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**Sunday 1 November to Sunday 8 November**

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Sunday 1 November 2020

# Virtual worship

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses’ (Hebrews 12:1).**

Read Hebrews 12:1–2

When the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak, and you were unable to worship in your home church, you more than likely went online and accessed a church somewhere else in the country where worship was happening. And, hopefully, you didn’t just observe what they were doing, but you worshipped with them. You weren’t physically there, but you worshipped with them virtually.

Today is All Saints’ Day, sometimes known as All Hallows’ Day. In many parts of Europe, on the evening before All Hallows’ Day (All Hallows’ E’en), people go to the local cemetery and light a candle at the grave of their loved one. It’s quite a sight to see the area so full of burning candles. And on this day, you would see hundreds of flowers that people have placed on the graves, remembering and honouring those saints who have gone before. A great cloud of witnesses.

Did you know that every time you worship, you are joining with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, who are praising God around the throne day and night, continuously? That includes your loved ones who died in Christ. You are tuning in, connecting to their worship. All the biblical heroes, great church fathers and reformers, modern-day heroes of faith, people who showed you Jesus, parents, grandparents, and close friends are saints in heaven and on earth praising God, worshipping virtually. In fact, they are worshipping actually. You never worship alone. Even a pandemic can’t separate you from this crowd of witnesses.

Every now and then, close your eyes and sense all those around you, and thank God for them.

**Thank you, God, for all those who have gone before me and shown me Jesus. I join them this day in worship. All praise to you. Amen.**

Monday 2 November 2020

# Opening the borders

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches’ (Ezekiel 17:23).**

Read Ezekiel 17:22–24

Australia, as with other countries, has, for a long time, had issues over border control. In this case, it’s not about COVID-19 restrictions but more generally: who should we let in, and who should we restrict? Will ‘outsiders’ pollute our culture, our way of life, and our freedom, or should we open our arms to them? An interesting question!

What about you, personally? How do you feel about those around you who are different in some way? Those who look different, have a different socio-economic background, and maybe even have a different religion? Do you want to close your borders to protect you and those you love, or do you want to open them wide?

And what about your church community? Is your church a ‘mighty fortress’, standing firm against anything or anyone who might challenge the way you’ve always thought and operated?

The Jewish people of biblical times struggled with issues like this. In Ezekiel, God speaks judgement against his own chosen people when they turned from him, but he also says words of hope. He speaks of a new time, a new tree, which will grow and have branches big enough and be far-reaching to accommodate birds of every kind. Jesus says something similar in one of his parables.

Just like all non-Indigenous Australians come from ‘outside’, so do you who call yourself Christian. The borders have been opened to you. You have been welcomed. You have been given shelter. Will you, in your attitudes, your opinions expressed, your actions, offer the same to those who are not like you? Will you point them to the One who opens his arms and invites all to come to him and there find rest?

**Lord God, when my arms are crossed firmly across my chest, prise them loose so that I can reach out to others as you have reached out to me. Thank you for your graciousness. Amen.**

Tuesday 3 November 2020

# A great job

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me’ (Mark 9:37).**

Read Mark 9:33–37

Jesus has this habit of turning things upside down. We may have a particular mindset or a way of operating, and Jesus often challenges it. He wants to show us that God’s scheme of things is not always consistent with the way we think and operate.

So, in this Bible reading, Jesus challenges our concept of greatness. There are world leaders, for example, who like to tell us what a great job they’re doing. That’s understandable, in a way. You wouldn’t want a world leader telling everyone what a terrible job they’re doing!  But what’s a ‘good job’ from God’s perspective? Where does greatness lie?

Jesus focuses on a child and says the way that you are towards this child reflects how you are towards him, and, by extension, how you are toward the Father. He could have used a different example: an abused woman, a victim of paedophilia, a homeless person, a refugee – anyone whom society might consider to be at the lower rung of the social ladder. A child! Shun this person, build walls to protect from this person, ignore their cries for fair treatment, widen the gap between the marginalised and the rest of society, and you are way off the mark in terms of greatness in God’s framework of reference.

