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**Sunday 24 January to Sunday 31 January**

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Sunday 24 January 2021

# Seen and loved

by Sonia Hulme

**‘As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen’ (Mark 1:16).**

Read Mark 1:14–20

In today’s reading, we see Jesus at the very beginning of his earthly ministry, assembling the group who would become his 12 disciples. These are the ones who would spend the next three years travelling with, eating with, living with and learning from him.

Three of them would become part of his inner circle, including Simon. It seems this might not have been his first encounter with Jesus. The Gospel of John records that it was Simon’s brother Andrew who had first introduced them. Over the next three years, though Jesus and Simon were master and servant, they also became close friends. Jesus renamed him Peter, and he was the first disciple to recognise Jesus as Messiah, the one promised by God to save his people.

No matter the exact timing or circumstances of their meeting, Simon Peter’s story began with being seen by Jesus as he toiled away at his everyday job. He saw into Peter’s heart, which was capable of great love but also deeply flawed, and called him anyway. The beginning of Peter's life-changing kingdom adventure was being seen in all his humanity and loved despite his imperfections.

It’s no different for you and me. Jesus sees you toiling away at your everyday tasks. He sees you, and calls you into deep and intimate friendship with him and then on into his kingdom work. Where does he see you today? Perhaps you are not a fisherman but employed in some other vocation? Or you are retired or struggling to find work? Jesus issues you the same invitation. Might he be saying to you, ‘I see you; I know you; I love you. Come; follow me, and take part in what I’m already doing in the world. Come on a life-changing kingdom adventure …’

**Thank you, Lord, that you see me where I am today, and you love me. Your seeing of me frees me into life. Help me take up your invitation to friendship and join, with joy, your kingdom work in the world. Amen.**

Monday 25 January 2021

# The God we got

by Sonia Hulme

**‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised’ (Job 1:21b).**

Read Job 1:1–22

These words from the tragic and mysterious story of Job form the basis of a well-loved worship song, which you may well have sung:

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord blessed be you name

Many years ago, I suffered a significant personal loss. I’ll never forget sitting in worship as this song began. The tears that had welled up in my eyes began to roll down my face, and I was powerless to stop them. What sort of a God was this, who would give us such joy (the news of a much-longed-for pregnancy), only to take it away so cruelly? It was not the first time this had happened to us, and I felt myself sliding into another deep sadness.

I wondered about Job, a fellow traveller from long ago who had suffered so greatly and lost on a far greater scale than me. What did we have in common? A turning point came in seeing that there is a lot more to his story than his ‘nice Christian’ response in chapter one. There follow 19 more chapters, where his feelings (perhaps by then having ‘thawed out’) come out in torrents. There are not so many worship songs based on those chapters of anguish and lament. Perhaps there needs to be!

My healing began when I expressed my own torrent of emotion out to the God of Job. I came to see my anger as an expression of trust. I believed he existed. I wanted to engage with and stay in relationship with him and wrestle through these hard issues together. If God was big enough to handle Job’s anger (and even commend him for ‘speaking rightly’), then he could certainly handle mine.

What sort of God do we have? For all the images of him as our gentle Father, at times, he shows himself to be a God of mystery and silence. God refuses to shape our world the way we would like it and act as we hope he will. But when life takes a dark turn, and our feelings toward him are shaky and disintegrating, his hold on us is unshakeably strong. The God we got is One whose grace and mercy will hold us through the torrents of rage and the longest nights.

**Lord, we long for the day when suffering will be overcome, and what has been lost is restored. Thank you that the truth of your love is not altered by the changeable strength of our feelings for you. When our suffering renders us incapable of choosing to praise, you welcome our questions and our longing for something better. Come, Lord Jesus, come.**

Tuesday 26 January 2021

# Whispers of love

by Sonia Hulme

**‘Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?’ (Jeremiah 31:20).**

Read Jeremiah 31:18–20

This was not the people of Israel’s finest moment. Taken into exile by the Babylonians and advised by the prophet Jeremiah to settle in for the long haul (70 years – a whole lifetime), things must have felt bleak and hopeless for them. If ever there was a time when good news would be welcome, this was it. These chapters bring this hope. What might have been total extinction of their nation would instead become restoration and rejoicing. A new covenant (relationship) with God was about to begin. Jeremiah spoke to his audience of events that would happen in their near future. He also talked of a future new relationship between God and his people that would be ushered in by Jesus himself.

In all the talk of exile, punishment, and prophecy, it’s easy to miss the whispers of love in these Old Testament passages. But here is one right in front of us today. If you are a parent or if you love a child in your life, these words, and the ones that follow, may well resonate with you. How much we love the little ones in our lives. Even when they become big, our hearts are for them, and we want the best for them. How much more does our Heavenly Father adore us. You are dear and delighted in by God. Carry those words with you today and talk with him about how that knowledge makes you feel.

