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**Sunday 19 March 2023 to Sunday 26 March 2023**

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Sunday 19 March 2023

**In him**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him’ (John 9:3).***

Read John 9:1–41

To be completely fair, the disciples' question to Jesus about why things happen is spoken not from a judgemental standpoint but from one of tradition. ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?’

That world of action/reaction and deed/consequence is one that a human mind can understand. If you do something wrong, you’re punished; if you do something right, you’re rewarded. Certainly, from the disciples’ perspective, the man’s blindness would make sense if he had done something wrong.

Punishments make sense.

Imagine the freedom the man felt, not simply being healed of blindness but released from the chains of traditional judgement. No longer would he, or his parents, be impugned for supposed sins. No longer would he, or his parents, have to suffer the finger-pointing and the whispering, the long night of condescension and isolation. For this man to hear Jesus’ words, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him’, was the ultimate freedom. And not only to see with his eyes but hear with his ears.

‘That the works of God might be displayed in *him*.’

In him.

The one everyone thought was a sinner or the son of sinners. The one who sat on the side of the road and begged. The one who was considered unworthy. Imagine his total relief to hear that God’s works might be displayed in *him*.

Perhaps you feel like this man. Are you the one who feels the constant external judgements and hurled insults? *You’re not good enough. Someone with your past? Forget about it. You don’t have the answers? You must not have large enough faith.*

But the gospel of this Scripture is for you. Even if your journey with Jesus is new and wonderful or confusing. Even if your life has not turned out as you wanted. Even if you can’t quite seem to get a handle on everything. This Scripture is for you. God loves you without reservation, and whatever your past, God’s good works can be displayed in *you.* You are free in Jesus.

***Heavenly Father, in the midst of struggles and pain, help me to hear the good news of your Son, Jesus, so that your good works can be displayed in me. Amen.***

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Monday 20 March 2023

**Just eat it**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever (John 6:50,51a).***

Read John 6:41–59

When I was young, my parents raised poultry. Though this is not a rarity for many people of my vintage (think 50 plus), my parents took poultry raising to the extreme. Every year, 350 chickens, 50 ducks and 15 white turkeys would arrive by postal van and be delivered to our front door.

Our poultry was not raised for personal enjoyment. In fact, when I was little and staggering out to the sheds to feed them, water them and pick eggs, I could think of nothing less enjoyable.

That being said, it was still a sad day when those same 415 birds went to their demise. It wasn’t simply the quieter barnyard, but I knew what would be served for dinner: liver and onions.

Which evil minion decided to mix two of the vilest foods into one noxious meal? Though my parents did not write the recipe, they would fry up the offal and onions and set it in front of us. And what were their words to encourage us?

‘Just eat it. It’s good for you.’

Frankly, I didn’t understand it. I still don’t. But maybe that’s the way the Jews were feeling when Jesus said, ‘I am the bread that comes down from heaven’. And, ‘Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you aren’t going to have life’.

In other words, ‘Just eat it. It’s the best for you’.

These words are hard to understand. And even after two millennia of Christian teaching and guidance, I think we tend to pass over *exactly* what Jesus proposed. Eat my body. Drink my blood. That brings about eternal life.

When I was younger, in First Communion training, I tried to understand what it would be like if they truly brought out a slice of Jesus’s flesh and a thimbleful of his blood. Would I eat it? Could I drink it?

But Jesus commands it. Thankfully, at the Last Supper, Jesus instituted bread and wine that retains its taste, but the benefits are the same: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. I eat it because Jesus is best for me.

***Thank you, Jesus, for offering yourself as an atoning sacrifice for me. As I join in Holy Communion with you, my neighbours, and the company of saints across time, help me revel in your saving grace. Amen.***

Tuesday 21 March 2023

**Where else can we go?**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:68b,69).***

Read John 6:60–71

I’m a Fremantle Dockers fan.

When I first moved to Australia, my in-laws, diehard AFL fanatics, required a proper introduction to (arguably) the best sport in the world. Now, as a contrarian, in terms of sport, I did not want to choose one of the teams they barracked for. Thus eliminating roughly one-third of the teams, I did what any good American might do: I ran my finger down the list and pointed.

My father-in-law laughed. ‘Why did you choose that one?’

‘I like Fremantle’s colours and logo.’ (I pronounced ‘Fremantle’ as ‘Frehmantle’. That was my level of ignorance.)

‘Do you even know where *Fremantle* is?’

I stuck out my jaw obstinately and proclaimed, ‘It doesn’t matter. It is my team’.

Now, learning a new sport and understanding a new side can be difficult. There are all sorts of rules and regulations, different words to scream at the television like, ‘BALL!’ or ‘DELIBERATE!’, but at that point in learning the game, I was most concerned about whether the Dockers were a winning side.

Unfortunately, they were not.

Despite their un-winning ways, I continued to follow them even as the intricacies of the game were revealed to me. Some call themselves fans, but when the team slips to mediocrity and beyond, they abandon the team and select a new one. But not me. I’m with them to the end.

