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**Sunday 3 December 2023 to**

**Sunday 10 December 2023**

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**The coming of the Son of Man**

by Faye Schmidt

***But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come (Mark 13:32,33).***

Read [Mark 13:24–37](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+13%3A24%E2%80%9337&version=MSG)

The focus for many when reading this text is on the reference to the Son not knowing when he will return. Why doesn’t he know? Isn’t the Son one with the Father? Of course they are, but we ignore the nature of Jesus as both God and man. In referencing those who do not ‘know’, it is Jesus in his humanity that is referenced, linking him to us in our humanity. It is humanity that will not know when, where and how the Son will return.

And what are we to do? Keep awake. Be alert. Watch.

But do we? Don’t we just find ourselves thinking, ‘It hasn’t happened yet. Not likely to happen in my lifetime. I have plans – things to do – a life to live’.

Until we come face to face with a drama that forces us to recognise it, we don’t even think about our own death, let alone the coming of the Son of Man. It is there, buried deep and not considered until we are forced.

The consequence of this attitude is that we tend to put off living our lives fully committed and engaged in ‘being Christ’ in the world to our family and neighbour.

Is there peace in my family – both my biological and church family? Am I doing unto others as I would have them do unto me? Is loving others the focus of my engagement, or do I prefer to judge? Do I regularly sit at Jesus’ feet and open my heart to his word?

There is a proverb, ‘Don’t put off for tomorrow what you can do today’. According to today’s text, we must not delay. We don’t know the time – there may not be a tomorrow.

We do, however, live confident of God’s love for us, his promise of mercy and grace – and that is both endless and timeless.

***Through your Holy Spirit, Lord, awaken me to live as your child in the time you have given me so that others may see you in me and come to know the joy and peace of your love and forgiveness. Amen.***

*Faye Schmidt continues her diaconal calling through governance, having served on the Vic–Tas District Church Board, the General Church Board and currently as chair of the Standing Committee on Constitutions and her congregation, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide. Having lived and worked in many locations within Australia and overseas, Faye has a heart for the stranger and the newcomer and for being open to new ideas, learning from others and responding to needs.*

Monday 4 December 2023

**Whom do I serve?**

by Faye Schmidt

***Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ (Galatians 1:10).***

Read [Galatians 1:1–17](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+1%3A1%E2%80%9317&version=NRSVUE)

There was a time when much of our language was ‘linked’ to that in Scripture, particularly in the legal world. There was a document entitled a deed of release, which was used to release a person from an obligation, usually a financial debt. The opening phrase was, ‘I hereby forgive and release …’. Sound familiar? Nowadays, the same document just reads, ‘I release …’. Forgiving a debt is no longer used.

Likewise, we used to refer to a person’s last will and testament – now just a will.

There was a time in Australia when being a servant of Christ was not questioned or challenged, and the country was regarded as a Christian country. Our laws, traditions, rituals and morals were based on Christian teachings.

Our government schools incorporated the teaching of the Christian faith in their curriculums by people of faith.

The separation of church and state, the disappearance of Christian language and ritual, including the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer at the commencement of Parliament or local council, are signs of a time when the distinction between what is ‘pleasing to people’ and being a servant of Christ is more and more obvious.

To not stand out from the crowd, to please others and not be different, can mean that we suppress our Christianity so that we remain popular and pleasing to people.

Holding fast to God’s word in our conversations and engagements with others can be challenging. The temptation is to keep silent, not to speak out. St Paul said, ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile’ (Romans 1:16).

Can we say the same? Do we witness for Christ and thus serve him? Or does our silence speak for us?

The good news is that God continues to serve us through his word, the sacraments and others in our Christian family.

***Dear God, I pray that you send your Holy Spirit to strengthen my faith so that I may first serve you in gratitude and praise for the love you have shown to me through the service of your Son as my Saviour. Amen.***

Tuesday 5 December 2023

**Hierarchy of importance**

by Faye Schmidt

***As for those who were held in high esteem – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favouritism – they added nothing to my message (Galatians 2:6).***

Read [Galatians 1:18–2:10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+1%3A18+%E2%80%93+2%3A10&version=NRSVUE)

How often have we heard from others – or even said it ourselves – ‘Who are you to tell me what to do? By what authority? What are your credentials that equip you with the ability to say these things? You are a nobody.’

On the other hand, how often have we also hesitated to say anything based on what people will think? We are concerned about how we are perceived, not how our message is received.

In our text today, we have Paul saying that although there may be people around him who are regarded with high esteem, they make no difference to him. Nor, he states, does God recognise one person above another – he shows no favouritism, nor does he allow anyone’s position to have influence over his message.

