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**Sunday 26 September 2021 to Sunday 3 October 2021**

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Sunday 26 September 2021

# Watch your feet!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea (Mark 9:42).**

Read Mark 9:38–50

As we age, the risk of stumbling and falling becomes more significant. We work hard to improve our balance, and, indeed, the exercise regime that my husband and I enjoy includes significant balance work. As we walk around the neighbourhood, we don’t see many stumbling blocks, but we have lots of uneven paving that can prove treacherous.

I am familiar with millstones because, on our farm, there was a rather large, old millstone in the yard. Now, my father was a big man and very strong. But even he could not lift this stone. If you had one of those hanging around your neck and were tossed into the sea, there is no way you could escape drowning.

Jesus’ desire is for all people – even the little ones – to believe in him. And woe betides anyone who puts a stumbling block in their way! The outcome is not just a skinned knee, gravel rash on your palms or even a broken pelvis. We are to do whatever needs to be done to ensure we enter the kingdom of God.

So what stumbling blocks are in our way? Or more importantly, what stumbling blocks are we putting in the way of others? Is our collective behaviour as a church a deterrent for people joining us? Do we as individuals present a less than winsome example of Christian life to our family, friends or neighbours?

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse highlighted some terrible examples of power being misused against children. Our church was not guilt-free in this. As a church, we can guard against further abuses by people with power and authority. One of the strategies for this is learning about what misuse of power looks like to vulnerable people and how we can prevent it.

Hands, feet and eyes are mentioned in the reading today, but what about spoken and written words? In our times, social media allows our voices to be heard more widely than ever before. May we use these opportunities to draw people to Jesus rather than becoming a stumbling block that could result in consequences quite contrary to our expectations.

**Dear Jesus, we know that all people are precious to you, particularly children. We are all your children. Help us to encourage one another in our faith and strive to encourage and support the faith of others, rather than being stumbling blocks to the growth of your kingdom. Forgive us where we have got it wrong, and help us to be a reflection of your love in our lives. Amen.**

Monday 27 September 2021

# A wish is granted

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, ‘Ask what I should give you’ (2 Chronicles 1:7).**

Read 2 Chronicles 1:7–12

Have you ever wondered what you would wish for if you were asked for three wishes? It’s tantalising, isn’t it? Would you want wealth, beauty, power, smaller feet, curly hair, world peace, an end to lockdowns and a cure for COVID-19? Stories about Aladdin’s lamp and wishes coming true have featured in fairy tales for generations, but Solomon hits the jackpot! God asks him what he wants and actually makes good on the request. And not only does Solomon get what he wished for, but God adds on riches, possessions and honour. Wow! That is an amazing response.

I ask God for a lot of things. There are many people who I pray for on a regular and irregular basis. I don’t keep tabs on how these prayers are answered, but I know God hears those prayers and some responses have been over and above what I could have expected.

If we fast forward to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, I find his reference to King Solomon most interesting. We have Solomon, who has wisdom and knowledge plus riches and possessions. Yet when Jesus tells us not to worry about life, he suggests that we ‘consider the lilies of the field … Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’. And as I look at the lilies, freesias, bluebells, daisies, sweet peas and all of the other spring flowers blooming in my garden today, I have to agree that nothing made by humans can match them for colour, form, perfume and beauty! Jesus then suggests that we don’t need to worry as God is there looking after us. There is also the promise: ‘Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well’ (Matthew 6:25ff).

Solomon is not the only one that God is going to shower with blessings. God will also look after each of us in every way. All we need to do is trust. Let’s just do it!

**Loving God, thank you for hearing our prayers and answering them so generously. Please strengthen our faith in you so that when we worry, we recognise that you are looking after us and that you will provide for all of our needs in ways far beyond what we can imagine. Amen.**

Tuesday 28 September 2021

# Don’t swear!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**But I say to you, do not swear at all (Matthew 5:34).**

Read Matthew 5:33–37

Today’s reading takes me back to the second commandment, which I learned as: ‘Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain’.

A more modern version is: ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain’.

Luther’s explanation to this commandment as I learned it is: ‘We should fear and love God that we may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie or deceive by his name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks’.

A more modern version of that is: ‘We are to fear and love God so that we do not use his name superstitiously, or use it to curse, swear, lie or deceive, but call on him in prayer praise and thanksgiving’.

The commandments and explanations speak clearly of what we are taught and what we believe is right and godly. As well as things we are told to avoid, we are encouraged to call on God’s name ‘in every trouble’. God is running a 24/7 call centre just for you and me and promises to get back to us. That’s great customer service.

When we pray, we address God through Jesus – hence, we can sign off using the words ‘in Jesus’ name’. Jesus has told us that whatever we ask God in his name, God will give it to us. We can talk to God and believe that he is listening to our prayers and responding to them. Sometimes God’s response is not what we want or expect. That can be difficult. When that happens to me, I am comforted by a couple of biblical promises. ‘All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28) and ‘God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

One of the other times we can use God’s name is when we need to swear that we are telling the truth. If we do not tell the truth at such a time, we go against God’s wishes.

