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**Sunday 12 September 2021 to Sunday 19 September 2021**

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Sunday 12 September 2021

# In over our heads

by Tom Brennen

**Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him (Mark 8:32).**

Read Mark 8:27–38​

When were you last ‘in over your head’?

I vividly remember the first lesson I ever taught as a teacher many years ago. My class of well-groomed youngsters greeted me politely and waited for the lesson to begin. The room was warm, and the excitement of a new school year was in the air. And like many graduate teachers, I would soon learn what it really meant to be a teacher.

The late nights of marking, the helicopter parents, the minor behavioural issues that come with working with teenagers and so on made me realise that my teacher training had not fully prepared me for the rewarding but very challenging day-to-day work of teaching. As my first parent-teacher interview night approached, I had great anxiety. I feared that parents would clearly see I had absolutely no idea what I was doing and that I was well ‘over my head’.

In this Gospel reading, we see Peter declare that Jesus is the Messiah, only to be rebuked by Jesus soon after for not getting what that really meant. Peter was in over his head here. Just as I was an inexperienced and young teacher, so Peter was an inexperienced and young Christian. He forgot – or perhaps failed to grasp – exactly what the fullness of Jesus’ ministry meant.

At the beginning of our faith as new believers, we find ourselves well over our heads – unable to fully grasp what it is to live the Christian life. Those who have years of faith behind us can still be like Peter and the first disciples, failing to grasp all of what it is to be a Christian and follower of Christ.

Christ says, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’.

As we take on the cross of Christ, we must commit ourselves to learn and grow in knowing what this means for us each and every day. Our sinful nature means Jesus will sadly have reason to turn to us and say as he did to Peter, ‘You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’.

As we step out on our journey, let us diligently seek God’s grace, wisdom and guidance as we grow in the knowledge of what it is to take our own cross and follow Christ rather than the world or our selfish desires.

**Lord, may we approach your throne with humility and the knowledge that you are the author and perfecter of our faith. Help us grow in knowing what it is to take up the cross of Christ and follow you. Amen.**

Monday 13 September 2021

# A homeless people

by Tom Brennen

**Jesus said, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Luke 9:58).**

Read Luke 9:57–62

Jesus was a man without a home. We know all too well that he wasn’t welcome in his own hometown. He had few possessions and few financial resources.

As a result, Jesus’ ministry was undertaken through the support of others. Families and communities fed him, funded his work and provided places to rest and recuperate. He relied on the hospitality of his fellow humans.  While Jesus is indeed the Son of God, he still operated by human law and custom, and he relied on the grace and compassion of others.

Consider for a moment what it would mean for you to live as Jesus did, relying on the hospitality of others. You have no home of your own and no rental property, hotel room or Airbnb. You are reliant on the goodwill of others for everything you have, everything you eat or drink.

Now consider what your life is now. You likely have a roof over your head, food in your stomach and a plan in mind for the coming days, weeks, months and years.

As the early church grew and became a strong force in society, many valuable parts of the Christian life were lost. We mustn't allow ourselves to rush over passages such as this which remind us that Christians were never called to live comfortable lives free of suffering.

This passage is a reminder to stay awake and keep watch. Comfort is an evil force that can lead us to neglect the uncomfortable requirements of our faith. The person we worship as the Son of God was homeless and relied on the kindness of others for his sustenance.

Let us not forget that we must resist the temptation to see this world as our home. It isn’t. Until he calls us to our eternal home, let us live in that light. Let us heed the warning of the reading today against finding reasons to avoid the harder call on our lives, which is to humbly follow Christ regardless of the negative impact on our lives.

**Jesus, may the knowledge that you had no earthly home and you relied on the hospitality of others inspire us to follow your example of resolute service to God the Father in all circumstances. Amen.**

Tuesday 14 September 2021

# Following the leader

by Tom Brennen

**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:10).**

Read Philippians 3:7–16​

I am a school principal, and this means I spend an awful lot of time planning. There are strategic plans, operational plans, building plans and plans for planning.

As I read Paul’s words in our reading today, I am struck by his beautifully succinct vision statement and strategic plan rolled in one: it forms a pretty solid three-point plan:

1. Know Christ and the power of the resurrection.
2. Share in Christ’s sufferings to become like him.
3. Through these things, seek eternal life through Christ.

Unlike a CEO setting out a vision for their organisation, Paul’s plan is intensely personal and serves as an example to the readers of this letter. Paul knows that to lead others, he must tend to his own faith. He must grow in knowledge, share in Christ’s sufferings and desire eternal life.

From there, Paul calls others in his community to follow him, to not be like those whose ‘end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things’.

As followers of Christ, we are called to provide an example to our community of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Christ. To do this, it makes good sense to follow Paul’s three-point plan – know Christ, share in his sufferings, and look forward to the resurrection.

As with any sound strategy or plan, this takes time to carry out. As Martin Luther wrote: ‘At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith’.