With the coming first of television and now social media, there are many famous faces before us who make statements and comments on current affairs, whether political, social or religious. During COVID, we witnessed many occasions on which famous people made statements that others picked up, purely based on who they were, without considering the accuracy of what they said or the authority they held to make such statements. The rise of popularism means that we often look to the person who is speaking and, based on their position, consider what they say as important. The emphasis is on who is speaking – not the message.

Paul is making it quite clear that we are not to be influenced by others, regardless of what position they hold, when it comes to speaking of Jesus and witnessing to our faith. Paul was aware that there were those who were watching him and had the power to hurt him – and they did. He is actually writing this letter to the Galatians from prison.

Our focus must be on the message. We are charged with bringing the good news to all people, making no distinction, and not being influenced along the way to vary that message.

***Heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us in our faith towards you and our love towards one another so that we may always be a witness to your saving grace through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

Wednesday 6 December 2023

**Paul opposes Cephas**

by Faye Schmidt

***So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no-one will be justified (Galatians 2:16b).***

Read [Galatians 2:11–21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+2%3A11%E2%80%9321&version=NRSVUE)

What does it mean to be ‘justified’? ‘Justification by faith through grace’ is a key foundation of our Lutheran understanding of salvation through Christ. But what does justification actually mean? We often refer to someone as having been justified in their actions, ie their response was equal to and supported by the actions that were against them.

Some dictionary definitions of ‘justify’ include:

* To show (an act, claim, statement, etc) to be just or right.
* To defend or uphold as warranted or well-grounded.
* To declare innocent or guiltless; absolve; acquit.

Do you note the legal language? Do you feel as though you have entered a courtroom and there is a judge before you about to pronounce a sentence? And what is our sentence? Death, eternal separation from God.

But what does God do for us through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ? He says to us, ‘Sentence has been served – by my Son. Therefore, as an act of grace, I declare you to be innocent and absolved of all guilt. You are mine, and a place has been prepared for you with me’.

Can you imagine that happening in a court of law today? When we read the Book of Job, we realise that Job is in a courtroom before a judge, and he declares those words that we rejoice in singing each Easter, ‘I know that my redeemer lives’.

And what is our response? What does Christ require of me? To love the Lord, my God, with all my heart, mind and strength, and my neighbour as myself – yes, to love one another as he first loved us.

***We praise and thank you, Heavenly Father, that as our judge, you declared us to be absolved of all sin and adopted us as your children. Help us to see you in others and love them as you first loved us. Amen.***

Thursday 7 December 2023

**Faith or works of the law**

by Faye Schmidt

***Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8,9).***

Read [Galatians 3:1–14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+3%3A1%E2%80%9314&version=NRSVUE)

It’s not easy to have faith in God. It is far easier to rely on what we think, what we do and what we want. There are times when we may even think God doesn’t know what he is doing, and we have to take control.

Is God the ruler in your life? Are you living a life of faith in him? Or are our prayers directive, even demanding? Do we bargain with God? Letting go and leaving everything in God’s hands counters our human nature.

If we have faith in God, we must also trust him. It’s not enough to say, ‘I believe’, and then not trust that God’s will is paramount.

There are times when fellow believers will say, ‘I know the will of God. I have studied the Scriptures. I have read them in the original Hebrew and Greek. I know’. What a claim! Is it really possible to reduce God to our own intellect and understanding?

Our reading today points us to relying on our faith, God’s gift to us through the Holy Spirit. In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed, Martin Luther stated, ‘I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him’. By my own ‘reason’?

There is a story about a tightrope walker attempting to walk across a wire over Niagara Falls. A crowd had gathered to witness this event.

He approached the crowd and asked, ‘Do you believe I can walk across this wire to the other side?’

‘Yes’, they cried and cheered.

‘Do you believe I can walk across the wire carrying a chair?’

Again, they cried yes.

‘And if I carried someone sitting in the chair, could I do that?’

With wild cheering, they cried yes, yes. ‘Well then,’ he said, ‘who will volunteer to sit in the chair?’ There was silence.

With belief comes trust – and how fortunate we are to have a God who sends his Spirit to aid us.

***Dear Lord, may I be counted among the blessed with Abraham and trust in you and your will for me and the nations of the world. Amen.***

Friday 8 December 2023

**The law and the promise**

by Faye Schmidt

***Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator (Galatians 3:19).***

Read [Galatians 3:15–22](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+3%3A15%E2%80%9322&version=NRSVUE)

During the week, we have been meditating on Paul’s words to the Galatians, where he has made it clear that we are not made right with God by obeying the law but by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is tempting, therefore, to consider that the law has no relevance for us. But Paul makes it clear that the law has a purpose for us today.

