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**Sunday 29 October 2023 to**

**Sunday 5 November 2023**

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**The greatest commandment**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:40).***

Read [Matthew 22:34–46](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+22%3A34%E2%80%9346&version=NRSVUE)

One way to think of the commandments is as God’s blueprint for our lives: they give us a picture of the sort of life that God is building for us. The good news from today’s reading is that love is at the heart of God’s commandments – love for God himself, and love for our neighbour. This means that as we put our trust in Christ Jesus, he gives us his Spirit, who gives us the freedom to love others as God first loved us.

There’s a context to today’s reading: Jesus has come triumphantly into Jerusalem, he has cleansed the temple, and now he is teaching in the temple, in the place of sacrifice. As he teaches, he is confronted by many people, including the Pharisees. The Pharisees were people who sometimes prided themselves on keeping God’s commandments, and one of the Pharisees tests Jesus to see what he considers the greatest commandment.

It's in response to this question that Jesus says that all the law and prophets ‘hang’ on loving God and one’s neighbour. That is, whatever else God commands makes sense as we see how it shows love for God and for the people that God puts in our lives. God, in other words, does not give orders just to test how obedient we are. Rather, he gives commands that build us up so that we can enjoy life to the full.

Of course, we don’t always keep the commands to love as we should. Our hope, therefore, is not in what we can do for God, but in Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and who lives to intercede for us with the Father. And the Father, who gives us his Holy Spirit through his word, is the one who is building in us the love that has no end.

***Thank you, God, that you are love, and that you call us into the life of love. Please give us your Holy Spirit, so that we may keep the commands of your Son, and love one another, as you have first loved us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

*Fraser Pearce grew up in Sydney, and has served as a pastor in Melbourne, Bendigo and Adelaide. He is married to Margaret, and they have four children ranging in age from 23 to 15. Fraser enjoys being with family and friends, listening to (and playing) music and reading.*

Monday 30 October 2023

**Jesus the cornerstone**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes (Mark 12:10,11).***

Read [Mark 12:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A1%E2%80%9312&version=NRSVUE)

Normally, when we listen to a story or watch a movie, we think about the characters and make judgements about them. We think about whether they deserve praise or blame, reward or punishment: we want the goodies to win and the baddies to lose. We have this way of thinking right from the beginning when we are children first listening to stories. Although we might become more sophisticated as we grow, our sense of what is right and wrong remains, and we listen to or watch stories ready to make judgements.

In today’s reading, Jesus tells a story to the chief priests, scribes and elders who have questioned Jesus about his authority (Mark 11:27,28). In the story, Jesus talks about the tenants of a vineyard, who not only rob the owner of his produce but also mistreat and kill his servants and even his son. Jesus knows that the chief priests, scribes and elders will be able to judge for themselves that the tenants in the story are wicked. Jesus also knows they will eventually understand that he is speaking about them.

It can be a shock for us to realise that, in the story we listen to, we are the ones in the wrong. This is how it is in the Bible: God’s word reveals to us that we are sinners, we have acted unjustly, and we deserve condemnation. This would be too much for us to bear, except that Jesus, who tells us stories that reveal our need, is also the one who has gone to the cross to take away our sins. Although Jesus was despised in life – and suffered a shameful death – through his resurrection, he showed that he is the cornerstone of the church and that as God builds us together in him, we can live with humility and hope.

***Father, thank you that Jesus is the cornerstone and that through holy baptism, we are built together into the temple that is his body. Give us humility to acknowledge when we sin, and give us hope that you give us new life through your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Tuesday 31 October 2023

**Made in God’s image**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s (Mark 12:17).***

Read [Mark 12:13–27](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A13%E2%80%9327&version=NRSVUE)

Today is Reformation Day. At the heart of the Reformation is the message that we are right with God, not because of anything we could do, but because he has given us his Son who has paid our debt, washed us clean and brought us back to God. As we trust in Christ, we receive the freedom to live as sons and daughters in God’s family rather than slaves of a harsh taskmaster.

In his ministry, Jesus faced times when he was tested by people who wanted to justify themselves – who wanted to be sure of their own rightness by trapping him in some way. In today’s reading, we hear of people who want to trip Jesus up on the question of paying tax to the Roman authorities. They ask a question about whether it is right to pay tax to the emperor – a pagan man who oppressed God’s people with his imperial power. Jesus’ opponents want to make Jesus seem either too willing to go along with corrupt earthly power (and so lose his influence over the people) or too willing to take a revolutionary stance against the authorities (and so face the brutal legal consequences).

Jesus shows that he is right with God in the wisdom of his reply. First, he gets his opponents to show him a coin (which they are carrying – he is not). Then, he asks them whose image and inscription are on the coin. Of course, it is the image and inscription of Caesar, the emperor, so Jesus says that the coin should be given to Caesar. But then he says that what belongs to God should be given to God.