It was through Luther’s consistent commitment to meditating, considering, seeking and wondering that he grew in knowledge of the Father, Son and Spirit. May we diligently follow in the footsteps of the mothers and fathers of our faith, as with Paul and Luther, who have walked before us. They shine a light for us to follow – a light that points to Christ.

***Holy Spirit, move us to diligently seek our Lord through a commitment to the Christian disciplines of prayer, meditation, worship and learning. May we grow in the knowledge of Jesus, his suffering and the gift of his resurrection each day. Amen.***

Wednesday 15 September 2021

# The journey of faith

by Tom Brennen

**Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).**

Read Hebrews 12:1–4

I’m a runner, and as I’ve grown older, my focus on speed and finishing times has waned. I now seek races that take me to beautiful places in God’s creation. Trail running has the added benefit of teaching me perseverance as I race over challenging terrain hour after hour. This type of race is not a sprint; it requires endurance and focus.

Our readings this week have asked us to deeply consider what it is to follow Christ. Our reading today prompts us to ask some questions: What race has been set before us? How long is it? What terrain is it on? What waits for us at the end?

Organisers of running races often provide a map of the course and an elevation profile. One would think this would allow me to prepare well and not be surprised when sections are very tough, indeed. I should know what I am getting myself in for. Yet, time and time again, I hit a particularly horrible hill and technical downhill section that leaves me close to crying in pain. In such moments, I have been known to feel frustrated with the race organisers for making things too hard or not giving me enough warning!

The Christian life is indeed a race, much like a long-distance trail run where the times and finishing positions don’t matter so much; it is really about completing the course. God has a path for us to run, and it is often very challenging. While we know that carrying the cross will mean sharing in Christ’s suffering, it doesn’t stop us from being surprised, angry, frustrated or hurt when the suffering hits.

As the strategic plan of Paul told us yesterday, to walk God’s path is to join in the sufferings of Christ. The good news is that Christ understands suffering and is with us in our suffering. And when we finish, our Lord Jesus, seated at the end of our journey, at the right hand of God, is ready to welcome us home.

Let us seek to persevere and learn all we can from our journey. In this way, we may be an example to others in how we run this race.

**Father, give us the perseverance we need to walk your path and carry our cross. May we not lose sight of the end of our journey and its reassurance. Amen.**

Thursday 16 September 2021

# Giving an answer in the murkiness

by Tom Brennen

**Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15).**

Read 1 Peter 3:13–18​

‘What on earth did you do that for?’ a  colleague remarked upon hearing that I’d just returned from a weekend of trail running in the Victorian High Country. I had completed runs of 25 kilometres, 22 kilometres and 9 kilometres and a gentle run of 1.5 kilometres upriver to float back down on a pool ring. While it didn’t seem crazy to me, my answer (that it was a lot of fun) just didn’t seem to satisfy my colleague.

Today our verse asks us to give an accounting for the hope we have in Christ. Our response to this question is one of the more important responses we give. We must be ready to answer when asked, ‘Why on earth are you a Christian?’

As Australian society has changed, so too have the questions that Christians are asked. There are fewer questions asking how we could have hope in something we can’t see or arguing about not being able to use the scientific method to prove God exists. We are now more likely to be asked ‘How can you call yourself a Christian when Christian nations have colonised countries and abused populations?’, ‘How can you call yourself a Christian when the church has failed to protect children?’, ‘How can you call yourself a Christian when Christian politicians don’t support single mothers, drug addicts and those dealing with issues of gender identity?’ and so on.

The church and other Christian institutions have a chequered history and have failed time and time again. So too have we and other Christians as individuals, allowing our sinful nature to get in the way of living as God would have us do. This is precisely why our hope must not rest in the work of human beings or human institutions, for they cannot save us.

We are Christians first and foremost because we acknowledge Christ as the Son of God whose death and resurrection brought the healing of the relationship between humanity and God. This is the gospel in which we have hope. This gives us hope to sustain us in hard times. This gives us hope to sustain us when institutions and individuals in our lives fail us by failing to live up to the standards they profess. We do not place our hope in the things of this world but in Christ, our Lord.

What are Christians? Christians are convinced that our Lord loves us, saves and redeems us so that we may share his love with others during our time on earth and enjoy his company in heaven for eternity. This is the hope that cannot be taken from us, and this is the hope we must lovingly share with our world.

**God, help us to answer those who want to know the cause of our faith and hope. May we speak with love and compassion so that the Spirit may move others to find their hope in you. Amen.**

Friday 17 September 2021

# Suffering was never meant to be easy

by Tom Brennen

**But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy (1 Peter 4:13).**

Read 1 Peter 4:12–19​

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, ‘whenever I am in a real mess of pain and some well-meaning Christian says, “Well, when God closes a door, he opens a window”, I immediately look around for that open window so I can push them out of it. Which is to say, I don’t find ignoring the difficulty of life in favour of blindly cheerful optimism to be hopeful … I find it to be delusional’.

