****

**Sunday 7 March to Sunday 14 March**

****

Sunday 7 March 2021

# Misunderstandings

by Maria Rudolph

**But the temple he had spoken of was his body (John 2:21).**

Read John 2:13–22

‘What are you reading?!’ asked my housemate with raised eyebrows and curious eyes looking up and down the cover of my Good News Bible. ‘The BIBLE?’ And with that, she stared at me tauntingly, with amusement mixed in her voice. A hot flush climbed up from my neck to the top of my head. I was so embarrassed.

I wasn’t equipped to say anything back. Sure, afterwards, back in my room, I thought of lots of replies I could have given. But it was too late. And I didn’t like confrontation, especially on a topic that I knew so little about. I had only just started reading the Bible and had only just begun the journey toward baptism. It doesn’t take long to realise that Jesus is offensive.

Over a decade later, I think my housemate, along with many other people in our society, misunderstand Jesus. Some think Christians are a bunch of pious do-gooders. Boring party poopers at best. But by studying the Bible, I have come to realise that Jesus often provokes these kinds of confrontations, because he is so different, he aims straight at our heartstrings. There is no pretence with Jesus. We can either follow Jesus with all our heart, or it becomes impossible to follow him at all. Because Jesus offends. And Jesus is misunderstood.

Jesus was misunderstood throughout his ministry. Again and again, people around him were baffled and appalled by his words. When he zealously drives the money changers and vendors of sacrificial animals from the temple courts and is questioned about it, he simply predicts his death and resurrection – and this prophecy is misunderstood. Sometime later, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. His teaching raises the hairs of his audience. ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6:53). Again, Jesus is misunderstood and ‘from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him’ (John 6:66).

The words of Jesus are tough, alright? Do we fare any better when we follow Jesus today? The 12 closest of Jesus’ disciples stood out from the rest – although they even had a betrayer in their midst, known to Jesus! Simon Peter puts it in clumsy, profound words: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68). This trusting faith was confirmed when ‘after he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said [about rebuilding the temple, his body, in three days]. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken’ (John 2:22).

In the same way, when we are taunted and laughed at for our faith in Jesus Christ, we must consider what other options we really have. What else can give us salvation, the grace to make a new beginning despite our failings, day after day? What else would be a solid foundation to build our lives onto? Sometimes offensive, and often misunderstood, yet always fully enveloped in the love of God the Father and guided by the Holy Spirit, walk on, sometimes full of confidence and sometimes placing one embarrassed foot in front of the other, but always sure that God is with you all the way.

**Holy Spirit, come, fill my heart with faith and strengthen my trust in Jesus when I am taunted by others for it and when I find the words of Scripture difficult to digest. Make every part of my heart and soul cling to you alone so that zeal for your word and the love and gentleness you teach flows out of me today as I encounter others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Monday 8 March 2021

# Weeping shall turn into dancing

by Maria Rudolph

**Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you (Jeremiah 26:13).**

Read Jeremiah 26:1–16,24

A letter from an old friend arrived in our letterbox recently. It was sad and weighed down with a heart heavy from despair about the state of our church and our society at large. It spoke of rejection and a lack of feeling supported in fighting the Lord’s battle.

Jeremiah is called the ‘weeping prophet’. He was chosen by God to fulfil a task that would bring him much misery and hardship throughout his life. He was unusually young (Jeremiah 1:6) when he was chosen by God to be his mouthpiece to the people of Judah so they could reform themselves and turn back to God. Judah’s sister nation of Israel had already fallen captive to the Babylonians, and the situation was dire. The people had completely fallen away from God, were practising idol worship, even sacrificing children and engaging in all kinds of acts that directly opposed the Ten Commandments. It was Jeremiah’s harsh task to prophesy doom and gloom to an audience who couldn’t care less about what he said and thought he was downright stupid to the point of wanting to kill him.

Eventually, Jeremiah would be proven right as the events he foretold unfolded and the nation was taken into Babylonian exile for 70 years. When the remnant of Israelites eventually returned to their land and resettled in its towns, they all came together to listen to Ezra the priest, Nehemiah the governor and the Levites reading the Books of Moses to them, and the realisation of their failings hit them hard. They all started weeping, as once only Jeremiah had done. But Nehemiah graciously reminded them: ‘Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength’ (Nehemiah 8:10).

We must heed Nehemiah’s advice each and every day. I could list at least ten reasons right now why I’d rather be weeping than rejoicing, and I’m sure you could too! What does your list look like? It’s good to admit what we feel upset about. The Lord hears our complaints loud and clear – even when they only take place inside our heads. And more than that, the Lord sees right down into the depth of our hearts, where the causes and the underlying reasons for those sadnesses are buried. No motive is hidden from him.

