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**Sunday 6 June to Sunday 13 June 2021**

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Sunday 6 June 2021

# Repenting out of the divided house into the kingdom of God

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand (Mark 3:25).**

Read Mark 3:20–35

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the unemployment rate peaked at 28.1 per cent and averaged 23.4 per cent over 1930–34. To put this in perspective, during the COVID-19 economic upheaval, so far, the unemployment rate peaked at 7.4 per cent in June 2020 and is now back down to the mid-5 per cent. It is commonly accepted that the stubbornly high unemployment rate and accompanying human misery of the Great Depression was caused mainly by countries undermining each other. They should have been cooperating for the good of each other, as they have in the COVID-19 response. It’s a common theme in life: people who know better don’t try hard enough to get along.

In the reading today, Jesus is attacked by two groups that really should have known better. His family accuse him of being mad. The teachers of the law – Israel’s teachers – accuse him of being in partnership with Satan, ‘By the prince of demons he is driving out demons’ (Mark 3:22).

Jesus addresses the teachers of the law first. He points out how illogical their statement is. Jesus wouldn’t tie up the demons – as he has been doing in his exorcisms – if he were on Satan’s side. That house would not stand. He graciously warns them to not blaspheme the Spirit any longer because the Spirit can’t forgive that sin … which is commonly interpreted as meaning that they need to address their unbelief and stop relying on their own self-righteousness lest they remain unforgiven. Jesus then addresses his family, reminding them that his true family are those who do God’s will (verse 34).

It strikes me that in the church, not least our local congregations, people who really do know better spend too much undermining each other and not getting along. Like Jesus’ family and the teachers of the law, we too quickly revert to labels or impugn false motives. A house divided cannot stand! Jesus provides the answer when he tells us to do God’s will, having clearly laid it out in Mark 1:15, ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news’. This is pure gospel. It’s the offer of forgiveness, a time to make a new start. It’s an opportunity to no longer blaspheme against the Spirit in unbelief and self-justification. It’s an invitation to be embraced in God’s family. Thank God! For much more than economic misery is at stake.

**Lord Jesus, lead me to repent so that I do not grieve you or your Holy Spirit. In the confidence of your forgiveness, help me to right my wrongs and treat all people as though it were you that I was talking with or about. Through your Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.**

Monday 7 June 2021

# ‘Christful’ words for the distressed

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**Blessed is the one whom God corrects (Job 5:17).**

Read Job 5:17–27

I grew up in an era where children were still smacked when disobedient. All of that is a bit of a minefield – strong views on either side! I mention it, though, because I remember one time when I saw a ‘smacker’ saying to the ‘smackee’, ‘One day you’ll thank me for this!’  Yeah, right! Needless to say, it seemed pretty empty and completely unlikely. My fellow child felt no warmth towards the smacker or comfort from their words – probably only embitterment.

The words in today’s text are from Job’s friend Eliphaz. He is trying to comfort Job, who is wretchedly sitting in ashes, scraping his sores with broken pottery and grieving the loss of all he holds dear. ‘Blessed is the one whom God corrects.’ Do you think it would comfort Job right there at that moment? Sitting desolate in his pain and anguish, would Job really be comforted with Eliphaz’s confident words about an eventual restoration, even if it were true?

When people are profoundly miserable, grieving or hurting, it’s natural to want to console them. But the less we know about them and their personal situation, the easier it is to get it wrong. It is especially risky to stray into the area of understanding why things happen.

For example, Scripture indeed attributes discipline to God in some circumstances (Hebrews 12:4–13). But how do we know what’s played out in the heavenly realm (Job 1:6–12; 2:1–8)? What’s God, what’s evil, what’s gravity (Luke 13:1–5)? We don’t know. It’s not hard to further deepen the pain of the sufferer as we blunder around. Praying, writing a card, cooking their favourite meal or doing some jobs for them, if your relationship is close enough, will likely be more helpful ways of letting them know you care.