Being a Christian does not guarantee that life will always go your way or that suffering can be avoided. I really wish it were otherwise, but it is not. Time and time again, suffering is mentioned as part of the Christian life. Think of the suffering of the Israelites, the dangerous lives lived by prophets and apostles or the deaths of Christian martyrs. Our reading today tells us that we will be ‘reviled’ for identifying ourselves with Christ. Globally we know that our Christian sisters and brothers are being killed on account of the gospel. Our faith and speech must be deeper than simple platitudes.

Sometimes we want to offer people simple explanations and platitudes when they are suffering. In our desire to encourage them and make them feel better, we can seem to dismiss the difficulty and pain of the situation they are facing. Sometimes we try to give them false hope that everything is ‘okay’ when we both know deep down that everything is not okay. Yes, our role is to encourage those hurting, but we must be truthful in this comfort and hope we offer. In this, we need to point our sisters and brothers to the hope we have in Christ over anything else.

The father of our church, Martin Luther, reminds us, ‘when [non-Christians] run into affliction and suffering, they have nothing to comfort them, for they do not have the mighty promises and the confidence in God which Christians have. Therefore they cannot comfort themselves with the assurance that God will help them to bear the affliction, much less can they count on it that he will turn their affliction and suffering to good’.

Let us remind each other of the hope we have in Christ in the midst of suffering and that our Lord suffers along with us. Also, let us be brave enough to sit with our friends, share in their suffering, embrace it as part of the human experience, and move through it honestly, together as broken humans who still place their hope in Christ.

It is indeed the greatest of good news that suffering will have an end in the resurrection. But let us fulfil our pastoral duty and honestly deal with suffering, offering the hope of God, not the hope of human platitudes.

**Lord, your suffering bought our salvation. May our suffering teach us to be more like you, and let its humanity draw us together as your beloved people. Amen.**

Saturday 18 September 2021

# Save us, O Lord

by Tom Brennen

**But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life (Psalm 54:5).**

Read Psalm 54

We are a homeless people, a suffering people, a people with a seemingly impossible race to run and a people that will be persecuted on account of Christ. Sounds like a lot of bad news this week, doesn’t it?

Friends, look at the psalms for a reminder that God’s people before us have wrestled with their faith and their fear since time began. We are not the first to cry out as this psalmist does, ‘Save me, O God, by your name’.

As a commentator writes of this psalm:

God may seem absent from the world, but those who invoke his name with faith and courage will discover the reality of his awesome presence ... The message of the psalm is clear enough: the name of God will not fail the supplicant in a time of crisis. The enemies will not prevail. Yahweh will make a necessary connection between act and consequence, and the power of ruthless foes will be turned back against themselves.

In this time of trouble and suffering, the psalmist seeks God in prayer, honours his holy and precious name, acknowledges him as the creator and sustainer of life, and proclaims that only he can save them. Verse 7 is so clear: ‘God has delivered them from every trouble’.

In one of our readings earlier this week, Paul encouraged us to look to our mothers and fathers of faith for examples. This psalm, once again, shows the rich heritage we can draw upon for such examples.

God has indeed delivered us from evil. We have the gift of eternal life in the future and the intimacy of knowing our Lord now. This doesn’t remove suffering from our lives nor the pain of suffering.

To be a Christian is to enter into suffering. To be a Christian is also to enter into the joy of knowing our Lord.  When we are in trouble and amid suffering, let us cry, ‘Save me O God, by your name’, for this prayer has already been answered with eternal hope.

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit, save us by your holy name. May you rescue us from our strife and empower us to do your will on earth. You are the upholder of our lives. Amen.**

Sunday 19 September 2021

# Childlike humility

by Carolyn Ehrlich

**But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest (Mark 9:34).**

Read Mark 9:30–37

Jesus and his disciples were travelling from place to place. Jesus had already predicted his death (Mark 8:31–33), and he had taught that being a disciple meant denying self and following him (Mark 8:34).

Peter, James and John had witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration, and still, the disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest. How often do we (you, me) do this? How often do we experience that Jesus has something profound to say to us about who he is, about what is happening, about something supernatural, something that we do not understand? How often has Jesus spoken to us, given us his direction and asked us to do something, and still, we are concerned about our own greatness?

We gloss over what is supremely important in our walk with God, and we focus on ourselves. We justify, saying, ‘I am okay, better, smarter, stronger, prettier, more important, greater than …’ Where is the humility and servitude in our approach?

Further along in this passage, we are instructed to welcome children. Yes, we are to take this literally, but we are also to embrace the childlike qualities of simplicity, innocence and humility. Instead of focusing on ourselves, on our own sense of self-importance and greatness, we are directed to welcome little children – because when we do, we welcome Jesus.

In Jesus’ time, welcoming implied service. A host serves their guest. Selfless serving is the hallmark of Christianity. So, we are to selflessly serve everybody, including children. How will you humble yourself and simply and innocently welcome God, our Father, today?

**Father God, you are an amazing, gracious and wonderful God. Instead of welcoming you, I so often argue with others in ways that reflect my sense of self-importance and self-reported greatness. I do this privately and publicly. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. In Jesus’ awesome name, I pray, Amen.**