****

**Sunday 13 December to Sunday 20 December**

****

Sunday 13 December 2020

# In the wilderness

by Neville Grieger

**‘I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness’ (John 1:23).**

Read John 1:6–8,19–28

For the second week in a row in this Advent season, the Sunday gospel reading focuses on John the Baptist. My first reaction when I initially sat down to tap out some thoughts on this passage was, ‘Here we go again. How can the story about this Middle-Eastern wild-man John fella possibly be relevant to us today in the 21st century?’

But after letting it rattle around for a week or so, I had a different thread emerge. It suddenly dawned on me that this is relevant to us in 2020. John was out there in the wilderness trying to proclaim the good news about Jesus. I was reminded that we have been cast in a similar role, out in the spiritual wilderness of our world, challenged with the task of trying to get a similar Jesus message through to a mass of people that in the main are not listening. We are the John the Baptists (and Joanne the Baptists!) of today. It is our job to encourage people to be receptive to God-stuff and to bring them the good news of Jesus.

There is only one difference. We have the huge advantage of standing on the other side of the cross. We have the benefit of the profound words of Jesus, ‘It is finished’, echoing in our ears. It’s now a done deal, which brings an extra level of excitement to the news. We have been totally set free through the finished work of Jesus. We are free to dance. Let’s celebrate; let’s tell the world – that’s our challenge!

How do we do that? Well, I’m certainly not advocating climbing on a soapbox at our local mall or nearest major shopping centre. It starts with modelling. We can show people Jesus by our actions – and to use the words variously attributed to St Francis of Assisi, ‘Preach the gospel at all times, and if absolutely necessary use words’.

**Dear Lord, we thank you that you got the job done! Amid the uncertainties and anxieties of our world, encourage us and support us in our efforts to show people Jesus. Amen.**

Monday 14 December 2020

# If worth doing, do it well

by Neville Grieger

**‘Do what’s right and do it in the right way’ (Isaiah 56:1).**

Read Isaiah 56:1,6–8

Good old Eugene Petersen … he’s done it again! (Helped me, through his everyday language, to get a handle on a tricky passage!)

I grew up on a Mallee farm. I can distinctly remember my dad talking about a special identification plate that could be found on certain types of old 1900s farm machines manufactured by the Bagshaw Company (later to become Horwood Bagshaw). I was determined to find one of these small elliptical-shaped solid brass plates, which even back half a century ago were a highly sought-after collector’s item. My efforts were eventually rewarded with two prized finds. The point of interest and value of these items was in the letters inscribed, almost in code, around the perimeter:

IFWO   RTHDO   INGDO   ITW   ELL

I was reminded of this Bagshaw motto when I read The Message version of the opening verse of Isaiah 56. What a fabulous catch-cry for us as Christian people – if the Christian life is worth doing, then let’s do it well. Not that our salvation, which, back in Isaiah’s time, was still 'just around the corner', as Petersen puts it, requires us to do anything – far from it! It has already been done for us (past tense), for we are already at the party. So, in our celebration of that, we are challenged to do a good job of responding to God’s incredible undeserved love and gift to us, by making sure those around us are aware of the free ticket to the biggest party ever!

Communicating the good news of Jesus: worth doing? You bet. So, let’s do it well!

**Dear Lord, we pray that you would help us to appreciate the enormity of the gift that we have been given and to respond to that gift with action. Give us the words to say and the right moments to say them to those around us who may have not yet come to know Jesus. Amen.**

Tuesday 15 December 2020

# The right time

by Neville Grieger

**‘I can’t keep my mouth shut’ (Isaiah 62:1).**

Read Isaiah 62:1–5

Speaking of finding the moments and the right words, I am reminded of the well-known Aussie expression ‘to put a sock in it’. Most of us can probably recall occasions when we wished we had kept our mouth shut (or we regret having clicked Send on an email in frustration and haste). Once words are spurted out, they cannot be recalled, and the damage is done.

On the other hand, there may be times when in hindsight, we wished we had said something when a small window of opportunity arose to influence or respond to a situation. Sometimes this may involve standing up and being counted, even if we are standing alone.

Do we find it hard to keep our mouths shut in relation to the God stuff? Or have we missed an opportunity this week to initiate a spiritual conversation that may ignite a burning fire of spiritual growth for someone? For most of us, it’s probably having the courage to speak up, rather than struggling to keep our mouths shut.

