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**Sunday 27 September to Sunday 4 October**

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Sunday 27 September 2020

# Sitting on the fence

by Norma Koehne

**‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ (Matthew 21:23).**

Read Matthew 21:23–32

‘Sitting on the fence’ has always seemed to me to be a very uncomfortable place, especially with the barbed wire fences we have here in Australia! But this is exactly what the chief priests and elders were doing. They were not willing to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, even after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem earlier in this chapter, his authoritative cleansing of the temple, which he referred to as ‘my house’ (verse 13), and his subsequent miracles as ‘the blind and the lame came to him … and he healed them’ (verse 14). The question, ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ was meant to trick him into declaring that his authority came from God, so they could call him a blasphemer.

Rather than answering them, Jesus challenged them with a question, ‘John’s baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?’ One can almost picture the scene as they go back and forward trying to decide the answer, thinking of how it would look in the eyes of men, rather than looking for the truth. In the end, they opted for, ‘We don’t know’. The subsequent parable points to the sad truth that those sitting on the fence would miss out, but thankfully many who did not yet know the truth would be led by the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith into the kingdom.

Let us be bold to confess the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, revealed to us through Scripture, and that he has the authority to make us his children through baptism, forgive our sins, and bring us to be with him in heaven.

**Father, forgive me for the times when I sat on the fence and was afraid to boldly declare your truth. Strengthen me through the Holy Spirit to acknowledge your authority, power, love, and mercy. Amen.**

Monday 28 September 2020

# Changing our minds

by Norma Koehne

**‘Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 2:5b).**

Read Philippians 2:1–5

I almost hesitate to write about this wonderful hymn of praise to our Lord and Saviour. How can I ever hope to emulate his servanthood, his obedience, and his willingness to suffer the ultimate horror, separation, from his loving Father, all for my sake and yours?

Yet this is what Paul is urging us to do, to change our mindset from love of self to love and service of others. We receive encouragement, comfort, tenderness, compassion, and love from our gracious God. All of these qualities are ours through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. When we practice them, then we are a blessing to the world around us.

In our modern era, I don’t think we recognise how we are bombarded with mindsets, in what is called hegemonic understandings, through the media and all the current favourite ‘isms’ of the day, which underpin so much of education and daily life. For example, we have humanism, which ‘worships the creature rather than the creator’ or postmodernism, which says that your ‘truth’ is as valid as anyone else, and there is no ultimate truth. The list is endless, and as Christians, we have to be alert to weed out those aspects of modern society’s beliefs and ways of acting that do not conform to the mindset of Christ. Sometimes they even work to destroy our faith.

Being a Christian has always been counter-cultural. It was for Jesus and the early church, and people lost their lives for their faith. It takes courage to stand up for your faith. I remember some years ago hearing about a group of Christian students who confronted their law lecturer, who had said his class was unbiased and that people could say what they thought without censure. They told him that wasn’t true, and if they put forward a Christian point of view, they would be mocked and humiliated. I’m sure matters have not improved.

**Father, thank you for all the gracious blessings you heap on us. May you, Holy Spirit, guide us as we battle the spirit of our age and strive to be more like Christ in all we say and do. Amen.**

Tuesday 29 September 2020

# Healing peace

by Norma Koehne

**‘Peace, peace, to the far and near, says the Lord; and I will heal them’ (Isaiah 57:19).**

Read Isaiah 57:14–21

In our frantic and busy world, and especially at this time of anxiety and confusion due to COVID-19, we all long for peace in our lives. So many people I speak to here in Victoria are down and depressed after all these months of lockdown. It is very hard for people living alone when they cannot even have one family member visit. We especially miss the support and comfort of our brothers and sisters in Christ that we received through gathering together in worship.

God reassures us that although he lives in a high and holy place, he also lives with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit (verse 15). God lives with us. He walks beside us every day of our lives, and he holds us in his loving care. He will lead us by the hand through death into eternal life. What amazing peace this gives us.

I remember the time when I received a breast cancer diagnosis. All I could think was that whatever happened, God would be with me all the way, and this brought a tremendous sense of peace and of being held in God’s loving hands. God, who has done so much for us through the death of his Son, is willing to be with us every day and leads us to have a contrite and lowly heart, a heart that is repentant, humble, and trusting.