Say you have an accident playing sport. You think you have broken your leg. It feels strange, and you can’t put your full weight on it, but you are unsure as to the impact of the injury. So you go to the doctor, who arranges for an X-ray of your leg. The X-ray reveals that you do indeed have a fracture.

Identifying the problem or knowing something is wrong doesn’t heal you, nor does the X-ray heal you – it just identifies the problem.

The law is like that. The law does not save us, but it aids us in identifying how we, as failed creatures, have ‘broken bones’ within us – for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We cannot mend ourselves. We can’t be made perfect by ourselves – no matter how much service we provide to our church, community or family. It is not fulfilling the law that makes us right with God.

But we have a mediator, Jesus, who took on all our ‘broken bones’ (the ones we know and the ones we are unaware of), paid the price and made us right with God.

So why should we do works and endeavour to fulfil the law? In thanksgiving and as a response to the gift of salvation given to us by Jesus Christ.

***Dear Lord, thank you for coming into the world to heal me from all my sins. As I look in the mirror of the law and it reveals my sins, please forgive me and equip me through the Holy Spirit to live my life in thanksgiving and praise. Amen.***

Saturday 9 December 2023

**Love and faithfulness**

by Faye Schmidt

***Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven (Psalm 85:10,11).***

Read [Psalm 85:1,2,8–13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+85%3A1%2C2%2C8%E2%80%9313&version=NRSVUE)

Stop! Pause! Take the time to read the verse again – and again. What beauty, what imagery.

Can you see it? Can you envisage what this would look like if converted to a real image before your eyes?

It reveals a state of total peace. This is the culmination of everything.

God is love. So, we know that this is God in action. And who is faithful? Why, God’s Son, who was obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Through Jesus’ faithfulness in fulfilling the law on our behalf and justifying us before God, God looks at us from heaven and sees us as righteous, ie made right with him.

As a result of this love and faithfulness meeting, there is righteousness and peace – we, as the recipients of this love and faithfulness – are made right with God and share in this peace, a peace that passes all understanding. God came down from heaven to earth, and this will be the theme of many of our hymns and carols in the coming days.

How can we not approach our daily life with thanksgiving when blessed with such a gift from God? Whatever may be happening in our family, work or church, we know from Paul that ‘nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord’. When we look to that love and accept it, only then do we find the peace that has been won for us.

***I thank you, Lord, that you promise me the peace that the world cannot give, the peace that comes from knowing you have made me right with you and the Father through the Holy Spirit. May I live my day today in thanksgiving and praise in all I do. Amen.***

Sunday 10 December 2023

**Getting ready for Christmas**

by Pastor Mark Lieschke

***And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4).***

Read [Mark 1:1–8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A1%E2%80%938&version=NRSVUE)

We can get a lot of encouragement, instruction and advice from many individuals and groups around us – Christians and non-Christians alike – about keeping the law, being fair, and loving our neighbour. Most groups concerned about the wellbeing of society can tell us that. And that's fine – there is nothing wrong with that at all.

But there's no other place than the Christian church that calls us to repent from our sins, and there's no source of freedom from our sins other than Jesus Christ. That's what makes Christianity unique. And that's why the message of the forgiveness of sins is so important.

Part of the purpose of God's word is to make us realise our condition – our utter hopelessness and helplessness because of our sin. But that's not the end purpose.

The law does cut us down to size. It makes us see the rotten nature we're born with and the sin we continue to do every day. But its ultimate purpose is not to condemn us but to point us in the direction of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ.

The word of God calls us to repentance and comforts us with the forgiveness of Christ. We have that word. And, because of it, we have the assurance of being at peace with God.

We repent by admitting and confessing the abhorrence of our sin – then letting Christ take over from there, trusting that he can do – and, in fact, already has done – something about it.

It’s not long until Christmas. But before it comes, and before we can really enjoy celebrating it to the fullest, we need to hear those words: ‘Sinner, repent'. If there's no acknowledgement and repentance from sin, then we may feel no need for a Saviour and have no great joy in celebrating his birth.

But as we go to our Lord and say, ‘Jesus, be merciful to me, a sinner’, we can be assured that we will once again hear his words to us: ‘Your sins are forgiven you. Go in peace.’

***Jesus, be merciful to me, a sinner. Assure me that, despite my sinful nature and daily falling short of your expectations, you are gracious and compassionate, and you have come and continue to come to wash me clean and give me a new start every day. Let me go in peace again today. Amen.***

*Mark Lieschke is a retired pastor living on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He served in parishes in Adelaide, Palmerston North and Marton (New Zealand), and Wagga Wagga (school and congregation), before being elected as bishop of the NSW District of the LCANZ. He and Meredith have four children (two live in Canada) and two grandchildren. Mark enjoys spending time with family and friends, travelling, walking on the beach and resting.*