That said, a good thing to be confident in is how the sort of restoration spoken of in Job 5:18–27 – and many other places in Scripture – does have its fulfilment in Christ. Having suffered for us, Christ in his resurrection is the promise of heavenly life for us. It’s only through that lens we can ever really see the sentiment behind Eliphaz’s words being true – words such as ‘At destruction and famine you shall laugh’ (Job 5:22a). The thing is, that’s not a quick out-the-door of Sunday worship conversation. Nevertheless, we can always thank Christ for his cross that leads to life and for the prospect of faith strengthened in suffering. And sometimes, we are even truly privileged to console a fellow believer in such ‘Christful’ caring words of his promise!

**Lord Jesus, draw near to all those we know who suffer this day. Help us to listen well, pray fervently and gently be your hands and feet in whatever way is best. In your name, we pray. Amen.**

Tuesday 8 June 2021

**Looking in the right place for the wrong thing**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life (John 5:39).**

Read John 5:30–47

When you get a snack attack, where do you go? It might be the fridge or the pantry. And once you are there, what do you go for? My wife regularly reminds me that eight almonds or a small serve of dried fruit are far healthier than chocolate, chips, or peanut butter on toast! Likewise, veggie sticks are a better option than cheese and mettwurst. The pantry or the fridge might be the right place to look when hungry (ignoring the fruit bowl!), but what you choose might be the ‘wrong’ thing.

That’s how I read today’s text. Jesus is speaking with the Jewish leaders who are angry with him because he healed a paralysed man on the Sabbath day of rest. One of the things he points out is that they have been looking in the right place – but for the wrong thing. It’s right to look in the Scriptures and for life no less (verse 38). They have even gone to the right person at that point: Moses (there is no New Testament yet). But there, they have focused on the wrong thing: the law and their ever stricter and more pious interpretations than the prophecies of Christ that Moses declares (for example, see Deuteronomy 18:15–20). It’s kind of like the difference between going for junky carbs rather than a low GI high-fibre slice of bread! Just like junky carbs end up accusing us through the evidence that remains as we carry around extra kilos, Jesus says, ‘Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set’ (verse 43).

The question for us is, where do we go to be fed? There is no doubt that the Scriptures contain the words of life. But our legalistic and judgemental minds like to go for a quick grab of law. There, we can either justify our judgements of others or point to our own righteousness. That’s like empty carbs, though, because there is no life in thinking that’s where nutrition resides. We’ll soon be accused by our failures. The law’s job is not to bring life but to show us our need for Christ. Christ is where true life resides (John 11:25), and he is whom we keep our focus on. ‘For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). Keep looking there!

**Holy Spirit, thank you for your Scriptures. Kill off in us the tendency to look to the law of Moses to understand the Father’s love for us, rather than the grace and truth of life that has come through Jesus. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.**

Wednesday 9 June 2021

# No-one ever spoke like this

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**No-one ever spoke the way this man does (John 7:46).**

Read John 7:40–53

For my 11th birthday, my dear parents gave me a Lego fire station set. A friend came around after school to help celebrate my big day. I remember looking at him incredulously as he rolled his eyes at me for following the Lego instruction book. He confidently declared he only ever builds straight off the picture on the front of the box. I remember thinking, how is that even possible to get the set built properly? There are always blocks that can’t be seen in the picture. Who would want to compromise the structure or not get the most out of every special facet?

It seems that many people, Christians included, take a ‘go with the picture on the box’ approach to Jesus. This is rather than getting to know what Jesus himself has really said about who he is and what he has done. We risk ending up with a caricature of him not made in his true image. Indeed, we can miss more than facets by having our whole faith compromised.

Just one reason today’s text matters is because people regularly tell me they are not into attending church or God or Christianity, mostly because of some reason not to do with Jesus himself. For example, cover-ups in the church over moral failures, a teaching out of sync with the world, or a supposed lack of depth compared with their favourite pop-Christianity writer. While the issues definitely need sympathetic unpacking, it strikes me that what’s most needed in all this is to get back to Jesus because ‘no-one ever spoke the way this man does’.

Those words were uttered by the religious police in their self-defence for failing to arrest Jesus. Even if they were not originally meant in support of Jesus, ironically, they contain a profound truth and reminder about where we will find the real Christ and what is really important in Christianity. They also remind us of the worth of going back to Jesus himself as the authoritative source. As Jesus said a few verses earlier, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them’ (John 7:37). Is it time for you to read through the gospels and hear Jesus for himself?