How will God give us this peace and healing? He will ‘revive the spirit of the lowly, and revive the heart of the contrite’ (verse 15b). As we read God’s word, praise him in our worship, confess our sins, and pray to him, he comes to us and revives us. He renews, refreshes, restores and even restarts us.

**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. And the peace of God which passes all understanding be with us now and always. Amen.**

Wednesday 30 September 2020

# Praise, honour and glory

by Norma Koehne

**‘He humbled himself and became obedient unto death’ (Philippians 2:8).**

Read Philippians 2:5–13

It is impossible for us to fully grasp the incredible anguish and humiliation that Jesus suffered for us. There was the terrible physical suffering, but, more dreadful, there was the spiritual suffering. The sinless Son of God must have been overcome with horror as the sins of the world were placed on him. And then there was the agonising cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’.

The passage shows a downward spiral for Jesus. First, he is willing to leave the power and glory, which is his as the creator and ruler of the universe, to become a servant. Then he becomes truly human and shares all the hardships and sorrows that we endure. He was a refugee, and as an adult, he had no home. His life was not one of ease and comfort. The final act of humiliation was his death on the cross, the most shameful and painful death ever devised. Why did he do this? He did it for us, in his obedience to his Father’s plan of salvation for us all. He did it so that our loving God would never have to forsake us, and we can be held securely in his care for all our days and into eternity.

For his perfect obedience and the fulfilment of this plan, he is exalted and reclaims all honour and glory. He has the highest place, a name above every name, and acknowledgement of all in heaven and earth and under the earth, as they bow down and worship him.

My heart is full of thanks and a sense of humble amazement as I read this passage. He did this for me! Our praise here on earth may be weak, but how much more will it be when we join the saints in heaven singing?

**‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever’ [Revelation 5:13]. Amen.**

Thursday 1 October 2020

# Healing words

by Norma Koehne

**‘But say the word and my servant will be healed’ (Luke 7:7).**

Read Luke 7:1–10

What an interesting man this Roman centurion is. It certainly would not seem to be normal for a Roman centurion to, first of all, be so close to the people he had authority over, and secondly, to hear about Jesus and have faith in him. We get a picture of a man of compassion, with concern for his servant, and a man of humility. He does not deserve to have Jesus come under his roof, and does not even consider himself worthy to come to Jesus himself, but sends his friends, the Jewish elders, to plead his case.

As well as his compassion and humility before Jesus, the centurion recognises the authority and power that Jesus has. As a commander of men, the centurion gives an order, and others obey. It is interesting to consider what he believes Jesus has authority over. He believes that Jesus has the ability to heal sickness, perhaps even the power over life and death. And this power does not need any special act; it only requires the word of Jesus. No-one on earth can speak with such authority. Our rulers and politicians may think their words matter, and there is no doubt that what they say can cause both great distress and great good. But none of them can say the word and heal a person on the brink of death or from the sickness of sin.

As we consider our faith in Christ, we acknowledge, in humility, that it is created and sustained by God for our healing. It is formed through the words of baptism and maintained through holy communion and God’s word.

**Lord, create in us such faith that we may believe that your word has a saving and healing power in our lives. Amen.**

Friday 2 October 2020

# Seeking and saving the lost

by Norma Koehne

**‘What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away’ (Acts 22:16).**

Read Acts 22:1–21 (and Jonah 3:1–10)

These two stories clearly show the love of God and his persistence in bringing people to repentance and faith. Jonah, rather reluctantly, preached repentance to the people of the great city of Nineveh, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the king and the people turned from their sins and ‘believed God’. We see God’s patience in the history of the people of Israel, as this nation blessed by God continually turned away from him, and he sent prophets to bring them to repentance and back to faith.

Then we have that amazing story of God directly intervening in the life of Saul miraculously, turning him from a destroyer of ‘The Way’ to a bold preacher of the good news of Christ.  How was he changed? We see this in the words of Ananias, ‘What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash away your sins’. We can never forget the power of our baptism in our lives as it turned us from enemies of God to his beloved children.

There are so many Bible verses that talk about God’s love and joy over sinners who repent. First of all, his love: ‘While we were still sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). Then Jesus tells us, ‘there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent’ (Luke 15:7). God’s desire is not for just a few to know the joy of his love, but ‘God our Saviour … will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4).

