****

**Sunday 27 March 2022 to Sunday 3 April 2022**

****

Sunday 27 March 2022

# Nearer to God

by Dianne Eckermann

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them’ (Luke 15:1,2).**

Read Luke 15:1–3,11b–32

Luke chapter 15 begins with outsiders – that is, the tax collectors and sinners of his community – drawing near to him.

Jesus is not demanding they come to him, nor is he ordering them to follow. They are, apparently of their own accord, drawing near to him. There is something in his demeanour, in his teaching and in his acceptance of this group of tax collectors and sinners that encourages them to want to know him.

At the same time, others see what is happening. The Pharisees also spend a lot of time around Jesus. But their motives are not the same as the sinners who felt drawn to him. They are there to judge, catch him out, find reasons to criticise and ultimately condemn him. They believe they have a relationship with God, a rather exclusive relationship as it definitely excludes the group of sinners who come to Jesus to know more.

There could not be two more contrasting groups of people gathering around Jesus with two very contrasting motives. If we put ourselves into this picture, we may find it difficult to see where we fit. We probably don’t want to identify with the self-righteous Pharisees, nor do we want to be defined by our sin. If we could truly see ourselves, we may realise we are both self-righteous and sinful.

Our relationship with God is not determined by our best behaviour, by being a nice person or by regularly attending church each Sunday. Our relationship with God is also not defined by our worst behaviour, the times we have not been at all nice to others or when we have neglected God. It has already been determined by the immeasurable love of God, who comes to us in all our imperfections, including those we are not even aware of. It has already been determined by a loving God who draws us near, even though we keep losing our way.

Luke chapter 15 ends with the parable of the prodigal son and the words, ‘he was lost, and is found’. The prodigal son is all of us – we are simultaneously lost and found because no matter who we are or what we have done, God waits with love, acceptance, mercy and grace.

**We pray: Heavenly Father, you know who we are, and you accept us for who we are. We ask you to reach out to us with your love and acceptance, drawing us nearer to you. In the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.**

Monday 28 March 2022

# Reunited

by Dianne Eckermann

**Then Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while (Genesis 46:29).**

Read Genesis 45:25–46:4,28–30

Like many families in the last two years, we have been separated due to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic. It has been almost as difficult to see family from interstate as it has been to see those who live overseas. Phone calls or video link-ups are fine, but nothing is better than being able to hold and touch someone in person. Conversations are much easier face to face and are much less confusing than communicating remotely. Calculating time zones also becomes redundant – another blessing.

Joseph’s meeting with his father after 22 years, during which his father believed he had been killed, was even more bittersweet than post-pandemic airport reunions. It is hard to gauge the various emotions in this reunion: joy at being able to hold each other; sorrow for the missing years; a sense of unreality that Joseph lives; awe that he arrives in a chariot and has become a man of considerable means. We are told Joseph wept for a long time. He certainly had been separated from his father for a long time, and there was, therefore, great regret and great joy during this reunion.

Pictures of family reunions in our media give us a good idea of how this reunion between father and long-lost son might appear. Small details, such as Joseph weeping on his father’s neck, indicate he is now a fully grown man, not the seventeen-year-old he was when his brothers sold him into slavery.

Perhaps more important than dwelling on what was missing during those years is what it was that Joseph actually achieved. His life was not at all an easy life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his family was quite dysfunctional. Sibling rivalry is not unheard of, but selling a brother into slavery is almost unequalled. His subsequent life in Egypt may have been comfortable by the time he was reunited with his father, but it had not been at all an easy path for a former slave to reach such heights.

