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**Sunday 29 January to Sunday 5 February 2023**

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Sunday 29 January 2023

**It’s not easy being blessed**

by Kathy Matuschka

**Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them (Matthew 5:1,2).**

Read Matthew 5:1–12

Have you spent time with a Rubik’s Cube? You can so easily make a movement that moves one side of the cube closer to your goal while messing up some clever work you did on another side. Sometimes that’s how it feels to follow Jesus: it’s hard to know when to act and when to stop acting, when to accept and trust that God will sort it, and when to challenge the status quo.

When I read today’s ‘blesseds’, I feel that following them all can be puzzling. It seems that some of these are things we can work towards, like being a peacemaker. Some are things that happen to us whether we like it or not, like mourning. And others can be a bit of both, like when taking a stand for the gospel leads to persecution.

Some of the outcomes we can expect as we follow Jesus seem to be cases of cause and effect (do this and then this will happen), while others are reversals – or paradoxes – in relation to how the world usually works.

When I hear the Beatitudes, I wonder: ‘Is there a single key I can use to unlock these?’ In looking for a key, I’m after:

* something that will help me feel less uncomfortable about Jesus’ words (like when he says we are blessed to be meek!)
* something that will give me confidence that the decisions I make throughout each day give glory to Jesus, my teacher.

But as much as I (and perhaps also you) would like to homogenise Jesus’ teachings, they simply don’t let us. We live in that intersection between Jesus’ first and second comings, the ‘now’ and the ‘not-yet’, and these times are not for the faint-hearted. That’s why Karoline Lewis said (on the Working Preacher website): preachers should not preach about the Sermon on the Mount but let it preach itself. Therefore, I invite you to sit with the text and notice which of Jesus’ teaching niggles you today and which parts comfort you.

***Dear Jesus, thank you that you began to teach your disciples while you were on earth and that you continue to teach us in many ways today.* May your comforting and challenging words speak to my heart today through your Holy Spirit. Amen.**

*For most of her life, Kathy Matuschka has preferred to give witness to her Christian faith using her ears and her hands. As a person for whom writing has not come easily, she now delights in learning to share her gospel hope using words as well. Kathy serves within the LCA Queensland District as Assistant Director for Ministry & Mission.*

Monday 30 January 2023

**Where is your refuge and strength?**

by Kathy Matuschka

**You wearied yourself by such going about, but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless’. You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint (Isaiah 57:10).**

Read Isaiah 57:1–13

I am amused at how we and the media make our human strivings sound like we have worked out the secret; that we have it all wrapped up! For example, when my husband and I were establishing a new business direction, working long hours without knowing whether we would succeed or not, I would read stories of small business owners who talked about how *flexible* their life was now that they worked for themselves. I would think to myself: yes, owning your own business *is* flexible: you get to work by day, by night, on weekends, whenever. It *is* flexible, but not necessarily in the inspirational way the magazine article portrays it!

When we invest in something new and we find a little success or refreshment as a result, it is easy to let the pursuit of it become our latest solution to the human condition. In our personal lives we turn good things like food, drink, work, exercise or entertainment into idols. In our congregations we can come to rely on certain people, or traditions, or innovations at times when God is waiting patiently for us to say: ‘It is hopeless. Clinging to the way we did things in the past, or chasing the latest trend are stopping us from acknowledging that in the end we can rely only on God to teach us and lead us through these confusing times.’

In contrast, God assures us in verse 13:

… whoever takes refuge in me will inherit the land
and possess my holy mountain.

One more thing: today’s text contains some graphic images of Israel’s unfaithfulness towards Yahweh their God, to the point that they harmed their own children. While the accounts shock us, we know that also in our times people who purport to be God-fearing can commit atrocious acts towards God’s beloved children. Therefore, let us pray: Lord, have mercy – heal your church and heal your world!

***Dear Jesus, thank you that you have given me so many good things to bless me and others. I’m sorry for the times that I rely too heavily on them instead of finding my refuge only in you. By your Spirit, keep me grounded and resting in you, Amen.***

Tuesday 31 January 2023

**God will heal and restore**

by Kathy Matuschka

### I have seen their ways, but I will heal them (Isaiah 57:18a).

Read Isaiah 57:14–21

After the graphic description in yesterday’s text about the unfaithful behaviour of the Hebrew people, God replies: ‘I have seen their ways … but I will heal them.’ Really? It doesn’t sound as though God is surprised or overwhelmed about how badly we fail. God simply calls us back to our God-given identity as people of peace. Today’s text tells us that those who receive God’s healing are people of peace, whereas the wicked are like the tossing sea - unable to rest.