We must remember that unlike Jeremiah and the Israelites who were banished into exile, we live in the resurrection joy of our Lord Jesus Christ every day. We have received the good news to share with the world, telling of God becoming human and showing us the Father’s heart before dying a sacrificial death so that we gain life through his blood. It is good to weep with those who witnessed the crucifixion on Good Friday, but as Christians, we don’t remain there. We move towards Easter Sunday, the day of the resurrection, where we overflow with joy that Christ has risen indeed. And that is the day we celebrate in our worship Sunday after Sunday. We celebrate resurrection day. There is a reason for our weeping to become dancing week after week, and, in fact, daily, as we joyously celebrate Christ’s victory over sin, death and the devil forever.

***Heavenly Father, when I despair because people seem to turn against you, restore the joy of your salvation in me just as Simeon rejoiced in the temple when he came face to face with baby Jesus. Make my heart leap for joy at the good news, and grant me the boldness and wisdom to share it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Tuesday 9 March 2021

# Unexpected twists

by Maria Rudolph

**Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (Matthew 20:26,27).**

Read Matthew 20:20–28

Well, there is a surprise! Two grown men have followed Jesus as his disciples for three years. They have walked and talked with him, saw plenty of miracles and heard a lot of his teaching. We don’t know many of the 12 disciples’ lineage, but we do know that these two men, James and John, have a father called Zebedee, because they are occasionally called the Sons of Zebedee. Of course, it was not uncommon in Hebrew culture to be known by your father’s name. But in today’s story, we have a rather unexpected twist. It’s not their father but their unnamed mother who comes and kneels before Jesus with her two adult sons. Perplexingly, she asks for them to be seated at his right and his left in his kingdom, without fully understanding the gravity of that request.

Presuming you are an adult as you read this devotion, when was the last time you took your mother along when you really wanted something? When did you last think that it was a good idea to have your mother speak on your behalf? It’s a bit unusual, isn’t it? It raises more and more questions. Was the mother also one of Jesus’ disciples and had travelled with him so she was there at that moment to ask that question? They were on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and, unbeknown to the disciples, to witness Jesus’ crucifixion. Did she happen to be in the travelling crowd of people?

Whatever the circumstances, James and John approved of her asking. That is the next unexpected twist in this story. These two disciples had heard Jesus teach about greatness in the kingdom of heaven by standing a child in their midst before (Matthew 18:1–4). They had heard Jesus teach them in various parables that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (eg the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–30; the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16). Yet they didn’t seem to understand the essence of his teaching until it became personal to them in their request. Jesus makes it very clear, ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave’ (Matthew 20:26,27).

Does it happen to you that you miss the point about what Jesus is on about until it concerns you personally? When did you last nod your head in agreement in church and then struggle to see how the words of Scripture come into effect for you?

The final unexpected twist in today’s reading is the nature of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus teaches an upside-down kingdom. Jesus teaches about a way where the teacher washes the feet of the student (John 13:4–14), where we willingly choose the lowliest seat at the table (Luke 14:10), where we have to give everything we have to follow Jesus (Luke 14:33). It made no sense to the people of his time, and still to this day, it challenges our modus operandi.

***Dear God, I am on the right track when I get challenged by your teaching because it means that your Holy Spirit is stirring in me and challenging me to lay everything bare before you and examine myself in the light of your Son. Just like James and John long ago, I need your help with this every day. Help me to humble myself and count everything a loss but to dwell in your presence. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Wednesday 10 March 2021

# Despite who you are

by Maria Rudolph

**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).**

Read Romans 5:1–11

The 20th-century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer explores the concepts of cheap grace as opposed to costly grace. What is meant by those two terms?

Maybe we need to start by asking ourselves, what actually does the term ‘grace’ mean? Before you read on, how would you describe it to someone? Grace is the pure mercy and forgiveness of God extended toward you as a completely free gift without any of your contribution. You see, when God extends a hand out to us, it is completely due to his love, grace and mercy. It is a free gift for us, one that we can’t earn and don’t even deserve.

Wouldn’t you say you treat free things often not with the same respect as you treat the things you have paid a lot of money for? Expensive things seem to have a special place and we treat them with a lot of care. If something is just given to us, it often seems a bit more … disposable. This even applies to activities, not just material items. Wouldn’t you agree that if you have paid $100 for a gym membership, you would try and get your money’s worth and attend as often as you can? But when you are offered a full membership for free, you might agree to come and then think it won’t hurt if you can’t make it for a couple of weeks or so, because there is no loss attached to it on your end. Or so we think.