So when Simon Peter says, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go?’, I hear the echo of a sports fan. *Through thick and thin, I’ll be with you.*

Jesus has just revealed a traumatic truth to the disciples. I’m guessing that at least one, if not all, were inwardly wondering if they could weather the storm of eating Jesus’ body and drinking his blood for the sake of salvation. Yet, they had seen the miraculous things he could do. They had watched him transform lives. This hard teaching was the next obstacle on the way to an even harder one – the cross.

On my Lenten journey, as I ponder the coming cross, Jesus’ death and resurrection, I hear his poignant question. ‘You do not want to leave, too, do you?’

If I’m honest, there are many times I want to leave Jesus. To be faithful in an anti-faith world, to wrestle with exposing my belief or hiding it under a bushel, is extraordinarily difficult. But where else can I go? When I came to know Jesus as my Saviour and that he is the Holy One of God, there is no other truth for me. I can only hold onto the wagon and let Jesus take me where I need to go.

How would you answer Jesus’ question? What makes it hard?

***Holy Spirit, as you guide me along life’s journey, remind me that faith in Jesus comes through you. Thank you. Amen.***

Wednesday 22 March 2023

**Is it time?**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival because my time has not fully come (John 7:8).***

Read John 7:1–13

I wish, I wish, I wish I had perfect timing.

Whether the punchline for a joke, how to keep a steady beat while playing music or, most importantly, the moment to reveal to my wife that I forgot to get the steaks out of the freezer for dinner, I wish I had that timing.

I suppose perfect timing is not only being aware of what the actual time is, but it’s also paying attention to what’s going on around me. And sometimes, that perfect timing is not a perfect time for me.

So it seems with Jesus, after his discussion with his disciples regarding the Communion pathway to forgiveness of sins and eternal life in him.

I wonder how tempting it would have been for Jesus, after ‘many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him’ (John 6:66), to call them back and say, ‘But watch this! Remember how I turned water into wine? Remember when I walked on water?’ Surely, then, those abandoning disciples would have said, ‘Okay, then. It’s a lot easier to follow you when you’re performing miracles for me’.

That wasn’t the right time for Jesus, just because the people believed Jesus should capitalise on his celebrity. And when he didn’t, when he ‘missed his opportunity,’ they left. Following Jesus as a servant, as a ‘mere’ itinerant teacher and preacher, was too hard. In that, there was embarrassment. What if Jesus was ‘merely’ that? We want a Saviour, and he claims to be a servant.

‘My time has not fully come,’ Jesus asserts.

It wasn’t until the cross and its cruel torture, the tomb and its ultimate pain, and the resurrection and its eternal hope that Jesus’ time had fully come. To follow him to the cross seems like folly – too hard – yet to die with him in his death, dying to self, is the only way to salvation.

That’s the perfect time.

How hard is it for you to hear, understand and follow Jesus? Are there times when his words make you cringe? Are there times when you just want Jesus to perform a miracle so you can really believe?

Yeah, me too.

That’s the perfect time for me to rest assured that despite my struggle to hear, understand and follow him, despite my cringing at some of the things I think, Jesus brushes them aside and says, ‘I have come that they may have life and have it to the full’ (John 10:10b).

That’s Jesus’ perfect time.

***Dearest Jesus, thank you, that despite my fears and faithful misgivings, you claim me as your own to be with you forever. Amen.***

Thursday 23 March 2023

**Knowing Jesus**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***Jesus answered, ‘My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me’ (John 7:16).***

Read John 7:14–36

In our reading today, the Jews are confounded by Jesus, who shows up late – halfway through the festival – and begins to teach in the temple court.

Imagine being one of those listening. In front of that glorious building dedicated to praising God, Jesus, the Son of God, stands unrecognisable, speaking amazing words with such deep and profound meaning. The crowd murmurs, ‘Where does he get this stuff? Who has he been listening to?’

Occasionally, I listen to podcasts on various issues. Sometimes I am astounded by viewpoints that differ from mine, but especially by how they came to see them. These people have similar characteristics: humility, tempered pace, and an ability to ask questions to understand. Generally, they are well-read and well-travelled. The opposite holds true, also. Those who annoy me the most are the ones who like to stir the pot when it doesn’t need to be. They like to hear the sound of their own voice; they have gone nowhere other than the most recent social media feed to repeat something that echoes their own opinions.

This is one of the many reasons why I truly enjoy Jesus’ teaching skills. He is humble and gentle, even with those who vex him; he responds with reason, not of his own, but from the one who sent him; he understands human nature and draws people into the discussion. Jesus reveals a mirror for people to see themselves.

As you read this section of Scripture, what do you see in yourself in the mirror Jesus holds?

It’s fascinating how Jesus holds so many things in tension – his heritage and culture with his understanding of citizenship in heaven; his ability to change creation, heal people and work miracles with perspective and how things of faith need to be heard rather than seen.

