****

**Sunday 8 May 2022 to Sunday 15 May 2022**

****

Sunday 8 May 2022

# Jesus, plainly

by Emma Strelan

**How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly (John 10:24).**

Read John 10:22–30

Sometimes, I feel I’ve spent up to this point in my (short) life waiting for God to reveal himself properly to me. Once I’ve got the right amount of knowledge from reading the Bible and have been to enough church services, it will all click into place. I’ll know for sure who Jesus is, and I won’t be able to question God’s truth any longer. Twenty-one years in, and it still hasn’t fully clicked.

Honestly, I have genuinely found myself asking God, ‘How long will you keep me in suspense? Can’t you just show me plainly who you are?’

Yet, at the same time, when I read this passage in John, I want to scoff at the Pharisees questioning Jesus and think, ‘You idiots, can’t you see Jesus has revealed himself clearly to you?!’ I mean, in the previous chapter, he healed a blind man!

In a show on Netflix called The Good Place, which plays with the idea of an afterlife based on merit points, a few humans are proud because they managed to get all four clues that the architect Michael (who runs the afterlife) left them. Michael responds that he actually left them 1200 clues, but he’s glad they got enough to work it out at least.

The interesting thing about what we see in the Gospel accounts is that for some people, Jesus’ message was as plain as day: the kingdom of God is at hand, and he is the way to that kingdom. Do you know who those people were? A broken woman, a demon-possessed man, the little children. And they weren’t even necessarily seeking God out.

Don’t get caught up asking the wrong questions of Jesus. He is plainly the Messiah.

**God, thank you for the way you reveal yourself in so many ways. Today, I ask that you show me one of the 1200 clues for you I just haven’t picked up on before. Amen.**

Monday 9 May 2022

# The incarnate shepherd

by Emma Strelan

**As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered (Ezekiel 34:12).**

Read Ezekiel 34:1–16

In this part of Ezekiel, God accuses the Israelite leaders of failing to care for their nation. God declares that because they have not protected their ‘flock’ from the wild animals, cared for the weak or brought in the strays, God himself will.

Here, in the vivid imagery of prophets, we see God’s ultimate expression of his willingness to personally care for humanity. Couldn’t he have just sent some angels, another better king to protect them or even a human messiah?

Yet sure enough, true to prophecy, God came into the dirty world, trekked across dusty terrain, huddled by the fire on a cold night, slept on the floor with his sheep and kept one eye open for wolves and robbers.

In John 10, when Jesus embraces Ezekiel’s prophecy, the Jewish leaders don’t really know how to handle it. The fact that in the same passage they were more willing to proclaim this miracle worker as demon-possessed than acknowledge him as God shows just how undermining Jesus was.

For them to accept Jesus as God, the shepherd, would mean revaluating their whole interpretation of Scripture – imagine how much pride they’d have to swallow!

Perhaps the revolutionary nature of the Good Shepherd is lost on our modern understanding. But if words written hundreds of years before Jesus fulfilled them were to cause so much perplexity, they no doubt can do just as much for us now.

Jesus never intended to fulfil our expectations of who God should be. He wanted to short-circuit our pride and fear and transform our understanding through a personal experience with him.

What part of pride or fear stops you from seeing God as he truly is?

**Lord, thank you for the promise you’ve given us of gathering your flock. Show me today where my pride is hiding a misconception that I have of you. Thank you that you’re a personal God, and that’s how you’ve chosen to reveal yourself. Continue to transform my understanding so that I trust in you and your promises. Amen.**

Tuesday 10 May 2022

# The ninety-nine

by Emma Strelan

**If a man owns a hundred sheep, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? (Matthew 18:12).**

Read Matthew 18:10–14

Isn’t this one of the strongest images in the Bible? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, looking for the lost sheep. I understand why I’ve heard so many sermons on this.

The purpose of Jesus’ parables is to reveal what the kingdom of God is really like. So, what does this lost sheep parable reveal?

Firstly, that God has emotions; he feels concern and happiness. Secondly, God takes an active role in caring for his flock. Thirdly, God doesn’t want a single one to be lost. Fourthly, God greatly rejoices when a lost sheep is returned.

The way that Jesus tells this parable suggests that the shepherd’s response is obvious and expected – will he not, of course, leave the ninety-nine? In other parables where the characters often act in a way opposite to what they’re expected to do (for example, the good Samaritan, the father of the prodigal son), in this parable, we apparently anticipate the man to go looking for his lost sheep.

But if the sheep represent us, the people of God, what does it reveal about us? The thing I noticed is that even though the man leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one, he doesn’t leave them alone. They are left together on the hills where the man has led them, and they can enjoy the pastures and each other’s company.

For the sheep that don’t wander off, there is joy and peace in where they are. Sometimes I’ve wondered if maybe I need to wander off a little bit from God so that I can feel his love fully when he ‘finds’ me again.

But I think I’m forgetting the value in the ninety-nine sheep around me, the flock that God has brought me to.

