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**Sunday 17 October 2021 to Sunday 24 October 2021**

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Sunday 17 October 2021

# Blindness

by Pauline Simonsen

**James and John came to him. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we want you to do for us whatever we ask’ (Mark 10:35).**

Read Mark 10:35–45

Oh, the breathtaking overconfidence of James and John! They’ve got it all worked out: what they need to get Jesus to agree to and how they will do whatever it takes to get it. I’m amazed at their arrogance, both in wanting positions of power alongside Jesus and in their assumption that they can manipulate him. I totally get why the other disciples are outraged when they hear what the brothers are trying to arrange.

I love Jesus’ response to their naked machinations, though. He isn’t affronted by their arrogance; he doesn’t condemn. He deals with their demands at face value and turns the whole interaction into a teaching point, calling the disciples away from a worldview that uses authority and status as a weapon of power and abuse. He calls them to the ways of his kingdom, where authority is used as an offering of service and self-sacrifice.

Listen, again, to the boldness of the brothers’ opening demand: ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you’. Isn’t this the prayer of every one of us at some time in our lives? We mightn’t state it as bluntly or as overtly as this, but isn’t this often the guts of our prayers, too? God, you need to do this for me: heal me, help me, show me, make me, give me. Whatever I ask.

Jesus’ reply shows us the blindness of such prayers. We can’t see the full picture – where our lives are going and the ramifications of our request/demands. Only God has that 360° vision, seeing it all, knowing the beginning and the end. Jesus tries to warn the brothers, ‘You don’t know what you’re asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’ He has only just finished telling the disciples about the cup of suffering he will drink in Jerusalem (10:35). He tries to tell them, and you and me, that the way of his kingdom is a surrender to God’s oversight. Jesus calls us away from getting power to fulfil our desires. He calls us to a willing surrendering of power to serve God and others, to give ourselves away in God’s beautiful redemptive purpose.

Just as Jesus will do in a few days, when he prays in a garden: ‘Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’ (Mark 14:36).

**Father, forgive us our blind, arrogant demands of heart and mouth. Holy Spirit, grow in us the trusting surrender in which our Master Jesus lived and died. Amen.**

Monday 18 October 2021

# Known

by Pauline Simonsen

**I know you by name (Exodus 33:17b).**

Read Exodus 33:12–23

Have you ever felt way out of your depth? That you’ve been called to do something that you feel hopelessly inadequate for, and that frankly scares you silly? Me too.

Here is Moses, instructed by God to lead the Israelites from Sinai to the Promised Land. But they’ve just messed their nest badly with the idolatry of the golden calf, bringing God’s judgement on them as ‘a stiff-necked people’. Not a good beginning!

Moses pleads with God: ‘You’re sending me to lead these people, saying you know my name and favour me. Well, this doesn’t feel like a favour! I don’t want to go anywhere unless You come with us, showing me the way!’

God’s answer? ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Then God tells Moses again, ‘I know you by name’. God knows him: knows Moses’ weaknesses and strengths, knows his capabilities and inadequacies. Reassuringly, the mission ahead doesn’t rely on Moses’ ‘name’ and capacity, though – only on God’s. ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ Moses can rest in God’s presence and capacity.

To seal this deal, God does something extraordinary. He speaks his holy name to Moses (again, remember the burning bush). ‘I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.’ God reveals his personal self to Moses so that Moses remembers again the God who goes with him. He knows, even as he is known.

And God has done this for us, too. God caused all his goodness to pass before us and told us his name in his incarnate Son. ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14).

You and I are known personally by God, our Creator. But we also personally know our God, in Christ the Son. And this God, who has spoken his personal name to us at our baptism, goes with us wherever he sends us. Whatever scary, big, impossible task you face with him – however inadequate you feel – know that because of Christ, you stand in God’s favour. You are known. And his presence goes with you, and he will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).