Though we can and should hear the words personally, it’s also worth noting that they weren’t written to an individual, but to a community of God’s people. What community do you find yourself in today, and where do you need to hear God’s whisper of love and faithfulness in it? A fractured, stressed-out family? A group of friends? Your battle-weary church family? God delights over your communities, as well and speaks those same words of hope, life, and love.

**Just like the love we have for the children in our lives, your love for us is fierce and wonderful. Let our lives display the truth that we are precious and wanted, watched over and cheered on.**

Wednesday 27 January 2021

# Get ready

by Sonia Hulme

**‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’ (Matthew 3:3).**

Read Matthew 3:1–6

If you’ve seen the 1970’s musical Godspell, it’s hard not to read this verse without the words of one of its most memorable songs echoing around in your head. It’s not a difficult song to remember, consisting as it does of just one line repeated over and over: ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord; prepare ye the way of the Lord; prepare ye the way of the Lord’ … You get the idea. Matthew quotes this passage from Isaiah and applies it to John the Baptist, whose ministry, though compelling in itself, would prepare the way for ‘someone more powerful’ – Jesus, the Messiah.

This passage is often used in the context of Advent, as we prepare once again to welcome Jesus as a baby in the manger. But Christmas has come and gone. Now, we are in the first month of a new year. It is a time to look forward to what’s ahead. The trouble is, so many of us are still struggling to come to terms with the year we’ve just left. Fires at the start of last year were followed soon after by news of a strange new virus. Lockdowns, isolation, quarantine and social distancing became part of our everyday vocabulary. Lives and jobs were and continue to be lost. As I write, nearly every news article playing on the TV in the background is still concerned with this all-consuming virus.

What does preparation for our Saviour look like on the back of that? How do we make way for him in our lives this year? Perhaps it begins by acknowledging where we’re at. I don’t know about you, but when I visit someone, I’m never quite as comfortable in a magazine-perfect house as I am in one that looks a bit ‘lived in’. Because it’s real. Maybe God is like that. Perhaps we don’t need to present him with a perfectly prepared heart and life. He’s quite comfortable slipping into our mess and beginning where we are. The ’ordinary stuff’ of our everyday life is the perfect place for the Saviour to come alongside us and feel at home.

**Lord,** **my preparations are not perfect, and despite my best efforts, my paths will never be perfectly straight. But I welcome you into what I have and who I am, your dearly loved and forgiven child**. **Thank you for making yourself at home in our world, and with me.**

Thursday 28 January 2021

# A big day on the water

by Sonia Hulme

**‘When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!”’ (Luke 5:8).**

Read Luke 5:1–11

I spent much of my childhood in a small country school with 18 other children. On the wall in our classroom hung a painting depicting the scene from today’s story. Jesus is preaching to the crowds from a borrowed boat on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. My imagination would often wander to that painting and particularly to one little girl who was leaning on a rock, listening to Jesus. I decided I wanted to be like her, so near to Jesus that I could almost touch him.

What would it have been like, to be there that day? What would I have seen if I stayed after he had finished preaching and most of the crowd had drifted away? This story isn’t really about me, though, sitting on the shore. It’s about the owner of the borrowed boat and his interaction with the preacher.

I hear Jesus telling the men to head out into the lake and start fishing. Simon Peter is surprised – he’s tired. They’ve fished all night; they’ve already washed their nets. But he agrees to try, and as I watch, the biggest netload of fish I’ve ever seen begins to be hauled over the side. Now Simon knows fishing, and his life in the industry means he understands how much of a miracle this is, being in the wrong conditions at the wrong time of day. I see him, overcome by this impossible catch, become filled with fear at the thought of who this in in the boat with him, and who he is in comparison**.** ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ I see Jesus move to reassure him with the words spoken so often throughout Scripture to anxious hearts, ‘Don’t be afraid’.

Safe on shore, I ponder this. The Creator putting his creation at ease. He doesn’t want to be separated from Peter, and he certainly doesn’t intend to go away. He wants to come close and let him know that all is well, that this relationship will be based on love, not a set of impossible standards that Peter will never be able to meet anyway.

Peter is bringing the boat back to shore now. He is leaving behind a whole boatload of valuable fish and walking away with Jesus. He has thrown his lot in with the preacher and will spend the rest of his life learning what it means to follow him.

