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**Sunday 19 November 2023 to**

**Sunday 26 November 2023**

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Sunday 19 November 2023

**God’s strange economy**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them (Matthew 25:14).***

Read [Matthew 25: 14–30](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A+14-30&version=NRSVUE)

It seems strange that God would use money (before we came to use the term ‘talent’ to mean a thing we’re good at, it was a Roman unit of currency) to help us understand the kingdom of heaven. Money is more commonly associated with earthly realities, like power and opportunity for gain at another’s expense. Furthermore, how can God require us to produce a certain return on heavenly investments when we know that our salvation is only through God’s grace? That sounds like works righteousness.

Is the man who goes on a journey in today’s parable supposed to be Jesus? It seems that the man is setting up the third servant for failure by giving him only one talent when the others receive five and two, respectively. That doesn’t sound like Jesus, but this I know to be true: each of us has times when we imagine God to be that unfair and loves others more than he loves us or even sets us up for failure.

As we compare ourselves with those around us, do we identify with one of these servants? If so, do we forever see ourselves as that same servant? Or can you see yourself in any of the three servant roles in the story?

I can be any of those servants on any given day. Not only that but sometimes, when I think I am being extremely faithful to Jesus, my master, I find that I have, in fact, been hurting myself and others. At other times, when I feel without hope or direction, I later discover that my frailty has touched someone else’s soul. That’s God’s economy for you!

Today’s story, like any parable, raises a lot of questions. However, the money analogy does help remind us that something precious has been entrusted to us while we wait for Jesus to return and that we are called to do something with it.

The man in the parable who received ‘just one talent’ received the equivalent of 15 to 20 years’ salary for an average worker. That’s a lot! That’s how generous Jesus is, and he invites us to participate in his abundance.

But we go on our way knowing that, unlike the servants in the story, we have the freedom won by Jesus and God’s Spirit going ahead of us to multiply our heavenly treasures.

***Dear Jesus, thank you for inviting me to join you in your kingdom work. May your amazing generosity be evident in my life and flow to all I meet. Amen.***

*Kathy Matuschka serves within the LCA Queensland District as Assistant Director for Mission. Kathy and her husband Mark have three wonderful adult children, one lovely son-in-law and another officially joining the family next month.*

Monday 20 November 2023

**Jesus: the sacrifice and the scapegoat**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Those who passed by hurled insults at him (Mark 15:29a).***

Read [Mark 15:22–32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15%3A+22-32&version=NRSVUE)

As the marketing urges us to prepare for Christmas, it may seem strange to be reflecting on Christ’s passion. While the stores arrange their displays of glitz and glamour, Christians approach the season of Advent by pausing to reflect on the transience of this world. As we join all creation in groaning with longing for the restoration of all things, it seems timely that this week, we will reflect on God’s amazing rescue plan for us and all creation.

Today, I invite you to notice the behaviour of the members of the public who passed by Jesus while he was on the cross, hurling insults at him as they went. And then the chief priests and teachers of the law, who scapegoated Jesus more privately. (Rather than leading the charge of abuse, the Jewish leaders repeated the comments of the crowd … bravely amongst themselves.)

And if you can bear to, look at Jesus, staying on the cross and taking the fear and anger of all humanity.

In Leviticus 16, Yahweh gave the Hebrew people a process of atoning for their sins. It involved two goats, one of which was sacrificed on the altar and the second which carried the ‘wickedness and rebellion’ (Leviticus 16:21) of the people into the desert. This second goat took their anger and fear far away from the Hebrew people, which was essential to the process of setting them free to start again.

Together, the goats pointed ahead to Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sins of humankind. Jesus was a willing sacrifice and also a scapegoat – the Son of God who came among us to absorb our anger and abuse while offering himself as the greatest gift ever.

In our world today, nations are paying a high price for the anger and fear that is characteristic of all humankind. Scapegoating behaviour powers wars and other abuses of power because when we scapegoat, we decide that a person or group of people is ‘other’ than us and, therefore, does not require our respect and care.

Have you ever experienced being scapegoated? If so, do you struggle to forgive those who hurt you? Are you experiencing being scapegoated today? Take comfort: Jesus knows how you feel. By staying on the cross for us – even while being scapegoated – Jesus rescued us from all the fear and shame we so often pile onto one another.