These are the things Jesus can teach us as we continue on our journey of ‘working out salvation with fear and trembling, [to understand] it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose’ (Philippians 2:12,13).

These are the things we can know about him.

***Dear Jesus, thank you for opening your life, mind and heart to me so I can know you even more. Amen.***

Friday 24 March 2023

**Dying of thirst**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will from within them (John 7:37b,38).***

Read John 7:37–52

In David James Duncan’s book *Brothers K,* the protagonist quotes his mother, saying, ‘Sometimes you find yourself standing knee deep in the river of forgiveness and dying of thirst’.

Have you ever stood in that river as I have?

It feels like this is the river of living water that Jesus speaks about when standing in front of the crowds at the Festival of Tabernacles. Proclaiming at the top of his voice to the Pharisees, the chief priests, the Jews – anyone with ears – Jesus shouts aloud his understanding of the human heart and our desperate longing to be connected to something greater than ourselves. If only those people could have seen Jesus as the conduit of the Holy Spirit – the quencher of thirst and fire – then those hearing him might have bent down to drink that life-giving water and experienced rejuvenation.

Instead, the Pharisees, the chief priests, the Jews – anyone with ears – began arguing with each other about who Jesus really was. Whether the Prophet or the Messiah, the people bitterly disputed who they thought he was with who he really was. So they were divided and missed out on the thirst-quenching life in the Spirit.

Now, has life turned up the temperature on you? Are you dehydrated? Are you thirsty?

If you’re like me, sometimes I feel dizzied by the constant whir of life and find my mind saying, ‘If I could just do this or feel that, or if Jesus could just take this or give that’, then I would be satisfied. But that kind of thinking is like standing knee-deep in the water. What Jesus offers is something greater – the Holy Spirit – which quenches those daily brushes with the heat exhaustion of life and brings peace.

Go ahead.

Take a drink.

You’ll feel better.

***Holy Spirit, flow deep within me as I find life within you. Thank you for quenching the deepest desires of my soul. Amen.***

Saturday 25 March 2023

**Hoping and waiting**

by Pastor Reid Matthias

***I wait for the Lord; my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope (Psalm 130:5).***

Read Psalm 130

There are different kinds of hope. One is for something you haven’t seen yet, and the other is waiting for something you know will happen. It’s an expectation.

Many years ago, one of the springs in our garage door exploded. Feeling slightly afraid, I grabbed a baseball bat to fend off whatever assailant was shooting off firecrackers while hiding in the garage. I opened the door, and with a sigh of relief, I spotted the uncoiled spring lying on the floor. Without the spring, the heavy garage door only lifted with great resistance, so my wife had a choice of encouraging me in one of two ways:

‘I hope you can fix the garage door’, or ‘I expect you can fix the garage door’.

Now, these are two very different statements. In the first, Christine, who loves me very much but has little experience with my abilities to repair things, hoped that I might summon the wisdom with which to fix the spring.

In the second, Christine, who loves me very much and has previously witnessed my ability to repair things, expected I’d be able to fix it.

Unfortunately, I was the first, and we called a garage tech the next day.

This hopeful waiting is similar to the psalmist’s experience. In the depths of trial or frustration, the psalmist cries out for God to help him. He begs God to listen and be attentive. And then, with great faith, the psalmist states, ‘I hope for the Lord; my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope’. Because the psalmist has witnessed God’s mercy and unfailing love in the past, the expectation is that God will be consistent and do the same some time in the future.

Thus, he waits for God to contend with the struggle of the present.

What kinds of things do you expect of God? How long are you prepared to wait? What do you believe is the purpose of waiting?

May God bless you as your whole being waits on him to show you his love and mercy.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for your ever-present love for me. Although I don’t enjoy waiting, I recognise that, in your good time, I will see all the goodness you have for me. Amen.***

Sunday 26 March 2023

**Yes, Lord**

by Rachel Stelzer

***‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world’ (John 11:27).***

Read John 11:1–45

In John’s beautifully crafted and deeply evocative gospel, there are 21 chapters. Ten chapters precede this one, and ten chapters follow it.

This personal and emotional chapter in John’s Gospel is the hinge, the crux of the matter. Jesus, confronted with his friend’s illness, chooses to stay where he is for two days, as he knows that ‘This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it’ (verse 4). Jesus goes to his friends; he spends time, talks with them, and weeps.

Jesus’ beautiful conversation with Martha is the ultimate hospital bedside moment, the great graveside question. ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ (verses 25, 26).

And it is to us, too, that Jesus asks this question.

At the start of John’s Gospel, Nathanael declares, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel’ (John 1:49). At the end of his gospel, John explains, ‘these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31).

And Martha’s answer, here in the centre of the middle chapter of John, is the central message of John’s Gospel. ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world’ (verse 27).

May we also have the courage and the faith, along with Martha, to proclaim our trust in Jesus, the resurrection and the life.

***Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Be at the centre of my life, and help me to boldly bear witness to you, the Messiah, the Son of God. Amen.***

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