Over and over again, Jesus shows us the heart of the Father. In his critics’ eyes, he focuses on the wrong kind of people. But the One who was there already at the creation of the world, and the One whom we now call Lord of Lords and King of Kings, he welcomes the little one, the insignificant one. Maybe even you! That’s how we can measure greatness. And he teaches this to his disciples and you and me.

**Thank you, God, for being different from what we might expect and showing us another mindset. Give us eyes to see the ones you most want us to welcome, and in doing so, we welcome you. Amen.**

Wednesday 4 November 2020

# Come on up!

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘Friend, move up to a better place’ (Luke 14:10).**

Read Luke 14:7–11

As pastor of a congregation with a school, I was always included in staff photos. My natural inclination was to go and stand in the back row where the male staff tended to be. No particular humility – I guess another option never occurred to me. But the principal beckoned, inviting me to come and sit in the front row next to him. Slightly embarrassed, but feeling hugely honoured, I moved to the front row.

I always remember that. The principal invited me; he thought that my rightful place was next to him. I couldn’t have felt more honoured.

Can you recall a time when you felt particularly honoured? Maybe when you were celebrating a special birthday or some other occasion and speeches were made, and you felt a little awkward but also a little chuffed – and a little humbled because you know your shortcomings.

Here’s the thing about Jesus’ teaching for those who tended to choose for themselves the best seats. The host invites the one in the lesser seat to come on up. The honour is not presumed; the host gives it.

Has it occurred to you that this is what God does for you? Whatever seat you think you deserve, it’s a lesser seat. But God invites you to come and sit with him. Like the father in the story of the prodigal son (see Luke 15), he runs to meet you, dresses you royally, and puts on a feast for you. As Jesus says, it would be humiliating if you presumed the best seat and had to be asked to move! Graciously, the host bestows the honour because that’s what he chooses to do.

**Lord, it’s hard for me to understand why you would bestow honour on me. I can think of plenty of reasons why you wouldn’t. But thank you – thank you for your generosity and grace. Amen.**

Thursday 5 November 2020

# At God’s mercy

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ (Luke 18:13).**

Read Luke 18:9–14

We all know that we’re saved by grace through faith. Only grace. So, there’s no way that we would be in the category of those who were confident of their own righteousness, is there?

Is there? Don’t we feel pretty good about our regular church attendance, our involvement in the local church community, and our good standing? We see and hear the bad way some people act, and, to be honest, we can confidently say that we’re not like that. Not even close. And because we can identify those feelings in ourselves, the truth is that, deep down, we look down on everybody else. We’d firmly defend ourselves if anyone brought that accusation, but maybe it’s true.

When the pharisee thanks God that he’s not like others and doesn’t do the things they do, he’s probably speaking the truth. But it’s that low-down, cheating, traitor-of-a-tax-collector (traitor because he’s a lackey for the Romans) who goes home justified before God. Why? Because he knows what God knows – he has no leg to stand on; he’s just a sinner. So is the pharisee, but he’s too full of himself to acknowledge it.

The tax collector stood at a distance; he would not even look up to heaven. That is humility. It’s as though he is saying: ‘God, I’m at your mercy!’ And now God can do what he loves to do best. He can give his tick of approval – you are right with me!

Living in grace means we can do all the God-pleasing things because we love doing them, knowing that they don’t really amount to much if we’re trying to earn brownie points with God. We are sinners, every bit of us, but God forgives us and declares us to be saints.

**God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Because I am stripped bare, it’s hard to lift my head. But I do so that I can see your mercifully outstretched hand, welcoming me. Thank you. Amen.**

Friday 6 November 2020

# Fake news and good news

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned’ (Romans 16:17).**

Read Romans 16:17–27

How discerning are you? The term ‘fake news’ has become much used. Are you able to discern what is true, reliable, and factual, or are you easily swayed by what sounds good or what appeals to the way you see things? In a time when there are so many news sources, it’s hard to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

How discerning are you when it comes to the truth about God, who he is, and what his will is for us? A persuasive speaker or a charismatic presenter can easily sway us. How do we figure out what is valid and what is just an obstacle in our way?