***Dear Jesus, thank you for the scapegoating you endured on the cross for me and all humanity. Through your Spirit, please set my heart free from the urge to retaliate when I feel abused. Amen.***

Tuesday 21 November 2023

**What just happened?**

by Kathy Matuschka

***And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’ (Mark 15:39)***

Read [Mark 15:33–39](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15%3A33-39&version=NRSVUE)

The words, ‘it is finished’, appear in John’s Gospel but not in our reading today from the Gospel of Mark. Mark gets the message across in other ways: through the darkness that covers the land, Jesus expressing a sense of being forsaken by God, Jesus crying loudly as he takes his last breath, and the temple curtain being torn in two. We get the picture that something of supernatural significance is occurring. Unprecedented things are happening.

These unprecedented things include a Roman centurion confessing, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God’. I doubt the centurion predicted this outcome when he was assigned to keep order at a crucifixion that day!

The shouts and taunts of the crowd have ceased – the darkness has stolen their confidence. But in the darkness and the desolation, a single voice – one who shouldn’t be announcing it because it questions loyalty to the Roman emperor – proclaims what just happened.

What new things is God revealing to you in your darkness? Who is God using to reveal these things to you? It is Jesus’ way to use the person we least expect – the person who offends us, the person who doesn’t seem smart enough, the person who is so ‘not like us’ – to direct our attention to the things that really matter.

***Dear Jesus, you continue to surprise me with the way things work in your upside-down kingdom. Through your Holy Spirit, open my heart and mind to notice new surprises every day of my life … until one day, you completely take my breath away in my heavenly home. Amen.***

Wednesday 22 November 2023

**Taking a stand**

by Kathy Matuschka

***In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there (Mark 15:41).***

Read [Mark 15:40–47](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15%3A40-47&version=NRSVUE)

On Monday, we reflected on the scapegoating behaviours that occurred at Jesus’ crucifixion. Today, we notice the opposite: people who go against the flow, take a stand against violence, anger and fear, and find a different way to be in this world.

First, we are invited to notice the women who were watching from a distance: Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Salome, who have followed Jesus throughout his ministry. As they have cared for Jesus' physical needs, they stay to watch over his body to the end of his earthbound existence.

Instead of running from their helplessness as the others have done, they stay.

Likewise, Joseph of Arimathea stays to care for the body of Christ in death. Even today, Joseph’s decision, in contrast to the actions of the rest of the Jewish council, bears witness to the extent of his hope in the kingdom of God.

Taking a stand against the crowd can be hard work. Unlike the people in today’s text, most of us probably won’t go down in history for differentiating ourselves from the misguided mainstream.

It can be hard work, too, to watch as others fail to even notice the fear and anger they project on others and the impact of their polarising behaviours.

Most of the time, it is the many behaving badly who get the attention, not the one or two who decline to follow along. Despite this, I choose to believe that every action toward justice and mercy – whether by doing something you know is right or by refusing to do something that diminishes others – has ripple effects in the kingdom of God, where it matters.

***Loving Lord Jesus Christ, we hope for so much goodness from ourselves and the world around us, and yet, we so often fail to live up to our expectations. Give us the strength, grace and hope to start anew each day, living in the identity you achieved for each of us on your cross. Amen.***

Thursday 23 November 2023

**Don’t be alarmed**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:8).***

Read [Mark 16:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+16%3A1-8&version=NRSVUE)

How is it that these women who stayed for the horrific crucifixion of Jesus Christ are now driven to fear by an empty tomb? We aren’t told why, so we can only guess.

Was it the supernatural appearance of the young man in white? Could it be the cumulative shock of the past few days coming to a head as they arrive to mourn and depart, not knowing what to do or think? Could it be the absence of the body of Christ – could it be that for the women, anything was bearable as long as they knew where Jesus was? Or was it their fear of public speaking, having been asked to proclaim a very important message to Jesus’ disciples?

Reflecting on these women who cared for Jesus in life and intended to care for his body in death makes me think of those today who care for the body of Christ – the church.

While this earth remains, to be part of the body of Christ is to live every day with the reality that the church, though redeemed, also remains broken. We look forward to our never-ending life in heaven, where the body of Christ will be fully restored, and we will live in perfect peace and unity.

Maybe, like me, you fear for the Christian church. In these times between Jesus’ resurrection and his return, it’s often hard to discern the actual state of the church. As the Gregorian chant says, ‘In the midst of life we are in death’.

We, too, need the assurance: ‘Don’t be alarmed’ (Mark 16:6). Just as Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, experienced both life and death during his time on earth, so the Christian church (which is also the body of Christ) continues to know life and death … and resurrection.

Using the words of a song based on Romans 8:38,39, we pray:

***Nothing can separate us from the love of God
Neither death nor life, not any other power
Nothing can separate us from his precious love
So do not fear, for you are his. Amen.***

Friday 24 November 2023

**The Lord works with us**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:20).***

Read [Mark 16:9–20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+16%3A9-20&version=NRSVUE)

Today’s text begins with the 11 remaining disciples refusing to believe Mary Magdalene and two others who have announced to them that Jesus is alive.