**Lord, it’s hard to see ourselves the way you see us. We see our failure, shame, and fear. You see those things too. In return, you offer us friendship, love, intimacy and an invitation to journey with you. Do not go away from us, Lord; come close and make your home in us.** Friday 29 January 2021

# Turning back

by Sonia Hulme

**‘Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death’ (2 Corinthians 7:10).**

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11

There is an unsolved mystery lingering over my family. Some years ago, on a trip to the Adelaide Show, I purchased an extra Bertie Beetle show bag full of chocolates for a friend whose children couldn’t go that year. When I went to give the bag to them, it felt strangely light. There were only two chocolates left. My husband and I tried all manner of tactics to help the guilty one (or ones) of our five children confess and repent, including begging, pleading, threatening and offering instant forgiveness with no consequence. Mysteriously, not one of the five could recall what happened to those Bertie Beetles. And they never, ever have.

In this section of Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, he is feeling pleased that his begging and pleading had a much better outcome. He had previously written, admonishing them for some beliefs, attitudes and actions that concerned him greatly. They listened to what he said, taking his words to heart, and ‘turned around’ because of it.

Have you? Has a Scripture during your reading, or in a message at church, or sent by a caring friend, ever pierced your heart and turned you back to the one who poured out his life for you? Each time this has happened to me, I have gained a deeper understanding of the truth contained in Hebrews 4: ‘The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow: it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart’.

If this has been your experience, I pray you have also come face to face with God’s unending capacity and desire to embrace, forgive and walk forward with you, his dearly loved child. May you grow in friendship with the one who was waiting and watching with hopeful, open arms for you to turn back to him.

**Thank you for the cross, which is the ultimate sign of your desire for me to be restored in my relationship with you. Help me return there often and see the look of love on the face of the one hanging there, for me.**

Saturday 30 January 2021

# Fear not!

by Sonia Hulme

**‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise’ (Psalm 111:10).**

Read Psalm 111

One of the reasons that I can’t give up my paper Bible in favour of a digital version is that it contains about 25 years’ worth of markings I want to remember. For many years of attendance at an interdenominational Bible study, colouring key verses and words kept me focused, awake and listening. In my quiet times with God, moments of clarity, conviction or comfort have been shaded as well. More has been added on my yearly retreat, where I am fortunate to spend several days in silence alone with God, gathering ‘food’ for the year ahead. Those wafer-thin pages most Bibles have can look a bit drab after many years of use, but the bursts of colour I see now remind me of how God has continually spoken into my life through his word.

What can we see in today’s psalm which might be worth ruminating on, turning over in our minds and taking into our hearts? What strikes me straight away is the focus on the character of our Heavenly Father. In only ten verses, there is an overflow of descriptive words, which, if you are the colouring sort, would soon culminate in a riot of colour. Who is this God we follow? He is great, glorious, majestic, righteous, full of wonders, gracious, compassionate, provider, faithful, just, trustworthy, steadfast, upright, redeemer, holy and awesome.

It’s interesting then that this psalm finishes with a verse about fearing God. Sometimes we can view this negatively and feel a bit overwhelmed by who we aren’t in the light of who he is. We can often be overwhelmed by our fears. What if, today, we focused on being overwhelmed in a positive sense by all his goodness to us, as evidenced by this descriptive list? How might you carry yourself knowing that this is the God you have walking closely and intimately with you?

PS If you’d rather keep your Bible pristine and unmarked because that works for you, then that’s just fine with me!

**Sometimes I am overcome by my thoughts, even thoughts about you. Help me to focus today on the fact that you, the God of the universe, choose to come close to me. Help me accept your invitation and live today as a dearly loved child with an incredible God on my side.**

Sunday 31 January 2021

# Spotlight

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘For God … made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6).**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Having been an art student and teacher for many years, I have always been impressed by the effect of Rembrandt’s use of the painting technique, chiaroscuro. This is an Italian word meaning a strong contrast of light and shadow. It adds drama and focus to his work. Rembrandt used it to shine a spotlight where he wants you to focus as you view his work. There are many good examples of his paintings that demonstrate this. Two are the very famous The Night Watch and The Descent from the Cross. I encourage you to find these on Google.

Reading these verses from 2 Corinthians 4, we are struck by the imagery and contrasts of light and dark: ‘light of the gospel’, ‘the glory of Christ’, ‘let light shine out of darkness’, ‘has made his light shine in our hearts’ and ‘to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory’.

Just as Rembrandt used chiaroscuro to focus on parts of his work, so also God wants us to think of our before and after. We were in darkness and condemned by our sin, but, by grace, God has saved us, through Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice, for eternal life with him. That is a life in the spotlight.

**Dear Heavenly Father, there are times in our life when we want to hide in the darkness. Please give us the courage to embrace the light of the gospel every day. Amen.**