God does not want us to use God’s name lightly. To my ears, many times when I hear his name invoked or referred to (as in ‘OMG!’, which I understand as an abbreviation of ‘Oh my God’), those using the terms are not really understanding to whom they are referring. I wonder what would happen if, in those circumstances, we started explaining to people what their words mean to us and what God has done for them.

**Heavenly Father, thank you that we can call on your name. Please help us use your name in ways that bring you glory. Thank you for listening to our prayers and for your generous responses to them. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.**

Wednesday 29 September 2021

# A right spirit

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them? (Luke 9:54)**

Read Luke 9:51–56

I love writing – the tussle to get the right words that have exactly the meaning I want to communicate, whether it be to say thank you for something I have appreciated, to convey my disagreement with an opinion, to let someone know I am feeling sad or acknowledge the sadness they are feeling. Words can do that!

I remember once when a colleague from another organisation had overstepped a boundary. I sat down at my desk and constructed a carefully – or maybe even cleverly – worded letter I was prepared to send off to let this person know just what they had done wrong. Before sending it, I asked a wise mentor to check it. He read it through, looked me in the eye, and said, ‘You must send this in the right spirit’. I stopped and thought about it. I concluded that maybe a softer touch was needed and fire and brimstone raining down on the recipient was not conducive to an ongoing relationship. These days, I often reflect on that.

I wonder how it was for the disciples back then. They were preparing the way for Jesus, and it must have come as a sharp disappointment when the residents in this village turned down the opportunity to receive Jesus. I can imagine the righteous indignation and the wish to punish such inhospitable people. But that was not what Jesus wanted. And I like to think that this village had another opportunity to welcome Jesus and that they came to a different conclusion. No-one was hurt by the refusal of hospitality, and the action of moving on did not destroy a potential relationship.

Our words and actions are so important when we are relating to others. If we take time and think about those who may be irritating us or making us angry and resist the urge to take out that anger on them, we may well open up new opportunities for sharing Jesus’ love, or as the hymn writer says:

Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from thee.

**Let us pray in the words of Psalm 51. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.**

Thursday 30 September 2021

# You’ve got mail

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:4).**

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4–9

My mother was a great letter writer – actually, she typed all of her letters, which was a huge relief because this meant that people could read them. My parents married in the middle of the last century, and at that time, Mum moved from Victoria to New South Wales, leaving her mother and five siblings and their families behind. Mum and her family corresponded regularly, and I remember her reading out the letters she received to us all as we sat around the table, listening to the family news. I’m sure these letters were a great comfort to Mum as they ensured she retained contact with her family.

Paul was also a great letter writer, and I wonder how his letters were received. Were they eagerly anticipated? If there was dissension in a congregation, was there wariness when it was known a letter had arrived? The church was young when Paul was writing, and his letters were important in the formation of the church at that time.

After greeting the Corinthians, Paul goes on to give thanks for them. His message provides a clear affirmation of God’s grace and all he has done for them through Jesus. It seems Paul is thankful for every one of them. He provides quite a list of reasons.

How often do we give thanks to the members of our worshipping community? Many people play vital roles in any church community – the pastor, the church secretary/office staff, the treasurer, those who count the collection, pastoral carers, musicians, visual artists. Also, those who maintain the property, cleaners, welcomers and people who provide hospitality (morning tea, lunch). And those who prepare the PowerPoint slides and operate the technology, ushers, Holy Communion servitors, cantors, lay readers, website managers and anyone else I have forgotten. There are others too whose contribution is less visible: the faithful ones who quietly visit or drop off cakes and casseroles where needed, those who phone to check up on the sick ones or frail ones, the quiet encouragers. Whew! That’s quite a list!

What better time to give thanks for our community than when we kneel at the altar to receive Christ’s body and blood.

**Gracious God, thank you for the community in which we worship where we hear of your grace. Thank you for those who faithfully serve us within the community, and thank you for the opportunities we have to serve others. Amen.**

Friday 1 October 2021

# A child of God

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are (1 John 3:1).**

Read 1 John 3:1–8

I learned a lot about parenting during my years of working in adoptions and foster care. I learned about the grief of couples unable to achieve a pregnancy and women and men signing consent forms to relinquish their children. I witnessed and shared in the joy of couples who became parents when a child was placed with them for adoption. I walked alongside foster parents who committed to caring for a child who was not their own. Often, this commitment, and love for the child, was sorely tested when a child acted out their grief and anger about what had happened to them. Sometimes the most hurtful thing that a child could say was, ‘Don’t tell me what to do. You’re not my real mum or dad!’