We are privileged to be God’s voice to bring people to repentance and back to the love of God. I am sure we all have those among our family and friends who have turned away from God. How can we be silent when we know that God grieves over them and yearns to have them reconciled and restored? I love the story of Abraham pleading for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. We need to plead no less persistently for those who have turned away from God.

***Loving Father, thank you that you have saved me and forgiven me. Help me, through loving words and actions, to reveal this love to those around me. Amen.***

Saturday 3 October 2020

# Grafted into the vine

by Norma Koehne

**‘Restore us God Almighty … that we may be saved’ (Psalm 80:7).**

Read Psalm 80:7–15

I wish I could draw the amazing picture that the psalmist builds up of God’s care and protection of the people of Israel. He plants a vine that covers the whole land like a canopy, to nourish and protect the people. It covers the mountains and trees. The people can rejoice and feel secure under its shade; however, the people of Israel turn away from God. The vine is plundered and damaged by wild boars and insects, and the psalmist pleads for God to return and restore the vine, and watch over it and ‘the son you have raised up for yourself’ (verse 15).

This picture reminds me of Jesus' words, ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5). Later in the chapter, John tells us that this fruit is love, ‘This is my command: love one another’ (verse 12). We have been grafted into the vine in our baptism, tightly bound into the stem, so that we can flourish and grow, and God’s love can flow into us and through us to those around us.

I remember a touching story from Siassi in Papua New Guinea. Their first much-loved missionary, Bamler, was killed in an accident. To spread the sad news to everyone, the message that went out was that ‘The big tree in the forest has fallen and the birds have flown away’, meaning they have nowhere to find rest and security. Above all, who will bring them the saving words of the gospel?

How much more do we find rest, security, and nourishment as we remain grafted into the vine of Jesus’ love and mercy?

**Lord, keep us safely grafted into the vine of your love and mercy, and nourish us with your saving word. Amen.**

Sunday 4 October 2020

# Stinky fruit

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance’ (Matthew 21:38).**

Read Matthew 21:33–46

I’ve been in homes where there is a photo on the wall of previous houses the inhabitants lived in. When I asked about it, they recalled memories and soon stepped into well-worn narratives about their life there. The photo is way more than just a decoration; it’s a summary of their history.

The parable in today’s gospel reading might only be a few verses, yet Jesus pretty much summarises the whole Old Testament and history of salvation. Stunning! As soon as Jesus mentioned the landowner building a vineyard, wall, winepress, and watchtower, his listeners would have been transplanted back to the famous Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7 (today’s Old Testament lesson). There God describes how he lovingly built a vineyard of the choicest vines (Abraham’s offspring). It had all the infrastructure it needed to succeed. But the kings and priests in charge failed in their duty to nurture it and keep it healthy. Other gods were tolerated, the people were misled, and the prophets, God’s mouthpieces, were treated shamefully.

The people listening to Jesus, the chief priests and elders, were his opponents. They thought they were properly nurturing the vineyard of God. Never would they have equated themselves with those in Isaiah 5 who are the object of God’s scorn. But bad fruit they are or ‘stinkies’ as the Hebrew more literally describes the bad grapes. Within days, these stinkies will take God’s son outside the city walls and kill him (Matthew 27:32–37).

It’s a grim parable for a Sunday. Where’s the good news in it?

It speaks on a couple of levels, at least. Graciously, there is a warning for all who would be teachers in Christ’s church. They need ever to be faithful to God’s word to not be or produce stinkies. Beyond that, though, all of us hear how God’s judgement has fallen on Jesus murdered outside the walls for our transgressions, including the takeover of God’s truths. And out of that? We now live in the promise that the kingdom of God has been restored to us through Jesus’ death. And even more, we are given the privilege of producing his fruit (Matthew 21:43). Jesus, the cornerstone (Matthew 21:42), is not going anywhere. He will keep us grounded as we build on him. Blessings in Christ as you make that your picture.

**Lord Jesus, our cornerstone, we believe that by your death, you have forgiven us for the stinky fruit we produce. By your Holy Spirit, keep us grounded in your word, so that in response we may yield your good fruit in the week ahead. In your name, we pray. Amen.**