****

**Sunday 16 July 2023 to Sunday 23 July 2023**

****

Sunday 16 July 2023

**Whoever has ears, let them hear**

by Maria Rudolph

***Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables (Matthew 13:2,3a).***

Read Matthew 13:1–9,18–23

Wiring up the pastor with a microphone and checking the sound levels on the lectern are commonplace Sunday morning activities. Some churches even have a hearing aid channel area. After all, we want to ensure everyone can hear what is spoken! Not long ago, we had to rely on the pastor to project their voice to carry the unamplified words to people’s ears.

At least most of our preaching and teaching takes place indoors. Think about Jesus during his ministry. While he also taught inside synagogues, his teachings mostly took place outdoors. Catching his words while walking alongside him on the road is okay. But think about the crowd while Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount.

In today’s reading, a large crowd is gathered on the shore, while Jesus is bobbing up and down in a boat. Take a moment to consider the scene. Waves gently rolling in, the wind in your ears, the sound of the mumbling crowd around you, maybe someone coughing, and a seagull screeching occasionally. And there is Jesus, out in the boat, teaching. How many of his words would be audible to you? Would you be straining to hear him, hanging on to his lip movements to help you make out the sounds? Every word he says matters. You don’t want to miss any.

Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven – about God. The words of Jesus are life and truth! Your ears prick up at the parable – you want to have the kind of soil that produces a hundredfold return from the seed of God’s word. Jesus says, ‘Whoever has ears, let them hear’. And that’s all without amplification. It is much, much easier for us with our fancy sound systems and microphones to make Bible teachers and preachers audible. But does better hearing mean better understanding? How blessed are we to have so much help to hear God’s word? We have the gift of audibility: the Holy Spirit gives the gift of understanding. Be bold and ask the Holy Spirit to open the ears of your heart to a renewed understanding of God’s word today – for good soil conditions for the seed of God’s word to fall and that it will bear much fruit to the glory of God.

***Holy Spirit, open my heart to gain new understanding as I hear God’s word. Help me not squander the many opportunities I have to listen to and ponder teaching and preaching on the Bible and instead inspire and grow me each day so these seeds fall on fertile soil, germinate, grow and bear much fruit to your glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Monday 17 July 2023

**Intercession**

by Maria Rudolph

***Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17).***

Read John 17:12–19

Many prayers made by pastors before preaching a sermon begin with or entirely consist of these words Jesus prays: ‘Sanctify them [us] by the truth; your word is truth.’ This is part of Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John’s Gospel. Jesus intercedes for his followers and the coming church. Jesus intercedes for us.

The Holy Spirit also intercedes for us. Romans 8:26,27 teaches that ‘the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God’.

Intercession (prayer) begins and ends in God. God the Trinity is three in One. The Holy Spirit fully knows the will of God and intercedes for us in accordance with it. Jesus, who reminds us through his prayer in John 17 that ‘all he has is God’s, and all God has is his’ (John 17:10), also intercedes for us according to God’s will.

We are so blessed by this intercession! If God is on our side, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? The answer is nothing, and nobody can stand between us or separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39)! You never have to think that no-one is interceding and praying for you. God himself intercedes for you – the very Way, the Truth and the Life. We are led by Jesus to pray: sanctify us in your truth; your word is truth. We are sanctified, or, in other words, made holy, by God’s word – by reading it, hearing it, pondering it, internalising it, living it. Jesus himself is the Word-made-flesh who sanctifies us. We do well to cling to Jesus at all times because he has the words of eternal life.

***Dearest Jesus, help me by your Holy Spirit to cling to you, the Way, the Truth and the Life, at all times. Amen.***

Tuesday 18 July 2023

**Unity**

by Maria Rudolph

***That they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity (John 17:22b,23a).***

Read John 17:20–26

The theme for General Synod next year is ‘The gift of God – It’s grace that unites us’. What a beautiful encapsulation of the ending of Jesus’ high priestly prayer in our John reading today. Jesus is the culmination of God’s grace through the redemption of all people by his blood. A better gift doesn’t exist. The climax of Jesus’ extensive prayer captured in John 17 is for the unity of all believers – that we may be one as Jesus and the Father are. If only we could achieve such a blessed unity in our earthly life already. But it seems this will only come to completion when Jesus returns.

Jesus, who is fervently praying for unity, is also the very one in whom we find true unity. Paul reminds us (Ephesians 4:3–6): ‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.’

The key is Jesus. The reason for unity is one hope: grace – the redemption through Jesus’ blood. The reason for unity is one baptism – new birth through water and the word. God the Father is over all, through all and in all. Jesus is the centre. The foundation. The focus. The reason. Unity in faith means all believers can follow, serve and proclaim Christ and this blessed hope – together. Unity in Christ means finding common ground in Jesus, which sustains us when we have theological, cultural and practical differences. The colour of our skin, the language we speak, our convictions on what music or liturgy we should have in worship, if women or men should be ordained, or whether we can pray in tongues – our starting point in any of our big and small issues is recalling our Christ-centred unity as baptised believers. This is an ongoing work in progress to which we are called in different ways throughout in our lives. Let us take the words of Jesus’ prayer and make them our own – especially as our LCANZ journeys toward the General Convention of Synod in 2024.