Let’s remember that we may be the only copy of the Bible that some people will ever see!

**Lord, grant us the gift of discernment, which gives us the wisdom to know when to stay silent and when to speak out. Give us the courage to speak out for you when the moment arises, and always show people Jesus by our actions. Amen.**

Wednesday 16 December 2020

# Deep roots

by Neville Grieger

**‘He’ll put down deep oak tree roots’ (Hosea 14:5).**

Read Hosea 14:5–9

The incredible resilience and drought resistance of the mallee tree has never ceased to amaze me. Even through the harshest and most extended periods of hot dry weather, the mallee soldiers on, as if oblivious to the unfavourable environment, continuing to look fresh and green, even still able to put out new shoots.

Some months ago, I was privileged to listen to the master winemaker responsible for overseeing the continued production of one of the Barossa Valley’s (or arguably the world’s) finest red wines. He talked in detail about the importance of the soil structure and depth, which allowed the 150-year-old vines to produce high-quality fruit year in year out without any supplementary irrigation, despite the effect of climate change and decreasing annual average rainfall. He also told the story of how people often asked for the pruning cuttings to propagate from this famous vineyard in the hope of being able to reproduce similar quality fruit and wine. He was always very quick to point out to these hopeful people that they could take as many cuttings as they liked – but unless the cuttings were rooted in the deep alluvial soils of that particular corner of the Barossa, the fruit would be very ordinary at best.

What powerful imagery this is for us on our spiritual journey. If we are deeply rooted in God’s fertile soil, even in the toughest of times, we will have the strength and resilience to dodge the curve balls that life has a habit of continually serving up.

**Dear Lord, thanks for deeply rooting us in your ‘Hill of Grace’ (Calvary). Help us to remain deeply entrenched in your soil, and protect us from trying to transplant ourselves and think that all will be okay in the superficially attractive alternative soil that the world has to offer. Amen.**

Thursday 17 December 2020

# Humble service

by Neville Grieger

**‘Whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater’ (Matthew 11:11).**

Read Matthew 11:11–15

The concept of genuine humble service to others is perhaps a signature characteristic of the Christian life. Servanthood does not come easy, because it is hardwired into human nature to look out for number one – (in triplicate) me, myself and I. Like so many teachings of Jesus, they are upside down in comparison to the way the world thinks and works.

The concept of leadership provides us with an excellent example. In the corporate world, and even in government, huge amounts of power and authority rest with the person at the top. Servant leadership, on the other hand, inverts the pyramid of power, with the leader operating at the bottom of the pile, working for and with (serving) the people in the levels that sit above.

I worked in Lutheran Education for many years. One incredible act of service and consideration for others still stands out in my mind. A young female student in Year 9 had just been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Despite being a superbly fit, elite athlete, it was quickly becoming clear that the cancer would win the battle, and it was likely that this girl’s life was going to be cut tragically short. The Make a Wish Foundation became involved. What happened next stunned our school community. The girl requested that her rowing club be gifted a state-of-the-art lightweight quad scull boat. The boat duly arrived, but the girl was so ill that she did not get to row in it herself – but she left a wonderful legacy for her teammates, her club and her community to enjoy. What an incredible example of selflessness!

**Lord, we thank you that you turned the world upside down with your thinking. Thank you for modelling servanthood for us. Help us in these difficult times to sharpen our focus on others and to look out for the needs of those around us – in gratitude for what you have done for us. Amen.**

Friday 18 December 2020

# How are your certainty levels?

by Neville Grieger

**‘How can I be sure of this?’ (Luke 1:18).**

Read Luke 1:5–25

In the deep distant past, I can vaguely recall trying to understand Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. I am quite sure that I never really understood it, other than it was something about not really being able to be certain about what was going on! That rather poor, lay-person summary of quantum mechanics, would reflect that it is perhaps not surprising that I rather ingloriously bowed out of university physics quite early in my academic studies!

On the other side of the certainty ledger, multiple references have been made, dating back at least two centuries, to the two things in life that are certain: death and taxes. Many contexts have added additional certainties to those two. In education, we built on the saying by adding a third: change. Change usually encompasses a degree of risk-taking. For organisations to stay at the forefront in a rapidly changing world, the greatest risk is to take no risk at all. With risk comes uncertainty. How can we be sure that the proposed change will lead to improvement and efficiency in the way that we do things? Or the bottom line, in the case of education, better outcomes for students?