And then Jesus comes. And he commissions the remaining disciples to preach the gospel and perform signs in his name.

And blow me down, they do! The disciples saw their resurrected Lord and received his commission. And off they went – preaching everywhere.

I’m drawn to the final words in verse 20: ‘and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.’

Signs point us to things or draw attention to things. In today’s text, they point to (or underscore) Jesus’ commission, which, in turn, invites us to trust in Jesus Christ, the Word of God and our Saviour.

Today’s text offers two wonderful assurances, even for us today. Firstly, as we speak God’s word, Jesus is working with us to confirm his word through signs. This leads to the second point: because it is Jesus working the signs, we needn’t be concerned about what might or might not happen when we share our faith.

***Dear Holy Spirit, help me to trust your work and cooperate with you as you speak your truth into and through my life. Amen.***

Saturday 25 November 2023

**The rock of our salvation**

by Kathy Matuschka

***Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation (Psalm 95:1).***

Read [Psalm 95:1–7a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+95%3A1-7&version=NRSVUE)

This week, we’ve been reminded that while we’re called to faithfully bear witness to God’s love and salvation, it’s not about us. Thinking backwards through the week, we’ve considered the following:

* The signs of the kingdom that occur are not our doing but Jesus at work through his word.
* We needn’t be alarmed by any signs of life or death or resurrection in God’s church.
* Sometimes, we bear the most significant witness, not so much by doing something as by refusing to go with the flow of negativity.
* Sometimes, the least likely people are the ones who proclaim the gospel to us (like the Roman centurion).
* Jesus knows about the fear, shame and anger we project onto others and willingly takes it on himself.
* Jesus’ generosity toward each of us is out of this world!

What more needs to be said? The psalmist refers to the Lord as our rock and us as the ‘people of his pasture, the flock under his care’ (verse 7a).

Is there one of these truths above that you might carry with you as you prepare to walk through the Advent and Christmas seasons? As you finish the tasks you set yourself for 2023? As you prepare for Christmas celebrations with your congregation, family or friends? As you think of the loved ones you miss, including those you won’t see again this side of heaven?

What do you need at this time from Jesus, the rock of our salvation and our kind, loving shepherd?

***Oh come, let us sing for joy to our Lord; let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. Oh come, my soul, trust in the hope of this world’s Saviour. Oh come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord, Amen.***

Sunday 26 November 2023

**Christ in me! Christ in you!**

by Peter Bean

***Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? (Matthew 25:37)***

Read [Matthew 25:31–46](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A31-46+&version=NRSVUE)

What surprises me about these verses is that neither the ‘good’ nor ‘evil’ people knew what they were doing! (Perhaps Jesus was praying on the cross for forgiveness for everyone!)

So how do we know how to live well if we don’t even recognise when we are? Perhaps we need to take a step back from the doing and the trying to live well.

Before we do, we are! Who are we? Children of God! Friends of the Saviour! In John 14:20, Jesus says, ‘You are in me, and I am in you’.

Perhaps we need to look in the mirror and see Christ (rather than an old, craggy face like mine or a young, beautiful one, possibly like yours). See Christ in me. See Christ in you. See Christ in the other person. Then act towards (do to) the other person as you would to Christ.

Then, who we are is what we do. Our actions and what we do reflect the gift we have received of life and forgiveness, grace and mercy, and justice and integrity. Then Christ lives in me and through me. And if Christ lives in the other person, what we do is being done to Christ.

And Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 begin to make sense. They are not at all about us making judgments on others, but recognising and realising the gift of life we receive and can give!

St Patrick (AD 390–461) picked this up in his famous prayer (perhaps look up the whole prayer for context), but for now, why not pray this portion of it with me:

***Christ with me; Christ before me; Christ behind me;
Christ in me; Christ beneath me; Christ above me;
Christ in hearts of all who know me;
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. Amen.***

*Peter is often out tending his garden – with 83 fruit and nut trees and extensive native bushes, he says there is a lot to do! Other times, he will be walking his dog, reading (too many books at a time), enjoying his family (15 grandchildren!), and occasionally writing – poetry, opinion pieces, devotions! To keep out of mischief, he is currently teaching himself to play the piano and is writing a paraphrase of each psalm. You can read these on his website, Creative Walking* [*www.creativewalking.com.au/psalm-reflections.html*](http://www.creativewalking.com.au/)