What belongs to God? You do. You are made in God’s image. What’s more, you have been bought by God not with gold or silver but with the precious blood of Christ. Your Lord Jesus willingly gave himself to his Father, and in Christ, you have been given to the Father, who will keep you as his treasured possession.

***Father, thank you that I am made in your image. Thank you that your name was inscribed on me in holy baptism. Since I belong to you, please give me your Spirit so I may live wisely. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Wednesday 1 November 2023

**Jesus: the Holy One of God**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’ (Mark 12:34a).***

Read [Mark 12:28–34](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A28%E2%80%9334&version=NRSVUE)

Today is All Saints’ Day – the day when we give thanks to God for all the holy people who have gone before us and whose examples of Christian living have encouraged us in the life of faith.

In today’s reading, we receive the words of our Lord Jesus, the Holy One of God – the One in whom all of God’s holy people have placed their trust.

As part of the reading, Jesus hears from one of the scribes – one of the people trained in God’s word. The scribe says that to love God and one’s neighbour is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. These words of the scribe have a special significance because the conversation he is having with Jesus is in the temple, in the very place where sacrificing happens.

Jesus sees that what the scribe has said is wise and assures him that he is not far from the kingdom of heaven. This was more true than the scribe could have known. Not only was the scribe close to the kingdom in the wisdom of his answer, but he was also close to God’s kingdom in the person of God’s Son, Jesus.

Jesus himself was and is the true Lamb of God who has brought us to new life in God by his sacrificial suffering and death and his resurrection and ascension. God has provided the sacrifice for us so that we may be free to trust wholeheartedly in God and honour our neighbour in our works of love. As God grows us in the life of love, he also frees us to be people who can set a good example of Christian living to the little ones in the faith.

***Lamb of God, you have taken away the sin of the world. Give us your mercy and peace so that we may love our neighbour as ourselves. Amen.***

Thursday 2 November 2023

**A warning from Jesus**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces’ (Mark 12:38).***

Read [Mark 12:35–44](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A35%E2%80%9344&version=NRSVUE)

Jesus wants his disciples to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). That is, he wants to free us from naivety concerning those who would deceive us and give us a life marked by his own truthfulness and honesty. The good news is that, as we receive Jesus’ word, he grows us in maturity and discernment.

In today’s reading, we hear Jesus while teaching in the temple. As he teaches, the large crowd is listening to him with delight. As part of his teaching, Jesus gives a warning concerning the scribes – the educated class of men who were socially honoured and liked to enhance their status through the clothes they wore, the greetings they received, and the places of honour they took at banquets.

Now, as it happens, Jesus was evidently not opposed in principle to people having honoured roles or even wearing special clothes as part of the worship of God. Jesus did not criticise the priests for the robes and other vestments they wore as part of their role in the temple – after all, the priests had a calling from God, who had given commands concerning what they were to wear as they served (see, for example, Exodus 28:1–5).

But Jesus did warn us to beware of those who seek for themselves the benefits of status and put on their own shows of piety to make the vulnerable trust them – especially with their money. Jesus wants us to understand that not all people who act in apparently godly ways have God’s approval. On the contrary, Jesus assures us that those who use God’s name to exploit the vulnerable will receive the greater condemnation from God.

Unlike those who deceive for gain, Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Listen to your Servant King, and he will give you his Spirit of wisdom.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for your Spirit-filled word. Let us always listen to you so that we may be wise people who are not deceived by those who use your name to gain power and make money. Amen.***

Friday 3 November 2023

**The word of the Lord endures forever**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’ (Mark 13:2).***

Read [Mark 13:1–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+13%3A1%E2%80%9313&version=NRSVUE)

Jesus has been teaching in the temple, and the last thing he does in the temple precinct is to praise the faith of a poor widow, who, in her poverty, put all that she had into the temple treasury (Mark 12:41–44).

As Jesus and his disciples leave the temple, one of his disciples points out to Jesus the magnificence of the temple stones and buildings. Maybe this disciple thought that Jesus would agree with him – after all, he had just praised the widow for her faithful contribution to the temple. But instead, Jesus says, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down’.

Jesus’ response is helpful for us to hear as we live as his disciples here and now. As God’s people, we contribute to things, including the church buildings where we meet to receive God’s word and sacraments, which will not last. No matter how precious our church buildings are to us or how many memories we have connected with them, we know they will one day cease to exist. Maybe you have already experienced this reality in your life – that the church you worshipped in as a child is no longer.