As I write this, I am on holiday in Queenstown, New Zealand. As I gaze at the beauty and grandeur of nature, everything falls into perspective, and it is not difficult to feel peaceful! But by the time these words are published, we will be beginning a new year, and many of us will be off and running into the important and the urgent things that consume our time. Some of us will be preparing to pack for the General Convention of Synod, a place that can bring out our most adversarial, competitive tendencies.

Often ‘our ways’ can be related to our fear that someone might be receiving more of God’s blessings than we are. Our behaviours can reflect our insecurities. Hear the word of the Lord: God has seen our ways, but God will heal us.

According to today’s text, God lives in both the high and the lowly places (verse 15). While we may prefer to live in the high places, there is nowhere that God will not go to be with his beloved people.

Is something striking you low today? Anxiety? Frustration? Shame? Recurring sins? Others’ attitudes towards you? Tell God, then leave it with God to heal and restore. Then look around you to find ways you can be part of God’s restoration and healing for others.

**Dear God, you know all about me and you continue to heal and bless me. Thank you that you are present with your people in both the high and the lowly places. Holy Spirit, please expand my heart so that I may share your peace and healing with those I meet. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Wednesday 1 February 2023

**Gift after gift after gift**

by Kathy Matuschka

### No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (John 1:18).

Read John 1:1–18

And now we are back where we started the week: with Jesus! After hearing God's promise through Isaiah: ‘I will heal’, we reflect on the source of all light and healing: Jesus Christ. The NIV translation of verse 16 reads: ‘Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given’ while The Message puts verses 16 and 17 this way:

We all live off his generous abundance,
gift after gift after gift.
We got the basics from Moses,
and then this exuberant giving and receiving,
This endless knowing and understanding –
all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.

Sometimes I hear people talk of the Old Testament times as though they were the ‘bad old days’ which Jesus came to earth to fix, but God’s grace has been there from the start (even before the start). It’s just that in Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection we see all the grace, all the hope, all the light stacked up together – ‘gift after gift after gift’ – and we see that God has been and continues to be present in every moment.

As believers, most of us would struggle to express or even to understand God’s mysteries in the way John does, but God’s Spirit enables us each to reflect Jesus Christ, God’s life and light, in our unique ways. As John pointed not to himself, but to Jesus the Messiah, the ‘light of all humankind’, may our lives and our words always point to God’s ultimate gift of life and light.

**Jesus Christ – our life and light – we cannot thank you enough for all you have done for us. And yet we ask for something more: for the grace to reflect your life and light in our daily lives. Thank you that you hear us and that you desire to bless us, Amen.**

Thursday 2 February 2023

**Who are you and who is Jesus?**

by Kathy Matuschka

**Finally they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ (John 1:22)**

Read John 1:19–28

As Christians in the western world, we are facing an identity crisis – or an identity opportunity, depending on how you look at it. For example, the church is no longer in charge as it once was within society, and we can’t assume that the people we meet are familiar with the Bible. This can lead us to wonder who we are and how we can share the words of life with those we meet.

In our story today, John the Baptist responds to questions from the Jewish leaders with words from the prophet Isaiah because that was appropriate for his context. But if the person with whom we speak is not familiar with the Bible this may not be the most appropriate starting point. What can we learn from the way John responded to those who asked him who he was?

Firstly, John didn’t go out of his way to explain his mission to the Jewish leaders. Rather, he responded to the questions when they came. In my life and in the lives of others, I have often noticed the value of waiting for people to ask you a question before you answer it.

Secondly, John didn’t try to answer all of their questions at once. The first question was ‘who’ and the second one was ‘why’. John let the Pharisees ask the why question before he answered it.

Thirdly, John offered a bridge when he a declared that he was not the Messiah but pointed to the one who is.

Both John the Baptist and John the apostle were unique people! I find it encouraging that between them they modelled a simple approach to faith sharing that any of us can imitate, even today.

***Dear Jesus, thank you that you for the gift of life that you share so freely with us. Through your Holy Spirit, may I live my life in ways that make people curious about you, Amen.***

Friday 3 February 2023

**The ultimate reveal party**

by Kathy Matuschka

**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29)**

Read John 1:29–34

In my lifetime, even the past decade or two, I have seen several new types of celebration. One of them is the gender-reveal party, when parents-to-be let their friends and family know whether they are expecting a baby girl or a baby boy. Thanks to medical science, something that was once a hidden fact is now quite easily known!

Well, how about John the Baptist’s reveal in our text today? The way the text reads, John the Baptist suddenly becomes aware that his cousin Jesus is in fact the promised Messiah. Don’t you think that this takes the reveal party to the next level? Christ, the Lamb of God, the promised Messiah, who existed before time began, has now been revealed in the person of Jesus. How amazing is that?

But wait, there’s more! Because Jesus was revealed as the Christ, and fulfilled his mission on earth, God’s Spirit now rests on, and lives in, every believer. And not only that, but God’s Spirit goes ahead of us in our lives.