But I have digressed slightly. One can’t help feeling a touch of sympathy for Zechariah in his extraordinary conversation with an angel who was trying to tell him that he and his ageing wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son. Zechariah wanted to know how he could be certain that this was true?

Centuries later, how are our certainty levels? Do we always reflect high levels of certainty in our Christian belief? As I mentioned in a previous devotion, we can have all the certainty in the world through the profound words of Jesus from the cross: ‘It is finished!’

**Lord Jesus, strengthen our faith and help us to eliminate any doubts in our belief that you are the risen Lord. Move us into action to spread the good news, and help us respond with love and gratitude to reach out to anyone in need who crosses our path. Amen.**

Saturday 19 December 2020

# Spiritual audit

by Neville Grieger

**‘With all my heart I praise the Lord’ (Luke 1:46).**

Read Luke 1:(46b)47–55

(Written on the eve of the first day of lockdown to prevent the second wave of COVID-19 in South Australia on 19 November 2020.)

What a way to close out our week with a song of praise! This passage is known as ‘Mary’s Song’, or more formally as ‘The Magnificat’, which can be translated as: my soul magnifies the Lord. It is a wonderful reflection on and celebration of Mary’s deep faith and her love of God at that time.

Perhaps this daily reading provides a special challenge for us in these turbulent times of the 21st century, the year of COVID-19, to make this our own personal song of praise. It is very easy for us to be distracted and despondent about the grim economics, loss of jobs, major hits to assets and super funds – yet, we have much to be thankful for.

It has been really reassuring to see our governments, both at a state and federal level, take a really strong, lifesaving line on the virus. Some countries have allowed the virus to run free and unchecked, which has ultimately led to the unnecessary and premature loss of many lives. We thank and praise God for the relative safety of our countries and the strong leadership of our politicians and public servants.

It seems that for many, COVID may have provided a catalyst for a spiritual audit. It has caused people to pause and reflect on what is really important in life. Leading Australian social researcher Mark McCrindle in ‘The impact of COVID-19 on relationships and spirituality’ makes several interesting observations relating to the positive effect of the virus on the spiritual life of Australian people. We are reminded of the Corinthians passage: ‘The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength’. Yet again, the method in God’s madness!

**Lord, give us thankful hearts. Help us to make Mary’s song our song. Amen!**

Sunday 20 December 2020

# What kind of greeting?

by Marlene Cooper

**‘But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid Mary; you have found favour with God”’ (Luke 1:30).**

Read Luke 1:26–38

Sending Christmas cards is one of my Advent traditions. Every year I ask myself, what shall I write? What kind of greeting will be just right for my family and friends this year?

Today’s gospel tells us about a special greeting God sent with an angel to a young woman: ‘Greetings, dear Mary! You are highly favoured! The Lord is with you!’

Not surprisingly, she was greatly astonished, troubled and afraid. ‘What kind of greeting might this be?’ she wondered.

The angel continued: ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary, God has a message for you: you are to give birth to a son who is to be called Jesus, Saviour, Son of the Most High, the Son of God. In fact, he will be a great king, reigning in a kingdom that has no end!’

How can this be? Imagine the turmoil in Mary’s heart, and the effect of the angel’s words on this young virgin engaged to be married and with all her life before her.

‘No word from God will ever fail,’ the angel assured her. Scarcely knowing where all this will lead, Mary responded in lowly wonder, ‘Yes, let it be. I am the Lord’s servant. Let all this be fulfilled’.

We live more than two millennia since this first ‘Christmas greeting’ was delivered to the young mother-to-be of Jesus. As we hear it again, we too might wonder what kind of greeting this might be. In these Advent days, we are assured that it has become a greeting for the world – a greeting and a message that connects the world to God. It is good news! Again, this year, God wants the world to know that the Lord is with us and God’s favour rests upon us because what the Saviour promised long ago to Mary has come for us all.

What a greeting to share with friends and neighbours this Advent – a greeting and a message to warm hearts and lighten lives as we look forward to celebrating Christmas once again.

**Loving Father, thank you that Jesus has brought your favour to a broken and needy world; give us the words to greet others with the favour you have shown to us. Amen.**