of the Apostle’s Creed in Luther’s *Small Catechism*; accessible at <http://catechism.cph.org/en/creed.html>)

Thursday 5 October 2023

**Must be God**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them (Mark 6:48b).***

Read [Mark 6:30–46](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6%3A47-56&version=NRSVUE)

I’m blessed by God every winter to spend a week in the beautiful Venus Bay in South Australia fishing for King George Whiting with some friends. Unfortunately, one day each year is usually too windy for us to get out in the boat.

In today’s gospel account, the wind doesn’t faze Jesus. He walks straight out over the water. The significance of Jesus walking on water is not the miracle here. Instead, it’s how he shows he is God by demonstrating mastery over the sea, a place in Hebrew thought of chaos, worry and terror that only God could control. Job 9:8 puts it: ‘He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.’

Mark, the gospel writer, makes this God connection dead obvious for us in the choice of words, ‘He was about to *pass* by them’ (Mark 6:48). God famously passed by both Moses (Exodus 34:6,7) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:11–18). Hence, when Jesus goes to pass by, it’s not meant to be lost on the disciples. Or us.

The disciples don’t understand, though, even to the point of having hardened hearts (verse 52). Can we really understand either? Probably not.

But what we can do is trust the revelation of God’s word. The one who feeds his people on the Galilean mountain, just as he did in the Sinai wilderness. The one who walks over the water – just as he parted the sea ahead of Pharaoh’s chase. The one who, when he passes by Moses in the cleft of the rock, proclaims, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6). The one who had proved exactly those words to us as they laid him in the tomb cut out of Calvary’s rock.

***Thank you, Lord Jesus, that your life, death and resurrection showed me that you are God. Send me your Holy Spirit so I can keep trusting in your word. When I’m fazed by life, let your word pass closely by to comfort me and bring, by faith, your promises to life. In your name, I pray. Amen.***

Friday 6 October 2023

**Still dull on what Jesus thinks?**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***‘Are you so dull?’ Jesus asked (Mark 7:18a).***

Read [Mark 7:1–23](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+7%3A1-23&version=NRSVUE)

I still feel a special affinity to the texts I wrote exegetical essays on while at seminary. Today’s from Mark, on what defiles a person, is one of those.

It left a number of lasting impressions on me that have been refined ever since. One is about the need to watch how we make rules about things that are neither commanded nor forbidden. Another was Christ’s care for parents. Another was the way Jesus so efficiently carved out the ceremonial food laws but left the moral code in place. And of more levity, Jesus’ own description of human anatomy in relation to food that is put in the mouth. Many of the translations sanitise this. The NIV is case in point when it translates food entering the mouth and going ‘out of the body’ rather than into the more earthy ‘latrine’ (my Greek dictionary) or being ‘flushed’ as The Message puts it. Yes – Jesus knew all about loos.

Related to the moral code, I learnt about the use of ‘vice’ and ‘virtue’ lists in the New Testament. They were a common device of the day to make a point. You see them throughout the New Testament letters – the gifts of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 and 23 being a good example of a virtue list as well as a real description of the Spirit’s work in us (Galatians 5:19–21 is its vice list counterpart).

In today’s text, Jesus himself, in verses 21 and 22, lists 12 vices that come out of the heart and defile a person. The first six describe behaviours. The second six have more to do with attitudes. Clearly, the original sin in our hearts drives both behaviours and attitudes. My main impression from this text is that Jesus takes sin seriously. This is despite what I hear people suggest to me today, not least in the church. Sure – he doesn’t want us distracted by the impact of breaking rules that aren’t really rules. But he nevertheless wants us focused on what dishonours him and hurts others and ourselves.

The sexual revolution is a prominent example today. In this list, Jesus’ own lips nominate ‘sexual immorality … adultery … lewdness’ as ‘evils that come from inside and defile a person’. He died to forgive us for these, as he did the rest on this list. It seems we remain dull to think any amount of them in our lives – and the other vices he lists – continue to cause him no concern.