Today, our prayer comes from song lyrics by Robin Mann (used with permission).

***May we be one,  
bound in love forever,  
growing close together day by day;  
growing as God fills us with his life –  
we are joined in him; he makes us one.***

***May we be one,  
as our Father planned it –  
may the love of Jesus make us strong.  
No-one can harm us when he is near –  
he has brought us peace; he makes us one.***

***May we be one,  
Jesus' truth to bind us –  
with his body, he unites us all;  
dying our death, he restores our life,  
living with us now; he makes us one.***

***May we be one,  
sharing life together  
with the Father and his only Son.  
Now we have life in this world of death;  
heaven has begun; he makes us one. Amen.***

Wednesday 19 July 2023

**The call**

by Maria Rudolph

***Jesus said to her, ‘Mary’ (John 20:16a).***

Read John 20:1–18

This account of Easter Sunday from John’s Gospel was the one we heard at our Easter services this year. For me, the first one on that day was a dawn service in Kings Park, a majestic green sanctuary located on a rock overlooking the CBD of Perth, girded by the Swan River, with the Perth Hills forming a beautiful backdrop. The service started in deep darkness, much the way it would have been for Mary Magdalene when she rushed to the tomb before daybreak. She could just make out the outline of the stone rolled away from the entrance. It is darkest just before dawn. The Light of the World was not there. He had risen.

As the dawn service progressed, the sky above the Perth CBD turned from red, to purple, to pink, and then the golden gleam of the sun bathed the glassy high-rises and watery surface of the Swan River in its splendour. Mary returned to the tomb in the light of day and stood outside crying. The Light of the World had returned and stood before her, yet she could not recognise him. He needed to call her by name. ‘Mary.’ And with that, her eyes were open. All her joy, hope and longing was there in Jesus.

You – wherever you may be reading this devotion today – are also called by name by Jesus, the Light of the World. You are his (Isaiah 43:1). The light of his dawn brightens even your greatest darkness. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face, as Mary did that day in the garden. Now feel encouraged to do as Jesus tells her that first Easter morning: Go and tell of him to others, so they can hear the calling voice of their Shepherd, too, and walk in his light.

***Dearest Jesus, thank you for dying and rising again from the dead. Because of you, death has no sting, and I can live in the joy and light of your love forevermore. Thank you for calling me by name. Help me go and tell of your good news to those around me. Amen.***

Thursday 20 July 2023

**Slow off the mark**

by Maria Rudolph

***Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21).***

Read John 20:19–31

Are you a bit slow off the mark sometimes? How about our LCANZ? There are plenty of opinions on why it takes the church so long to face large financial deficits, a major pastor shortage, and the dwindling numbers in congregational membership. Facing realities is one step, and then adapting to these realities by adjusting your *modus operandi* is another.

Praise be to God that we are in good company in being slow off the mark. Easter Sunday morning, two of the disciples had a running match to the tomb and believed in the resurrection. Easter Sunday evening, we find the disciples huddled together with the doors locked in fear. Amazingly, the resurrected Jesus stood among them and declared his peace over them. Shortly before his crucifixion, he had told them, ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid’ (John 14:27). Here they were, hiding and afraid. Jesus meets them right where they are, breathes on them to receive the Holy Spirit and even grants them the authority to forgive or retain sins.

This encounter could have changed their course of action. Yet the disciples are slow off the mark. Instead of going forth in confidence as Jesus sends them out, we find them, one week later, still huddled together behind locked doors. Jesus’ words, ‘Stop doubting and believe’ (John 20:27), are not just directed at the disciple Thomas. They are directed for of us. Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to help us not just know the peace of God and the hope we have in Jesus but also adjust our living and acting according to it. We need not hide and fear in the face of the big issues faced by our LCANZ or what we face in our private lives. We carry the peace of Jesus in us. We carry his death in us through our baptism and thus also his resurrection (Romans 6:4). God does not rely on us to be quick off the mark – God is simply always with us, always working in and through us. God invites us daily to accept and embrace the peace and hope he gives us, so we can face each day with confidence in his grace and care.

***Loving God, I can be slow off the mark when it comes to putting my actions where my words of faith are. Help me understand and trust in the peace and hope you give me and what that means for my everyday life. I want to believe; help my unbelief. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Friday 21 July 2023

**Brekkie with Jesus**

by Maria Rudolph

***Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast’ (John 21:12a).***

Read John 21:1–14

Once a week, I lead a church hall full of zero- to five-year-olds and their carers in a ministry program for little children so they can get to know Jesus better. I love asking them what they had for breakfast – I’ve heard of some pretty quirky toddler brekkie combinations over the years!