**Remind us, gracious God, that you know us personally and that we can know you personally in Jesus. May this intimate sharing in your presence give us rest, whatever challenge we are facing today. Amen.**

Tuesday 19 October 2021

# Burning in our bones

by Pauline Simonsen

**For to you I have committed my cause (Jeremiah 20:12b).**

Read Jeremiah 20:7–13

Poor Jeremiah. Was ever a man given such a tough, dispiriting task as he? God called Jeremiah to proclaim a cataclysmic message to Judah – that the God of Israel was bringing his judgement against them. Their great city of Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians, and the people would be taken off into slavery. Jeremiah faithfully declared this to his own people despite other prophets saying the exact opposite, and in the face of kings who demanded he cease and desist from his declarations of doom. ‘Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction,’ he sighs. ‘The word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.’

Even when he resolves to be silent, he finds that the message of God burns in his very bones (verse 9), and he cannot hold it in. He must speak what God lays on his heart, though it only brings him mockery, persecution and grief.

Actually, in every generation, God calls his people to this task: to speak his word without fear or favour. In our own time, we see the persecution of God’s people worldwide as they bring his word to people groups who don’t know him or don’t receive his Son. The Open Doors ministry reliably estimates that currently 1 in 8 Christians worldwide are persecuted for their faith, and over 309 million Christians are suffering very high levels of persecution and discrimination. And still, missionaries feel called to go and speak the good news of Jesus to people who oppose them.

Why? Why would anyone want to do such a tough, dispiriting task? Because, like Jeremiah, the words of God burn in their hearts, demanding to be spoken. Because like Jeremiah, they have committed their cause to God, their ‘mighty warrior’ (verses 11,12). And like Jeremiah, they sing to the Lord and praise him because ‘He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked’ (verse 13).

Whether we risk our lives, our reputations, or just our comfort to speak the good news of Jesus Christ, we can be sure that God is our defender and deliverer, that he never abandons his beloved messengers, and that he alone can bring new life from cross-bearing. The life journey of our Lord Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, demonstrates the faithful, transformational redemption of God. Keep your eyes fixed on him.

**Lord God, today we pray for persecuted Christians everywhere. Those who are losing heart and courage, facing overwhelming opposition, fearful and wanting to run or feel like their efforts are useless and failing. And we pray this for ourselves, as we feel this too … Holy Spirit, bring your comfort, encouragement and strength to us all, in the name of Jesus, our Pioneer and Saviour. Amen.**

Wednesday 20 October 2021

# ‘Because of me …’

by Pauline Simonsen

**You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:22).**

Read Matthew 10:16–25

Have you noticed a theme developing in this week’s readings? God sends his people out as his messengers to face difficulties and challenges in a hostile world that will oppose and persecute them. Moses, Jeremiah, James and John – whether they each knew it or not, there was hardship ahead. And today, we hear Jesus sending out the twelve disciples ‘like sheep among wolves’ to be hated, persecuted, betrayed, arrested, set on trial, flogged, and even martyred. After all, the pupil follows the teacher, and this is exactly what happened to Jesus.

The whole of Matthew 10 is challenging reading. Jesus addresses the twelve, but it’s pretty clear that the opposition and difficulties he describes aren’t just for those sent as apostles and missionaries. It’s for anyone who is a follower of Christ, a disciple of the teacher. Every one of us who are joined to Christ, and carry the Spirit of God within us, is already a foreigner in a strange land. We are a holy people, set apart, and so unwelcome in a world turned against God. It’s no different if we are public proclaimers or everyday Christians living out our faith in our everyday lives. ‘Jesus is Lord’ remains an incendiary declaration – whether in Roman times or today’s world.

What is your own experience with this? How are you received in a public setting when you say you are a Christian? What’s the reaction when you say you go to church? It’s easy to feel embattled and fearful or else aggressive and militant. But Jesus doesn’t offer either of those reactions. Instead, he calls us to keep engaging, to stay there in the hostile world that he so loves, being his people. Not to worry about finding the right thing to say because ‘the Spirit of your Father’ will give you the words. Keep engaging, keep loving, keep giving ourselves – just as our Master did. Stand in his strength and love with his love.