Joseph’s life, with its many ups and downs, is an example of how God had always been in control and by Joseph’s side. Just as God was by Joseph’s side when he was finally reunited with his father, God remains at our side and brings us together through him and in him. Just as Joseph trusted that God would keep his promises to him, we too can trust that God will keep his promise to us. Finally, if there was much joy when Joseph and Jacob were reunited, and if we feel the same sort of joy when we are reunited with friends and family after a long time, we can be sure that our joy in being together with God will be much greater and much more than we could ever have hoped.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for our families and for the times we are together, as well as for the times we are apart, so we feel the joy of being reunited. We thank you also for the ways in which you stay by our side and comfort us during the ups and downs of our lives. Amen.**

Tuesday 29 March 2022

# The joy of salvation

by Dianne Eckermann

**With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation (Isaiah 12:3).**

Read Isaiah 12:1–6

Water in Australia is often a problem. Many parts of the land have only recently emerged from several years of severe drought, and as I write, large areas of eastern Australia are suffering the destructive force of floods. It must be hard to read Dorothea Mackellar’s poem about her love for a sunburnt country and a land ‘of droughts and flooding rains’ when we have experienced the worst of both of these extremes recently and probably found little to love. Water dominates our lives – from those who have too much to those who have too little.

Some years ago, on a visit to the South Island of New Zealand, I heard a comment that we measure what is most important to us, which is why Australians measure water and New Zealanders measure sunshine. While I haven’t counted personally, apparently water is mentioned 722 times in the Bible, which sounds like it was important enough to be measured during biblical times.

In Isaiah’s song of praise to God who comforts us and is our strength and defence, the word salvation is repeated three times. Repetition emphasises the importance of salvation, not just in the context of the people of Judah thousands of years ago but in our lives today.

Therefore, it follows that to draw from wells of salvation is also important. This is a reminder that just as water is essential to life, so God’s salvation is also essential to life. It is easy to imagine the joy of salvation drawn from deep wells, as we know what it is like to be refreshed by water on a hot summer’s day.

When these words from Isaiah were first written, the world was unpredictable, just as it is today. It was not often a safe world where people could feel in control of their lives. Similarly, today our world seems to lurch from one unpredictable catastrophe to the next and rarely are we in control – whether we are enduring personal crises, such as illness, job or family pressures, or political instability threatens peace in our world. It is days like these we are most in need of assurance and the joy of water from the wells of salvation.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for life-giving water and the gift of your salvation. We also pray for those most in need of your strength and defence and ask for your peace. Amen.**

Wednesday 30 March 2022

# Because we bear your name

by Dianne Eckermann

**You are among us, Lord, and we bear your name; do not forsake us (Jeremiah 14:9).**

Read Jeremiah 14:7–9

The three verses of today’s reading provide great insight into the human character. Verse 7 acknowledges human sinfulness. In fact, it is emphasised not once but twice. However, by opening the verse with the phrase, ‘Although our sins testify against us’, the writer is already preparing an argument that perhaps we are not totally responsible for our sins. He demands action – not his own action but a demand that the Lord do something.

He continues with several questions, essentially suggesting that if God had been more present and less of a stranger, God would have been better prepared and these great transgressions may have been averted.

I have listened to many complaints of this nature during my working life. For example, complaints beginning by acknowledging the complainer may have done something they should not have. But they end up suggesting that their poor behaviour was actually caused by the system or by other people not doing their job correctly, all the while talking themselves out of taking responsibility for their own poor choices.

Verse 9 turns this mode of complaining on its head. Whether the confession of sin was sincere or not, the writer pleads with God for help. By its very nature, his plea acknowledges his sinfulness and that it is God alone who can provide the assistance he needs. Most importantly, it also mentions a significant reason why only God can help him; it is because the writer bears his name. It is not for himself that he is pleading for help: it is because he is the image of God. Whether the confession of sin was sincere or not, the plea not to be forsaken or separated from God seems absolutely genuine.

As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. If we are honest, there are times we have not acted as if that is the case, and we need God’s help as much as the people of Jeremiah’s time, perhaps even more so. It’s not easy being a Christian in a post-Christian environment, but through Christ, we are not forsaken but saved.