Jesus cooked breakfast for the disciples at least one time, recorded in John’s Gospel after his resurrection – and presumably on other occasions before the Easter events. He used what was available and commonplace for them at the time – fish baked on burning coals served with some bread. It sounds quite nice, although not the first thing I would choose to eat in the morning, but in order to have brekkie with Jesus, I'd say yes, please!

That’s an incredibly detailed account of the menu on that morning when the resurrected Jesus once again appeared to the disciples. And there is more detail, like the exact number of fish caught in the net – 153. It’s interesting to look at what is missing and left out of the story too. Why had the disciples returned to their fishing boats after the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them twice already, breathed the Holy Spirit on them and sent them out? Or why did they not recognise Jesus by his appearance, although he had already appeared to them twice since his death? They did, however, recognise Jesus by his actions, similar to the disciples recognising him in the action of breaking the bread in Emmaus (Luke 24:31).

I wonder if those little kids and their adult carers in our church hall can recognise Jesus by the actions of the ministry team when we sing, dance and play together? I bet they do. I bet people also recognise Jesus by your actions when you show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the fruit of the same Spirit Jesus breathed on his disciples. This same Spirit has been poured out on you. Let your actions of love towards other people be accompanied by a prayer today that the Holy Spirit reveals the living God to them as they recognise Jesus in you.

***Come, Holy Spirit, and fill me afresh this day. With your transformational power, fill the people around me today and let them recognise God’s face, hands and feet through me and my actions so that your grace can be revealed to them. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Saturday 22 July 2023

**Truth**

by Maria Rudolph

***Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth (Psalm 86:11a).***

Read Psalm 86:11–17

Truth is a big topic all the time. Jesus prays, ‘Sanctify me by the truth, your word is truth’ (John 17:17). As Christians, we ultimately ground our lives on God and his word as the litmus test for daily living. God’s word is truth for Christians.

In that context, there are a few important parameters to remember. Most importantly: Love for God and love for our neighbour (Mark 12:29–31) is the golden rule and the fulfilment of all commandments. Also, God’s word is not a law book or manual for every situation under the sun; in fact, there are plenty of situations that are not clearly defined by Scripture. It doesn’t mean the Bible doesn’t apply. We go back to the golden rule in every unclear situation. How would we honour God in it, and how would we honour our neighbour? And then grace. Jesus embodies God’s mercy through the undeserved gift of grace, the sacrificial death of Jesus for us. Christian people are grace people. Teach me your way of grace, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth. The special thing about Christ-followers is that our faith and salvation are not performance-based or works-based. We have been saved by grace through faith in Christ (Romans 3:23). When we have questions about a particular topic and honour God’s word as the ultimate truth, we look through the lens of faith in Jesus, loving God and our neighbour, and through the lens of grace. Some of us might be accustomed to today’s verse from Psalm 86 forming part of the Matins liturgy, a beautiful prayer to guide today’s pondering and a good one for us to pray in conclusion:

***Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Make me wholehearted in fearing your name, that I may walk in your truth. Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Amen.***

Sunday 23 July 2023

**This type of weeding isn’t for us**

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

***But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them’ (Matthew 13:29).***

Read Matthew 13:24–30,36–43

Some of you who are better gardeners than I am may have trouble tolerating weeds in your pristine gardens. The presence of that which is impure and out of place is hard to take. Among your lovely lush herbs, vegetables and flowers are ugly weeds that aren’t supposed to be there. The natural thing, of course, is to get rid of them. However, in Jesus’ parable, this is the point at which the agricultural analogy breaks down.

In Jesus’ parable, the field is the world, the good seed is the children of the kingdom, and the weeds are the children of the evil one. Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t deny that the devil is active and has those on his side. The impulse, therefore, to get rid of evil isn’t the problem. The problem is that, as fallible human beings, we don’t have the insight to do this without inflicting tremendous damage. We’ll uproot the wheat along with the weeds.

In a time where the values of our surrounding culture are increasingly at odds with those of Christ’s church, it can become tempting for Christians to want to see the causes of evil removed from our world. Indeed, we do need to take sin and evil seriously and struggle against injustice. Especially in the church, we’re called to exercise discipline where appropriate to lead to repentance and protect the vulnerable. However, our Lord’s words today are a warning about humility and caution in this and that final judgement is always in Christ’s hands rather than ours.

Thank God for that! Not only is the Son of Man capable of rendering this justice in such a way that the wheat isn’t uprooted along with the weeds, but this judge is also your Saviour. He’s the source of goodness that makes good seed even possible, and because of him, you have the promise of shining like the sun in the kingdom of your Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

***Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son to plant good seeds in this world. Help us trust in your perfect justice when we’re tempted to take final judgement into our own hands. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***

*Joshua is married to Kimberley, and they have four children together. He is a pastor of the Lutheran Church of Australia and previously served at St Paul’s Nundah in Queensland and Bethlehem Adelaide in South Australia. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Concordia Seminary St Louis, USA, and enjoying the adventure.*