***Holy Spirit, you take what is Christ’s and make it known to us. And so you’ve made it clear Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, even me. Keep me taking this word seriously and living in his grace. For you daily and richly forgive all my sins and the sins of all believers. Amen.***

Saturday 7 October 2023

**Loss and restoration of the vineyard**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

***Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine (Psalm 80:14).***

Read [Psalm 80:7–15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+80%3A7-15&version=NRSVUE)

About 18 months ago, the humble house next door was demolished to make room for a mansion. The western fence we shared with it had a lovely grapevine whose root was in the neighbour’s yard. The vine threw welcome shade onto our driveway, softened the outlook and brought lots of chirpy little birds into the area. We were really sad when it was torn out.

This sad experience has brought to life just a little how devastated God must have been by the destruction of his beautiful vine, Israel. It’s thought that Psalm 80 is written concerning refugees from the Northern Kingdom coming to seek solace in the Jerusalem temple after the siege and deportation by the Assyrians described in 2 Kings 17:1–6. The psalm uses vivid imagery to describe a once thriving and robust vine that could not be contained. Out of Egypt, this vine was transplanted into Canaan – the ground cleared for the children of Israel in which they could take root and prosper. But the walls of the vineyard have now been demolished, and the grapes plundered by passers-by and wild boar. The refugees plead with the Lord to return to them and to watch over their future, specifically ‘the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself’ – a reference to the Messiah.

Vineyards planted, loved and nurtured by the Lord but ruined by the unfaithfulness of their inhabitants are famous in the Scripture (see, for example, Isaiah 5:1–7 and Matthew 21:33–46). God is always planting his will in the world through the people who hear his word and act on it. God feels deep devastation when we don’t nurture this gift and open ourselves to attack. He’s also the great restorer.

***‘Restore me, God Almighty; make your face shine on me, that I may be saved.’ Keep me on your vine. Guard me from your watchtower. In your wine press, process your fruit grown in me so it may be for the good of your world. In Messiah Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Sunday 8 October 2023

**Cornerstone**

by Verena Johnson

***The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes (Matthew 21:42b).***

Read [Matthew 21:33–46](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+21%3A33-46&version=NRSVUE)

After telling the very confronting parable of the tenants, Jesus uses this quotation from Psalm 118:22. Did you know that this verse has a special claim to fame in the Bible? Jesus quotes it about himself in Mark 12:10,11 and Luke 20:17 as well. Peter mentions it in Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7,8. Paul refers to this verse in Ephesians 2:20. No text in the Old Testament is quoted more often in the New Testament.

Jesus was rejected by the chief priests and Pharisees. He wasn’t the cornerstone they were looking for! They had their own building, and he didn’t fit at all.

They didn’t approve of his lack of formal education (John 7:15). They didn’t approve of where he came from (John 7:52). They didn’t approve of his disregard for religious traditions (Luke 6:2). They definitely didn’t approve of his choice of friends (Matthew 9:11).

Yet despite the fact that they rejected and crucified Jesus, God raised him up and established Jesus as the chief cornerstone of his great plan of redemption. All things are grounded, built on and fulfilled in him.

Now, before we are tempted to shake our heads and ‘tut tut’ at the attitude of the chief priests and Pharisees – and maybe even feel slightly smug – take the time to reflect on this: Is Jesus truly the cornerstone of your life? Of every part of your life, not just the Sunday or churchy bits?

Sometimes, I can be tempted to build on my own foundation, logic, ideas and desires – especially in the everyday ‘non-churchy’ bits. I’m tempted to build in my way and in my time frame. It always seems like such a good idea at the time. But when my building starts to teeter or crumble, I run to Jesus to fix it or help me. Sometimes, he lets it fall down so that we can start building again, together this time.

If only Jesus had been the cornerstone right from the start!

A cornerstone is something to build upon. Jesus is the strong, unshakable foundation for every part of your life. Whatever you build in your life today, build on Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.

***Dear Jesus, thank you that you are the cornerstone. Please be my cornerstone and the cornerstone of every part of my life. Help me to build on you in everything. Amen.***

*Verena is a Church Worker Support Officer for the LCA Church Worker Support Department, where it is her privilege to support congregations, pastors, lay workers, employees and volunteers of LCA. In her spare time, she is involved in drama ministry, women’s ministry and prayer ministry. She has three children and eight grandchildren in three different states.*