**Lord God, no matter how challenging it may be, help us always remember that we bear your name and that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are not forsaken but have the gift of salvation. Amen.**

Thursday 31 March 2022

# Blessing the children

by Dianne Eckermann

**And [Jesus] took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:16).**

Read Mark 10:13–16

This well-known story of the disciples turning away parents and children from Jesus is one of the few times we hear of Jesus interacting with children.

The attitude of the disciples does not impress Jesus. At best, they were over-protective of Jesus; at worst, they were overly dismissive of the parents and children. They felt they had the power to decide who came to Jesus.

The life expectancy of people in biblical times was short. Children were particularly vulnerable to diseases that no longer pose the same threat to children in modern times. The view of childhood has also changed over time. Our culture tends to sentimentalise children. Two hundred years ago, children were considered mini-adults, and even earlier, in the time of Jesus, they were seen as less important than adults. They held a very low status in a community where status was quite significant. This recount of Jesus blessing the children in Mark’s Gospel comes not long after the disciples had argued over who would be the greatest. Jesus reprimanded them by telling them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’. The concept of status seems to be an ongoing issue for the disciples.

The children are the most vulnerable of all the people mentioned in this short encounter. They are described as ‘little’ children and are certainly small enough for Jesus to take in his arms. And by taking them into his arms, Jesus is doing what he so often did. Jesus is showing compassion for the powerless and the vulnerable. Again, he shows us that everyone is important to him, including those who are not valued by others.

These little children were also young – too young to come to Jesus by themselves. Jesus removed all barriers created by the disciples so that he could receive them and bless them. So perhaps when Jesus said, ‘anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it’ (verse 15), he is also telling us that we cannot come to him through our own efforts. We are vulnerable, helpless like a child, and in our childish humility, Jesus is there to hold and bless us. It is through love from Jesus – not through our own efforts – that we are blessed.

**Lord God, we thank you for embracing us with your love, and we ask that you help us share that love with all of your children. Amen.**

Friday 1 April 2022

# Seeing Jesus

by Dianne Eckermann

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way (Luke 19:3,4).

Read Luke 19:1–10

I am reminded of the story of Zacchaeus every time I am in a crowd and not able to see what is happening. Whether it’s at a music concert, a sporting event or a Christmas parade, I want to get a clear view over the heads of the crowd, but no matter how desperate I am to see clearly, it rarely happens.

The question that this story about Zacchaeus raises is why does he actually want to see Jesus? He was, by all accounts, a very wealthy person. He was not well-liked by his community because that wealth was accumulated through corrupt means, and the people around him were his victims. He was not just short in stature; he also fell short ethically. Zacchaeus just doesn’t sound like the sort of person who would want to see Jesus or who would brave a large crowd to do so. It’s also hard to realise what he hoped to gain simply by seeing Jesus. After all, he could not anticipate that Jesus would stop to speak with him, let alone invite himself to his home. Despite that, his eagerness was so strong that he, a grown man, climbed a tree to get a better view.

There was clearly something missing in Zacchaeus’ life, something he recognised but may not have been able to articulate. Perhaps Zacchaeus realised he was morally lost, so when he announced he would give half of his wealth to the poor and make restitution to those Zacchaeus cheated, he seemed to have realised that it was his wealth that was a burden.

We can’t ask Zacchaeus about his motives; however, we can see that Jesus, ignoring the attitude of the crowd, shows that anyone – regardless of previous character or history – can see and be seen by Jesus. It is Jesus who finds Zacchaeus, not the other way round, and it is mercy from Jesus that Zacchaeus joyfully recognises, for the first time in his life.

**Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many times you have poured your mercy on us, even though we have been undeserving. We ask you to help us see you clearly and, like Zacchaeus, find joy in your presence. Amen.**

Saturday 2 April 2022

# Community

by Dianne Eckermann

**Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy (Psalm 126:5).**

Read Psalm 126

We are now in the third year of a pandemic, which has left no community untouched in any place in the world. It is hard to comprehend that our modern world, which can send satellites into space or send information through the World Wide Web at the click of a button, can be so severely impacted by a virus – something so small we cannot see it with the naked eye. Although we have greater medical knowledge than any previous generation, many ways of preventing the spread of disease echo earlier pandemics (for example, the 1918 influenza outbreak or the Black Death in the 17th century).