**Thank you, Holy Spirit, that through Jesus’ words, you show us he is the Christ (John 7:41a). Keep us going back to Jesus’ own words of life, especially when we start to look for excuses to disengage. Keep us testifying, gently and lovingly, to all who have focused elsewhere to go back to the one that no-one has ever spoken like – Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith! In his name, and because of his promises, we pray. Amen.**

Thursday 10 June 2021

# Listening for yourself, not others

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God (John 8:47).**

Read John 8:39–47

Courtroom trials are, by their nature, adversarial and difficult for many people to hear. Accusations, arguments, rebuttals, judgements and convictions.

Perhaps that’s part of why this passage is very difficult to hear. John’s Gospel is sometimes described as one long trial of Jesus. Today’s text is a prime example in the way Jesus is being ‘grilled’ by people who had previously believed in him (see 8:31). This text is also difficult to hear because, historically, it’s been used to justify never justifiable anti-Semitic views and behaviours. Moreover, even today, many Christians mistakenly use it as a basis to reject those with other views.

This text can be more helpfully heard when we hear it as addressed to us. And then focus on Jesus’ warning of the adversary – the devil. Forewarned is forearmed (see Ephesians 6:10–17). Jesus alerts us to the devil’s main occupation: lying! This is something we are all at risk of being the victims of all the time. Jesus knows the devil’s lying habits only too well. They first surfaced in the Garden of Eden when the serpent asked, ‘Did God really say?’ (Genesis 3:1). Jesus, in acutely knowing the lying question – one we all ask all too often – makes his decisive answer worthy of believing. Yet it’s an answer in actions, not words, and from another tree: Calvary’s cross that Jesus dies on to take away the sins of the world.

And what about for us now as children of God made free by Christ’s death for us on the tree? Well, listen to our living Lord here. Watch out for the devil’s lies! Be forearmed by knowing God’s whole counsel. A few verses earlier Jesus says, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples’ (John 8:31). In John’s Gospel, holding to Christ’s teaching is first and foremost believing. Yes! God really did say that his Son Jesus is sufficient for reconciling us to God eternally (John 8:32)! Then out of trusting him follows the service and love Jesus asks of all his disciples in response. God really said that!

**Lord Jesus, your final word to us has been a word of grace earned on Calvary’s tree. As we live in your grace, we thank you for your words that warn. Guard our tongues so that we testify about you truly. Guide us to leave judgement to you. In your name, we pray. Amen.**

Friday 11 June 2021

# Who do you think he is?

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**‘Are you greater than our Father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?’ (John 8:53).**

Read John 8:48–59

‘Who do you think you are?’ It’s a question you might have been asked by someone you have offended and who is having a go at you. It’s in that context that Jesus was asked the same question by his adversaries.

Who did Jesus think he was? The 11 verses of today’s text are typically dense, as is often the case for John’s Gospel. Nevertheless, three beautiful self-identifications of Jesus stand out for us in three separate verses.

Firstly, Jesus is the one whose word brings life. ‘Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death’ (verse 51). ‘Obey’ here is not in the first instance about keeping the law. To ‘obey’ Jesus in John’s Gospel is to make our home in him, to remain in him as he remains in us (John 15:4). This happens when we believe in him and his word. He is the sent word that God now stands before us with the benefits of his very death, resurrection and life eternal for us to receive.

Secondly, Jesus is the one that reminds us that those who believe rejoice. ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad’ (verse 56). Abraham believed God (made his home in God – Genesis 15:6), saw his deliverance (Genesis 15:17–21; 19:29; 21:2; 22:9–18) and laughed with surprised gladness (Genesis 17:7). Those making their home in Christ rejoice, don’t they? (Reading Abraham’s life as recorded in Genesis 12–25 won’t disappoint if you can prioritise it today.)

Thirdly, Jesus is the eternal one, greater than the head of God’s chosen – Abraham – because he is God. ‘Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!’ (John 8:58). ‘I Am’ is God’s name. Jesus, the Word, was with God in the beginning. ‘Through him all things were made … in him was life, and that life was the light of all people’ (John 1:3,4 NRSV).