‘Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power … so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then.’

**Lord Jesus, my faithfulness to you is so easily intimidated by the hostility of today’s world. Help me, Master. Renew in me your Spirit of power, love and self-control. Stand me firm in you. Amen.**

Thursday 21 October 2021

# Fruit of the kingdom

by Pauline Simonsen

**The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit (Matthew 21:43).**

Read Matthew 21:33–46

My husband and I like wine. Sometimes we muse about owning a vineyard. How amazing it would be to raise the vines, tend the grapes, harvest, press and vat the new wine and wait as it matures, tasting and checking development until it’s time to begin blending a new vintage. What a nerve-racking, exciting and creative process that would be! We visit wineries and chat with the winemakers, hearing how they love and tend their vines. We’ve grieved when a favourite winery has gone out of business, and we wonder how the winemaker must feel, seeing their long-tended vines taken by others who may not care for them.

So, I appreciate the heart of the landowner in Jesus’ parable, who plants his vineyard, equips it carefully, but then must leave it in the hands of tenants to care for it as he goes away. His vineyard remains in his heart, though, because he sends agents to collect the produce.

But tragedy ensues. Two lots of messengers are attacked and killed. Astonishingly, he doesn’t have the tenants arrested. He extends grace. Crazy! Eventually, he sends his own son, figuring the tenants will listen to him.

We know what happens. Those wretched, wicked tenants kill the son, somehow thinking that they’ll get the property. But now, the vineyard owner will come himself. What will the grief-stricken father/owner do? ‘Kill those wretches!’, we all shout.

Jesus tells the parable to Israel’s religious leaders, and they realise Jesus is casting them as ‘those wretches’. They have the care of God’s beloved vineyard, Israel, and what have they done? Rejected and killed his prophets because they wanted to control the people themselves. Jesus knows they have rejected and will kill him, the Son. And finally, judgement will come to them because God loves his vineyard, his people. His Son dies for them!

Where are you and I in this story? A beloved vine branch? A messenger sent by the Owner? A grasping tenant, wanting to ‘own’ and direct the vineyard of Jesus’ church? Perhaps we’ve been each of these at different times in our lives.

Thank God he has brought us into his vineyard, the kingdom of his Son, in our baptism! Thank God his grace covers us, always! Now Jesus stands before us asking, ‘How will you respond to me, the vine? Will you let me produce the fruit of the kingdom in your life today?’

**Lord God, have mercy on us when we covet your vineyard. Keep us faithful and obedient to your Son, the cornerstone, the vine. Produce your good fruit in our lives today. Amen.**

Friday 22 October 2021

# Unstoppable gospel

by Pauline Simonsen

**You will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5:39).**

Read Acts 5:34–42

You can’t keep a good man (or woman!) down. Or an apostle from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ! You can forbid them from preaching, arrest them, put them in prison – but they keep coming back, declaring to everyone the news of Jesus the Saviour. You can threaten them with death – you can even kill them – but their message continues to be proclaimed and goes out.

The Pentecost-transformed, Spirit-filled apostles in Acts have been arrested multiple times and ordered by the temple authorities to stop preaching the gospel. Their response? ‘Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness!’ (Acts 4:29). These proclaimers respond to threats and persecutions with a prayer for even more boldness of proclamation! Is this foolhardy bravado? No! This is the Holy Spirit, ‘a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline’ (2 Timothy 1:7). This is what standing in God’s strength and loving with his love looks like.

And sometimes, even those opposed to us recognise there is more to us and our words than mere human conviction. Gamaliel, a wise Sanhedrin member, a man who knew the law of God, seemed to recognise the voice of God in these apostles. His words in our text suggest more than cynical political cunning. In his advice to the council, he clearly seeks the purposes of God.

And unwittingly, his words have become a huge encouragement to messengers of the gospel of Christ everywhere! We know that the good news we believe and speak about Jesus Christ is truth and life. The gospel we have been given is the power of God for salvation to all who believe it, and it is unstoppable. Jesus himself said that ‘this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come’ (Matthew 24:14).