I have also been part of the celebration when a child is placed for adoption. I hold dear the memory of a new father holding a little baby for the first time and saying, ‘So you’re my son’. I have also seen the joy of all parties when a foster placement becomes permanent through the adoption process.

Adoption means the adoptee becomes a part of the family and has equal rights a child born into the family would have. At the time of adoption, a new birth certificate is issued with the details of the adoptive parents included on it.

Taking someone else’s child into your home is not always easy! It takes a lot of love, patience and commitment from everybody concerned, particularly the new parents.

Isn’t it a bit like this with our Heavenly Father? He lovingly takes us into his family through baptism. We are children of God. God will never reject us. But sadly, some people choose to leave God’s family, which grieves God, as well as the members of God’s family here on earth.

Let’s celebrate God’s love and enthusiastically claim our place in God’s family with our fellow children of God. That’s who we are.

**Loving God, thank you for taking us into your care and making us your children. Help us grow to be more like you and see you in other people. Thank you for forgiving our sins and keeping us in your family. Amen.**

Saturday 2 October 2021

# Divine majesty and human dignity

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1)**

Read Psalm 8

One of my favourite movies is The King’s Speech. It is the story of King George VI and his struggle to overcome a significant speech impediment. I have just finished reading the book of the same name, and I was intrigued to read some of the king’s speeches. He often referred to ‘my people’ in his addresses. During his reign, the people of the Commonwealth came to admire and respect their sovereign. He was renowned for his humility and his empathy with all of his people. His visits to the colonies enhanced his reputation and built respect for him among his people.

Think about the pomp and ceremony that surrounds the representatives of royalty here. For example, at a reception at government house, you can only attend if you have been invited. You have to show your invitation and prove who you are when you go through the gates, and the length of the visit is pre-determined and listed on the invitation.

How much greater and more awe-inspiring is God’s divine majesty. God is not just the ruler of a collection of countries – God’s sovereignty extends over the whole universe. It is mind-boggling to think that God can even be bothered with us as a nation, let alone that he cares about me and you and every other person. What dignity that he bestows on each of us.

With majesty, God also shows meekness and humility. God’s Son came among us as an ordinary man. He took on the humblest role of washing the feet of his disciples. God allowed Jesus to die on the cross for us. Jesus showed us dignity, humility and respect for others, as well as self-sacrificial love.

One way that we respond to this is through worship. This is the time when together with our church community and with the communion of saints – those who are with God in heaven as well as those with whom we physically gather – we can acknowledge God’s sovereign majesty.

**Let’s pray using the words of the psalm: O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Amen.**

Sunday 3 October 2021

# Turn the page!

by Sonia Hulme

**Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these (Mark 10:14).**

Read Mark 10:2–16

My current work involves supporting a class of five-year-olds in their first year of schooling. To mark the Easter journey, their teacher shared the crucifixion story from a colourful children’s Bible. Many months later, I am struck by how many children wander over to those Bibles to flick through the 400 pages until they find the story again. One little boy, who comes from a family with no real faith background, seems especially caught up in the story. It’s a regular occurrence to be met with him pointing vehemently at the picture of Jesus on the cross and exclaiming in his high-pitched five-year-old voice, ‘Look! It was the saddest day’. Their lovely teacher also did share the resurrection story with them, so we leaf through the pages until we find a picture of the risen Jesus and remember together that Jesus didn’t stay dead, and the story has a happy ending. Satisfied for the moment, he wanders off, clutching his Bible. Tomorrow, we’ll probably do it all again!

In today’s reading, children are being brought to Jesus to be blessed, and his comments are intriguing. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. You must receive the kingdom like a child if you wish to enter it. What kingdom qualities do children possess that make Jesus stop and talk to his grow up followers about? Part of it is their utter dependence. The children in today’s passage could not even come by themselves; they had to be brought and maybe even carried. But was Jesus also speaking about their forgetfulness? Children need constant reminding about many things. Did he know part of the childlikeness lay in the fact they would need this constant reassurance, that they would get stuck in the sadness of life and all the things that had gone wrong, forgetting what had been accomplished on the cross and the great hope they had because the cross is not the end of the story?

So, my five-year-old friend, I am not so different to you. It’s healthy to acknowledge the sadness and struggle in my life and the lives of those I love. It’s okay to feel it – like you do when you look at the picture of Jesus on the cross. It’s okay to sit with the injustice of it. Like you, though, I need regular, daily reminding to turn the page and remember. Jesus didn’t stay dead. He lives with us now. He accompanies us now in our sorrows and joys, and he is leading us into a glorious future with him in eternity. Thank you for reminding me.

**Sometimes I am like a little child, Lord, stuck in the crucifixion story as I observe the death and injustice all around me. Help me to notice it, be moved by it, and then turn the page to be reminded of your resurrection hope. It’s not just hope for my future with you, but in my current circumstances as well. Help me to be part of your resurrection hope in someone’s life today. Amen.**