Jesus, able to back his claim entirely through his deeds, death and resurrection, declares he is our life-bringer who invites us to make his home with him. The one who brings eternal rejoicing. The one who brings God because he is God.

Who, for you, do you think Jesus is?

**Lord Jesus, thank you for your invitation to make our home with you. You are God and bring life and rejoicing to match. Bear this out in my life for all people I live around. Through your Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.**

Saturday 12 June 2021

**Something we know to be true**

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High (Psalm 92:1).**

Read Psalm 92:1–4,12–15

About an hour before the appointed beginning of worship, the faithful communion steward would arrive each week to begin his task of setting the Lord’s table. After our customary exchange of the Lord’s peace, the conversation would turn to how many might be at worship. Pre-COVID, when most people used the common cup, how many individual cups to put out? We’d compare notes on who had told us through the week wouldn’t be there (something that feels awfully close to hearing confession at times!). Sometimes, we’d conclude that it seems it might be a bit down this week. Once on this type of hunch, we put out a bit less than usual. We were soon scrambling for more supplies. Thereafter, we always said, ‘Well, let’s just see what the Spirit brings today’. And, honestly, whenever we thought things might be a bit low, the Spirit always supplied abundantly.

‘It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High.’ God’s people know this, which is why those counting how many cups to put out are often surprised. God’s people know there is something beautiful and blessing about worship that draws them outside of their own world and into his presence with the other saints, both living and gone before us. There they have their deepest yearnings met. For many people, it’s a still place set apart from the rush of the week. No devices (except for when they switch their Bibles on!). A chance to be fed. A chance to be served by someone else and no less than in the good things of God. This psalm, the only one linked specifically to the Sabbath, reflects this at every turn.

The people of God have been meeting regularly and frequently together for eons around the person of Christ in whom there is ‘no unrighteousness’ (verse 15c). Sometimes we need encouragement, as the writer of Hebrews recognises in their exhortation to not give up meeting together (Hebrews 10:24,25). But when we think about the Sunday ahead, we know it will be good. This psalm was written possibly 3000 years ago. But its recognition of the ‘good’ that thanksgiving is reads like something that the modern wellbeing and mental health movement are only now just catching up with. We didn’t need that to tell us an ancient truth; nevertheless, it shows us that God has been all over our deepest needs since the beginning.

**Lord God, your thoughts are so deep! Thank you that I can be outside of myself and in your world when you serve us in worship. You have made me glad by your work; at the work of your hands, I sing for joy. Richly feed all who sing praises to your name. In his name, by your Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.**

Sunday 13 June 2021

# What makes seeds grow?

by Kathy Matuschka

**Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how (Mark 4:26,27).**

This week’s readings employ agricultural imagery to help us understand the mystery of the kingdom of God.

Read Mark 4:26–34

Do you know how a seed sprouts and grows? I am both astounded by the agricultural technology and expertise available today and inspired by the farmers who apply it in their daily work. At one level, we could say that today we know a lot more about seed germination than people did in Jesus’ time.

But still today, no-one can produce a seed and make it grow. That is God’s work. I have watched friends negotiate the ups and downs of prolonged drought: sometimes crops do pretty well despite minimal rain, and other times, crops are ruined by rain only days before the harvest was due. When it comes to producing a harvest, many things can trump hard work, expertise, materials and technology.

Jesus uses planting and harvesting metaphors to help us imagine what the kingdom of God is like. The strange thing is that in contrast to my skilled and hard-working friends, the farmer in today’s parable doesn’t seem to be putting in much effort at all. Did the farmer plough the ground before scattering the seed? Does the farmer, in fact, sleep or get up and work? We aren’t told. This agricultural account sounds so casual that I wonder if this sort of farmer even deserves to see a good harvest.

And yet the harvest comes, the growth that we cannot guarantee, control or predict. The growth that isn’t about us. What kind of kingdom is this?

**Dear God, I could spend a lifetime trying to make sense of what you are doing and how you are doing it. For today, I thank you for welcoming me into your kingdom and assuring me of your love and provision. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**