I believe that we’re all the lost sheep at some point (maybe more often than we realise), but I also think it’s easy to spend more time thanking God for being found when we were lost and not always thanking him for the community and blessings that we gain by remaining in his flock.

**Lord, thank you that you care for us each individually. Thank you also that the fellow believers around us are just as much a blessing from you as your own attention and care. Help us to fully appreciate the pastures you lead us to. Amen.**

Wednesday 11 May 2022

# Wait, who’s the shepherd now?

by Emma Strelan

**Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).**

Read Acts 20:25–32

In the last two devotions, we saw the powerful role of the shepherd in caring deeply for his flock and searching for the scattered sheep. We found comfort in knowing Jesus is that shepherd. But now, Paul transfers that idea to the church elders, the people of the flock themselves.

Last year, I was a youth camp director for the first time. It really hit me what it’s like to care deeply for a group of God’s people. I didn’t need Paul to tell me to love them like Jesus because as soon as I got to meet each camper and leader, I was overwhelmed by how much I cared about them already. Here were people who had come together to learn more about God and encourage each other in this. And here I was, with the privilege of leading them for a week. They were all so unique and had so much to teach me! I honestly felt I would do anything for them and couldn’t bear the idea of even one of them struggling or wanting to go home.

In my brief time on that camp, I got a tiny glimpse of how God might feel for us, only magnified by the couple billion people on Earth. And I felt so blessed by the opportunity to share in that experience.

Now I see this Acts passage in a different light. Instead of thinking, ‘Oh no, that’s so much responsibility to live up to the expectations of Jesus, the Good Shepherd!’, I think, ‘What a privilege we have as a church that God wants to share this experience with us’.

So, how much responsibility do these elders have over the flock? Can they really do as good a job as Jesus? That’s a high standard, one that anyone is sure to fail.

The last part of the verse reminds the elders (and all of us) that the church belongs to God, not them. He ultimately saved us, bought us with his blood and brought the church into existence in the first place. This is an oh-so-important warning against our tendency to take either too much or too little responsibility.

So, for those who are church leaders, enjoy the blessings in that. And for the rest of us? Well, we can trust that Jesus’ blood has brought us together, and no other power can overcome that.

**Lord, thank you that you call me to take an active role in your church, whatever that looks like. Help me to appreciate both the responsibility and blessing that leadership brings. Today, let me look to you as the example of the best shepherd there could be. Amen.**

Thursday 12 May 2022

# Tracing Jesus

by Emma Strelan

**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).**

Read 1 Peter 2:19–25

To be honest, I read the text for today and thought, ‘I’m going to skip the bits about suffering; it won’t make for a very good devotional topic. Plus, how can I write about a topic I don’t have much experience with?’ But I kept getting drawn back to verses 20 and 21, especially the bit about Jesus leaving an example for us.

The Greek word here for ‘example’ (hypogrammos) refers to a writing or drawing that someone places under a sheet of paper and traces over.

For those of us not talented at drawing, there’s a significant difference between trying to copy an illustration just by looking at it and tracing directly over it. Tracing it, you still might not get a perfect result, but it’ll look much closer to the original. It’s also a lot easier to see when you’re not following the design because your pencil line will clearly veer off from the drawing underneath.

So, to what extent is our life really supposed to trace Jesus’? Jesus’ suffering was awfully brutal, and many people of faith, myself included, have often wondered, ‘If I take my life as a Christian seriously, should I try to go and get myself crucified too?’

But I think the purpose of this passage seems to be an encouragement to endure suffering with the proper spirit. I notice as Christians, when we hear a friend is about to go into a tough situation that’s likely to hurt in some way (physically or otherwise), we tell them that we’ll be praying for their safety. We naturally want to take the path of least resistance, the least suffering. But that’s not what Jesus did.

I realise as I grow older that there are many things worth suffering for – and Jesus understood this best of all. I hope that I get more opportunities to test my attitude towards suffering because I know that the most personal growth often happens in these times.

If I look to Christ as my example, it’s not his life in general that I should follow but his attitude. It’s the patience he demonstrated amid unjustifiable sufferings I want my pencil to trace.

**Lord, I want my whole approach and attitude to life to trace yours. Thank you for the ultimate example of enduring suffering you provided in Christ. Because I cannot live up to that example, help me endure the suffering I do experience with a strong and determined heart. Amen.**

Friday 13 May 2022

# Anxious humility

by Emma Strelan

**Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Peter 5:6,7).**

Read 1 Peter 5:1–7

It’s always been a secret desire of mine to be known for my humility. One of my favourite Bible passages is Micah 6:8, ‘Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly’. I’ve wanted people to say to each other after I’ve spent time around them, ‘Wow, Emma’s such a humble person’. Of course, I’d never say I was humble – that wouldn’t be very humble of me! But after reading this passage, I wonder if I’ve had the right idea of what humility really is.

I often think that humility is a form of lowering oneself, not expecting or feeling you deserve a specific level of respect or power.