As we live our daily lives, we are not unlike John the Baptist. We know that God has led us on a certain path, but much of the time where it is leading is not entirely clear.

And then one day someone with a need crosses your path and you suddenly understand why you needed to make space in your life. Or perhaps a new career opportunity opens at a time when you were in just the right place to pursue it; or after a period of uncertainty about where you should live, you are provided for in an amazing way.

It seems at the time that God has turned up, but in fact God was there before you. And it is God’s Spirit who has been planting these thoughts, inclinations and desires within you, preparing you for that day when God’s plan is revealed.

***Dear Holy Spirit, keep reorienting me toward the love and hope that you have planted within me, and expand my vision of what you will make of this hope. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.***

Saturday 4 February 2023

**Wisdom for life**

by Kathy Matuschka

### Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous (Psalm 112:4).

Read Psalm 112:1–10

These words used by the psalmist: ‘upright’ and ‘wicked’ can be challenging, because they seem to suggest that these are two distinct groups of people in this world. In times when polarisation is rife, and each group claims to be the right (or upright) one, how can we as Christians condone the judgement of people as either upright or wicked? Why do the psalmists keep challenging us with these binaries?

Is that what this psalm is about though? We only need to look at the verse above to recognise that as people who claim to love Jesus, we don’t always fit the definition of upright, as we are not always gracious and compassionate. In fact, the opposite can be true: often when we are most focused on the work we are doing for God, our behaviour toward others can be incredibly insensitive!

Sometimes it seems that the more you grasp at righteousness the more it eludes your grip! Aside from graciousness and compassion, Psalm 112 also tells us that following God’s commands mean that you: are generous and lend freely, pay attention to justice and freely scatter your gifts to the poor. If I were to judge myself by the percentage of time and energy I spend on these pursuits, I would not qualify as upright!

One more thing: Psalm 112 suggests that those who find delight in God’s commands also tend to enjoy wealth and honour within their community. In his Beatitudes (where we began this week), Jesus flipped these two assumptions on their heads. So, we can’t use wealth or honour as indicators of our righteousness!

Perhaps we need to recognise this psalm (and many others) as more of a call to faithful living than a checklist for judging ourselves or others.

The thing that encourages me about the Beatitudes and today’s psalm are that they are concerned about our daily living. Whatever our vocation, the principles for ‘doing life’ apply equally to us, and offer something to teach and guide us during any stage in our lives.

**Dear Jesus, thank you that because of your life, death and resurrection and the power of your Spirit living in me, I can hope to grow each day in grace and compassion toward myself and others. Fill me with your wisdom and love today, Amen.**

Sunday 5 February 2023

**Salt and light**

By Pastor Peter Bean

### Live so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Read Matthew 5:13–20

Salt has its purposes. Light has it uses. We could list them. Both need to be present in the right measure. When used positively, both enhance the world we live in.

This is my translation of the passage today:

*You are the seasoning of the world. Bring out God-pleasing flavours in all you encounter, all you do. Don’t overuse them or you’ll spoil the effect. You are the light (as I am the light). Don’t hide this light, no matter what sort it is, no matter how strong or weak. For you, it is the perfect time to shine into the lives of those you encounter. The Law? What do you think of it? Does it need to be kept religiously? Would you rather do away with it, or ignore it? Neither of these is my way. I perfect the Law and fulfil the Prophets. You can join me – by being the seasoning you are, by sharing the light you have and thus be righteous, living in me as I live in you. Then you don’t need to worry about Pharisaical stuff, but can concentrate on what is important.*

If I’ve managed to get the gist of what Jesus is saying, it is this: I have fulfilled the law. When you live in me: being salt or seasoning, providing light, you too fulfil the Law, you live as righteous people, practising grace and forgiveness. Living out mercy, justice and acceptance. We all do this differently.

It is only through grace and forgiveness that I can possibly be salt and light in the world. Only through the love of Jesus, can I work out which seasoning to be and how much of it to use; it’s only through the love of Jesus that I can work out which light I am and where and how to make it shine.

Then, even though it is a constant struggle, our righteousness will exceed that of the Pharisees; then we can know and live God’s love and encourage others to know and live in God’s love. Then we’ll bring out the God-flavours and the God-colours of this world.

**Gift Giver, help me to bring God-pleasing flavours and colours to the world. Amen.**

Peter is often out tending his garden – with 83 fruit and nut trees and extensive native bushes, he says there is a lot to do! Other times, he will be walking his dog, reading (too many books at a time), enjoying his family (15 grandchildren!), and occasionally writing – poetry, opinion pieces, devotions! He also tries to fit in a bike ride each day. To keep out of mischief, he is currently teaching himself to play the piano and is writing a paraphrase of each psalm. You can read these on his website, [*Creative Walking*](http://www.creativewalking.com.au/psalm-reflections.html).