You bear this gospel, too, friend. You are a messenger of peace to the people in your life. You have the words of salvation that speak life and hope to family, friends, workmates, the supermarket shelf-stacker and the bus driver. Whether you meet mockery, abuse or indifference, your testimony comes from God, and his word will not return empty, but it will accomplish God’s purposes.

Go, share, love, speak … and keep going! Because it is God who goes with you.

**Lord God, be the conviction in our minds, the courage in our hearts, the words in our mouth, and the love in our eyes. Speak your words of life and truth through us, and do your will. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Saturday 23 October 2021

# Laughing with joy

by Pauline Simonsen

**Those who sow in tears [will] reap with songs of joy (Psalm 126:5).**

Read Psalm 126

When have you ‘sown in tears’?

When has the work you were doing, the service you were giving, the love you were offering, been a labour accompanied by weeping?

Maybe it’s happening right now. It may be that the work is hard and exhausting, or you are experiencing negativity or challenges from people you work with. Or you can’t see if any good will come from your efforts. Perhaps you are losing heart in a dry spiritual desert.

This beautiful psalm of ascents, sung as the people of God walked up to Jerusalem for worship, recalled the astonished joy of their ancestors when God acted for them, rescuing them from their troubles, bringing them home. Exodus from Egypt, return from Babylon … ‘When the Lord restored our fortunes, we were like those who dream …’ Really? Can this goodness be true? Our God has done great things for us, again?

And they laughed with joy!

Many times, Israel’s people went out weeping, carrying seed to sow, but it was sown in hardship or foreign lands. But such is the loving goodness and wonderful grace of their God that they returned to their homeland with arms full of harvest sheaves, laughing with joy! The Lord is a restorer of fortunes.

Our Lord Jesus sowed in tears: tears over Jerusalem, weeping in the garden. He saw the bitter road ahead, the hard, exhausting work. He saw the cruel opposition of people around him, even perhaps wondering in his humanity if he was truly hearing the plans of God rightly. Perhaps it was all coming to nothing? ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

But I wonder if he laughed aloud that early morning when he stood in the dawn garden, freed from grave clothes, full of life, a victor over death itself. I wonder if the joy of God filled his heart as he knew his redemption work was finished and the harvest was beginning!

Wherever you are, whatever the sorrow you are experiencing in your calling, remember that your God is a restorer of fortunes. And may you be filled with the joy of hope, sure hope, that in his kingdom, those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy!

**Lord Jesus, you know the tears of frustration and sadness that overwhelm us in our walk. Come to us in these times and speak your words of life and hope to us again. Remind us of the armfuls of harvest we will hold one day in the future. Fill us with your joy, God of all goodness! Amen.**

Sunday 24 October 2021

# What do you want?

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see’ (Mark 10:51).**

Read Mark 10:46–52

‘What do you want me to do for you?’ What a fantastic question coming from the mouth of Jesus – if only he would ask me that! And such a simple reply: ‘I want to see!’ No long stories about what a miserable life it is when you’re blind, how nobody cares, or how you have to beg for help just to survive. No promises about what he will do if Jesus heals him, how he will follow him and give his life to him. This man has one need, one thing above everything else. Nothing else matters. He needs change in his life, and he says it straight out: ‘I want to see’. From deep in his heart, he screams his need to Jesus, and, most likely in tears, he places his burden at Jesus’ feet and says, ‘You want to know what you can do for me? Here it is quite simply: I want to see’.

Can you hear Jesus asking the same question of you? What do you want? We know that we need change. We know there are areas of our lives that aren’t what they should be. We live with worry, confusion, uncertainty. We know that we need healing in our marriage, family and relationships with others. The blind man says it straight, and Jesus responds immediately. And on receiving his sight, the healed man follows Jesus.

Be daring like this blind man, and say it straight: ‘This is my biggest issue’. And hear Jesus offer you the word of healing.

**Jesus, I bring to you that part of my life which most needs healing. Heal me, walk ahead of me, and I will follow. Amen.**