But we do not need to be despondent about this. Jesus, who called the temple his Father’s house, knew that the temple would one day be destroyed. He knows that the things we faithfully contribute to will one day no longer exist. But the word of God we receive as we meet will endure forever. As we put our trust in God’s word, we will never have cause to lose hope.

Jesus, the Word incarnate, was the one who endured to the end. He went to the cross to bear your sins, and he is now raised to the right hand of the Father to pray for you and bring you to the home with God that cannot be destroyed.

***Jesus, you are the Word of God, and you endure through death and the grave. Since you live with the Father, send us your Spirit so we may always have the joy that comes from trusting you. Amen.***

Saturday 4 November 2023

**Hope in God**

by Pastor Fraser Pearce

***Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God (Psalm 43:5b).***

Read [Psalm 43](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+43&version=NRSVUE)

It’s one thing to deal with injustice: people lying to us, treating us poorly, or taking things that belong to us. It’s another thing to feel as if God doesn’t care, as if there is no justice in this world and that there will be no final accountability for all the wrong that has been done.

In the psalm for today, the psalmist is lamenting the suffering he has experienced at the hands of people who act as if God doesn’t exist. He is also lamenting the way that God has, it seems, rejected him. It’s like he has gone to God’s court to get justice, but God, the judge, has thrown out his case.

But the psalmist does not give up. He knows that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6,7). So, he asks God to send out his light and truth – to send out his word, which shines on the path of life. The psalmist knows that this light, this word, leads God’s people to his holy hill – to the temple, where God provides a sacrifice that cleanses people from their sins and shows his true and lasting justice in the world.

As God’s baptised people, we can sometimes feel like God doesn’t care about us. We can feel like giving up, especially when we are struggling with injustice in our lives, and it seems that God is not doing anything to help us. But even then, we can still, with the psalmist, call out to God. God will give us his word to lead us back to where we gather with his people to share in the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice. He will lead us to meet in church to receive the body and blood of Christ, where we receive forgiveness of sins. It’s with God’s people, receiving God’s gifts, that we experience that God does care for us and can bring his healing, peace and justice even out of the injustices we have suffered.

***Lord Jesus, you show us the justice of God. As we receive your body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, assure us that you care for us and free us to be people who live justly in this world. Amen.***

Sunday 5 November 2023

**I’m not a Pharisee … am I?**

by Rachael Stelzer

***Everything they do is done for people to see (Matthew 23:5a).***

Read [Matthew 23:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+23%3A1%E2%80%9312&version=ESV)

This week focuses on Jesus’ discussions with and about the Jewish religious leaders after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He has been discussing, arguing, debating and showing up the two main factions of the Jewish religious leaders: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. At the end of the previous chapter, after attempting to trap, discredit and otherwise embarrass Jesus, the teachers of the law have withdrawn from the public eye to plot the removal of this troublemaker.

Now Jesus turns to the crowds, who have been spectators to the Big Debate. They may not have understood a word of the complex theologies and arguments they’ve heard, but they have loved seeing Jesus turn the faces of the most pompous and smug of their religious officials red. Jesus does not pull punches in describing the teachers of the law and warns people not to do as they do. They have various reasons for being smug, but their actions amount to hypocrisy.

I love to judge the teachers of the law. Those hypocrites! They do not practise what they preach! They really had it coming, and Jesus is letting them have it. Yeah!

And just as I am really starting to enjoy Jesus ripping into the ‘bad guys’, I notice this little phrase: ‘Everything they do is for people to see …’

Oh dear. Surely I’m not guilty of that?

Okay, I might slightly curate my social media feed and present my kids as little angels while carefully avoiding the photo angle that displays my full laundry baskets … I might scrub the family up to bring to church while my kids fight non-stop for the rest of the week. And, sure, when people come to my house, the living room is spotless because I throw everything behind my bed and leave heaving piles of toys, books and shoes that trip me up in the dark.

But I’m not a Pharisee … am I?

And, suddenly, I start to squirm. I guess there are a few things I’m smug about. And when it’s ‘all about me’ and my impressiveness, I might as well be a Pharisee. And every time I am less than impressive, where others can see, my carefully curated house of cards tumbles.

Perhaps I need to return to my Saviour, to his righteousness and grace. As the hymn reminds me, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring … simply to thy cross I cling’.

***Lord Jesus, prune away the Pharisee in me. Remind me of your grace that paid all for me. Thank you, Lord, that while I worry too much about outward appearance, you look at my heart. Amen.***

*Rachael Stelzer is the Primary Lay Chaplain at Coomera Anglican College near Brisbane. She is a member of Our Saviour Lutheran Church in Rochedale and teaches primary kids in the Growing Kids group. Rachael loves crafts, reading, and sharing meals, coffee and life with her family and friends.*