However, when I try to be humble by telling myself that I’m worthless, not good enough or not deserving, this actually leads to a lot of anxiety. The Greek word for anxiety (merimna) suggests worry ‘as when one does not know whether to do this or that’. And boy, do I have a lot of that kind of anxiety! When I put myself down in an attempt to be humble, I don’t feel I can trust my own decisions – after all, what right do I have to know what to do?

It may seem like this 1 Peter passage gives us two separate commands. However, it actually suggests giving one’s anxiety to God as a way of humbling oneself. If I were to give up my anxiety, I would feel much more secure in who I am. And that’s what humility really is – a sure understanding of who you truly are.

Humbling oneself is not necessarily the act of self-denial but pursuing an active dependence on God and entrusting your troubles to him. So maybe it’s alright to want people to say, ‘Wow, Emma’s so humble’. But not because I make myself seem lesser than I am. Rather, because of the way I trust in God and place myself under his mighty hand. And in ridding myself of anxiety, I can glorify him.

**Lord, help me take an example from the way you humbled yourself. Today, I give my anxiety and fear of making decisions to you. Help me to stand firm in who I truly am – your child. Amen.**

Saturday 14 May 2022

# A sky full of praise

by Emma Strelan

**Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above (Psalm 148:1).**

Read Psalm 148

One of my favourite things about the Book of Psalms is knowing that for thousands of years, people have been singing the same ones that I read today. I can almost feel a collective echo of centuries of praise resounding when I read each line. Knowing that not just all of creation but all of history has been praising God fills me with such awe and joy.

I’ve been staying at my parents' place for a few days while my housemate gets over COVID. Since leaving home, I’ve realised just how different my parents' spot in the hills is to mine near the city. Here, nature seems to merge much more seamlessly with the houses and streets.

I was sitting outside in my parents' backyard to write my final devotion for the week. As I read through this psalm about the heavens praising the Lord, I was hit by how loud all the birds above me were. There was a constant noise of different bird calls surrounding me. I thought about how cool it is that while I read the psalm, I literally get to experience creation praising God from the heights above.

And when I looked up, I could see the trees reaching up to the sky and swaying gently. Not altogether different from how I like to praise God in Sunday worship.

What a blessing it is that if we are to just stop and be still for a moment, it is not that difficult to hear and see the praises of creation towards God.

Another thing I find interesting is that the higher we get above the earth, the more in awe of God’s creation we tend to be. Just think about how amazing standing at the top of a mountain or looking out an airplane window is. Whenever I’m in those places, I really can’t help but praise God.

Part of God’s expert design is the fact that nature gives us both an example of and a reason to praise him. This is something I encourage you not to take for granted this week.

**God, all of creation sings your praise, and so shall I. Thank you for the masterful way you created the world. You made it to demonstrate your mighty power but also your creative heart. Help me appreciate your creation around me in whatever form it takes and praise you as boldly as the birds and the trees do every day. Amen.**

Sunday 15 May 2022

# Where’s Jesus?

by Pastor Tim Klein

**My children, I will be with you for a little while longer. Then you will look for me, but you won’t find me (John 13:33).**

Read John 13:31–35

‘Where’s Jesus? Where’s Jesus?’ This is part of an often-told story I’ve heard about a couple of mischievous brothers. Their mother becomes so exasperated with them that one day, after prepping her pastor, the mother sends them to the pastor. She has asked the pastor to attempt to get them to be less mischievous.

The first boy goes into the pastor’s study and sits down. The pastor stands up and asks, ‘Where’s Jesus?’ He continues to ask the same question over and over again, getting louder and louder, until the boy bolts for the door and runs away. His brother follows him. When they finally arrive in a safe place, the second brother asks the first, ‘What happened?’ The brother responds. ‘We are really in trouble this time. They think we have stolen Jesus!’

The same question is a good one for us today: ‘Where’s Jesus?’

For those first close years with Jesus, the first disciples, if they lost track of Jesus, would have to ask where he had got to. Somebody would be able to tell them he’s just gone on ahead – or whatever the situation.

Jesus knew that time was running short for that sort of relationship with him. He spoke of his arrest, crucifixion, burial, resurrection and ascension. He told them about it: the time will come when I’ll be gone, no longer here, but with my Father. You won’t be able to find me!

Even though those disciples listened to Jesus say, ‘you will look for me, but you won’t find me’, it wasn’t long until they heard the words, ‘I am with you always – even to the close of the age’.

Under this promise, we don’t need to ask, ‘Where’s Jesus?’ Jesus was present wherever those boys were – doing mischief or otherwise. He is with you and me in every situation of our lives.

Now, back to the pastor. The message I suspect he is trying to get through to the boys is this: whatever you are doing, wherever you are, remember where Jesus is. He’s right there with you.

**Lord, when I am tempted to sin and look away from you, prompt me with your word, forgive and call me back, remind me that I am your disciple, and refresh your command in my life to ‘love each other’. Amen.**