There is one sure way, and Paul has spent the previous 15 chapters spelling it out: the gospel, the good news encapsulated in Jesus. It is that news that liberates, frees us from the treadmill of having to meet impossible demands, and unites rather than pulls apart. It is whatever speaks of Christ and highlights Christ – Christ, who accepts the one cast out, doesn’t condemn but sets free, and brings healing where there is sickness, inclusion where there is exclusion, and life where there is death.

There is fake news, and there is news that is reliable and factual. There is bad news and good news. A lot of bad news says ‘you can’t’, ‘you shouldn’t’, and ‘it’s not right’. It enslaves us, binds us, and keeps us in what is perceived to be our proper place. Good news liberates us. It allows us to take risks, step out in faith, and go down a new path. It puts us under Christ, and there’s nothing more refreshing than that. It’s the filter we use for discernment.

**God of us all, give us the gift of discernment. Saturate us with the liberating gospel of Jesus so that it becomes the starting point in our search for your truth. In and through Jesus, we pray, Amen.**

Saturday 7 November 2020

# Help

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘You are my help and my deliverer’ (Psalm 70:5).**

Read Psalm 70

There are those, both believers and unbelievers, who seem to think that if you are a Christian, then everything will always go well for you. You know that that isn’t true. You have your share of struggles. In fact, you may well have had more than your share. But if others know that you are a believer, if you have openly spoken about the goodness of God, then you open yourself up to ridicule. Your God is supposed to care about you, and he’s supposed to be on your side. So how come you are in this predicament now? And that only makes things even harder.

There comes a time when we can only cry out to God to bring us through. We do not deny our faith when we speak openly and honestly to God and let him hear our anguish. The psalms are full of this kind of thing. In this psalm, the lamenter is desperate for release and so asks God to deliver and to do it quickly. God is not only able to help and deliver, but he is also the help, and he is the deliverer.

That’s his nature. That’s his desire. Not a magic wand waved over you so that it all disappears. Not always an instant cure or an immediate turnaround of circumstances. ‘Quickly’ is what you want, and when you express that, God understands the desperation of your situation. But he is true to himself. He will help, and he will deliver. Those who question your faith (that’s what some believers like to do) and ridicule you will be silenced. In the end, that is why we can rejoice and be glad in him, even while we cry out.

**God, help me. Look and see my struggles and deliver me. I put my hope in you. Amen.**

Sunday 8 November 2020

# God is our ‘good end’

by Kimberley Pfeiffer

**‘The bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut’ (Matthew 25:10).**

Read Matthew 25:1–13

Even though I am confident that I have been redeemed and given new life in Christ, lines such as this one still disturb me. It forces me to ask myself: am I wise or foolish in God’s sight? Will I be one of the ready ones on that day? Will I have oil in my lamp at that time? Will my Lord let me into the marriage feast? Might it be that my Lord says to me, ‘I do not know you’? That’s frightening.

It is good to be ready for important events that are coming up, whether it is setting aside money for the electricity bill near due or keeping to the study plan for next week’s exam. We know that preparation is the work we do to keep us gearing toward, and hoping for, a good end.

In this parable, the good end Jesus is talking about is the good end. It is heaven. And by this parable, we learn that preparedness is the key. Christ is talking to the church, his bride, those who are baptised believers. It is a warning to prepare well but also an encouragement to take seriously being ready for heaven. So, how do we remain ready?

For us, being ready means practising the faith that God has given us. He has already prepared everything; we only have to join in. Church is where God nurtures our faith and provides the oil and the tools to trim our lamps. We trim our lamp and keep it filled with oil as we receive and trust in his word and remain connected to God in prayer. Through absolution, we check the fit of our wedding garment that covers our brokenness. We even practise entering into heavenly joy at church, praising God and having a taste of the feast that is coming. As we receive God’s word, it gives us all the spiritual resources we need now while we wait – wisdom, encouragement, and confidence. These spiritual resources keep us ‘ready’ and sustain us.

**Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for preparing our way to heaven through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Strengthen us, your church, by the Holy Spirit, to teach us your ways and receive your gifts so that we remain confident on the path that leads to your door. Amen**.