This brings to mind the small village of Eyam in England that deliberately isolated itself from the rest of the local area when the plague arrived in 1665 as they had observed that people who travelled spread the plague. The death toll in the village was immense, but for over a year, they did not breach the boundary of their town and potentially saved thousands of others at a cost to themselves. The entire village community, led by the local priests, agreed that they would maintain a plan to keep others in neighbouring towns and villages safe. The plague village as it is known today continues to be remembered for its sacrifice of self in the interests of community.

Psalm 126 is also a psalm about community. It is a psalm that recognises there are times of sorrow and tears, as well as times of great joy. It is the community that sows in tears and the community that laughs and shouts with joy when fortunes are restored by the Lord. In other words, the community supports all of its members in both sorrow and rejoicing. Today community is rapidly being overtaken by the rise of the individual and a focus on self. If the village of Eyam had been self-focused, an even greater disaster would have occurred. However, they were community-focused and prepared to undergo greater hardship than we have endured for the sake of their community.

Our identities are forged in and by our community. Reading the Bible together in a community brings believers together with each other and also with God. As we move through the Lenten season to the sorrow of Good Friday, we also move toward the joy of Easter because Christ died for all. Indeed, he accepts each of us as individuals, as unique children of God, but together, we are a stronger community in Christ.

**Lord God, you understand that we can be self-centred and interested only in our benefit. You also understand our suffering as you endured suffering and death for us. Draw us together as your community, so we can be filled with the joy and laughter of being your people. Amen.**

Sunday 3 April 2022

# Responding to God’s love

by Charles Bertelsmeir

**Then Mary took a twelve-ounce jar of expensive perfume made from essence of nard, and she anointed Jesus’ feet with it, wiping his feet with her hair (John 12:3).**

Read John 12:1–8

How excited or emotional do you ever get about your relationship with Jesus? In the culture many of us have grown up in, we tend to keep our emotions under control. Our society tends to frown on us for getting too excited about anything religious. I think the culture that Jesus lived in was much the same. Being religious was about obeying a set of religious rules and doing religious things, much like our own society. This type of religion isn’t anything to get excited about; mostly, it is a dreary duty, and many people give up.

Seeing Mary acting how she did – especially uncovering her head to wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair – would have been considered degrading and embarrassing. So, what motivated her to act in this way? Mary had been the recipient of so much love from Jesus, culminating in him bringing her dead brother Lazarus back to life just a few days earlier. In one sense, she couldn’t help herself. She was so thankful and appreciative of Jesus’ love to her that it was just her natural response. I’m sure no-one watching would have doubted her sincerity.  It definitely was not an act she was putting on or a religious duty she was performing.

When people watch me and see how I react, people may think I’m a reasonably decent person, but I’m not sure they would see me acting in a way that was a response to Jesus’ love for me. I’ve learned too many coping strategies for what life has thrown at me over the years; many of these strategies showed little to no love. I’m a long way from Mary’s level of responding to Jesus’ love.

Where God has led me (and he may be leading you on a different path) is focusing on seeing myself from his point of view. Before I was made his child, my life fell so far below God’s infinitely high standards that I was inherently repugnant to him. It was Jesus’ sacrificial love for me (and us all) that led him to enter our messy, smelly world to rescue us and make us his brothers and sisters. I can get excited and emotional about my relationship with God from this perspective. However, when I compare myself with other good people, many of whom aren’t Christians, I can forget how much I needed rescuing and the effort God’s love led him to.

What things do you do to remind yourself of God’s great sacrificial gift to you, and how does this help you to respond in thankfulness to him?

**Heavenly Father, sorry that I’m often so preoccupied with my life that I forget all the wonderful things you are doing. Thank you that your love for us is so great that you keep reminding us of what you have done and are continuing to do for us, and you keep drawing us back into your embrace of love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**