Grace has been given to us freely. If we ponder on the meaning of grace for our life more often, it can help us understand how meaningful a gift it is, one not worth squandering.

Cheap grace is like saying, ‘God forgives me anyway. It doesn’t matter if I keep the commandments, if I bend the rules in my favour a bit or if I intentionally misbehave. God will wait for me with open arms anyway’.

Costly grace is realising how much it cost our Saviour Jesus Christ to earn this free gift for us. It cost him his life. It cost God his Son. Grace is beautiful and lovely, but it has been paid for with blood and tears. Even though it’s a gift that comes at no cost to us, it cost God everything. It’s not free at all. And as we start comprehending that and following intentionally the way of Jesus, we realise that, in fact, it costs us everything too. It costs us our whole life to follow Jesus. And yet God doesn’t force us into submitting to him. God gives us the free choice to do it, and he sends the Holy Spirit to work within us so we can respond to him in faith, love and trust.

God takes the first step toward you, while you are still a sinner. And God doesn’t do that as a once-off; he does it over and over as we also turn back to him. Make today yet another new beginning as you gratefully receive the grace God showers upon you.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me while I am still a sinner. Help me to please you, and grant me your Holy Spirit day after day. In Jesus’ name, Amen.***

Thursday 11 March 2021

# Imitation of Christ

by Maria Rudolph

**Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children (Ephesians 5:1).**

Read Ephesians 5:1–7

Could you start this devotional time by pausing and thinking of people in your life you have aspired to be like? Who are they? What qualities do they have that you admire and want to imitate? How has who you want to be like changed over the cause of your life?

Paul, as he wrote the epistle to the Ephesian Christians, asks them, and now also asks us, to imitate God. What an impossibly big pair of shoes to fill! Do you think it went down smoothly when the letter was first read out to the group gathered at the seaport of Ephesus? It’s all a question of what attributes there are to aspire to. The Greco-Roman gods of the ancient world didn’t have a great track record when it came to moral or even decent behaviour. Sexual misconduct, killings, betrayal and deceit was common and made for the most exciting stories of Greek and Roman mythology. The God of Hosts, the one true God, was of a completely new calibre and it is still those same attributes that we love and admire about God. They are listed over and over in the Old Testament and are elaborated on at length in the New Testament. ‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Psalm 103:8).

Aren’t these all great things to aspire to ourselves? I am almost certain that some of the people you listed at the beginning of the devotion embody some of those qualities in one way or another. I am sure that what draws you to them and makes you want to be like them is a glimpse of your loving Father’s heart.

In today’s passage, we find a list of behaviours that express the opposite of those godly attributes. There is also advice to steer clear of the people who display them. Would that leave any people for us to interact with at all? Would we need to try and avoid our own glance in the mirror? But avoidance isn’t the end goal in any Christian teaching. It’s never about a ‘they’ and ‘us’ mentality. Each and every one of us is on a journey with our Lord and Saviour. The path looks different for everyone but there are two constants. We all have the same starting point: we all are dearly loved children (Ephesians 5:1). And we all have the same destination, eternal life with God. Within this framework, there are endless possibilities of how your life will play out exactly. And we have the assurance that when we strive to be imitators of God, we will keep our eyes fixed on the goal!

**Holy Spirit, fill me afresh. I have so many failings and shortcomings, but I offer myself up to serve God today with all that I am and all that I have. I need your help every step of the way. Please help me to strive to be godly in everything I say, do and think. Because I am loved by God, I can love other people. Help me share that love abundantly today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Friday 12 March 2021

# Nothing but the blood of Jesus

by Maria Rudolph

**It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18,19).**

Read 1 Peter 1:13–21

In worship, we are in the habit of singing about really outrageous things without batting an eyelid. In fact, we use words like blood, flesh, pain or slain as if we were singing about flowers, butterflies and the pretty countryside on a spring morning. Music is a powerful way for many to connect with the meaning of Scripture and feel close to God. But I do sometimes wonder if we domesticate the strong language in these songs a little bit too much.

Blood is a word we use surprisingly often as Christians. Even before Jesus comes on the scene, blood is a main feature through the Old Testament. Sacrificing animals to God as a sign of adoration happens with Abraham (who is even temporarily called to shed the blood of his own son). The exodus from Egypt goes hand in hand with the Passover feast, which centres on smearing lambs’ blood on doorframes. Then we have lengthy passages in the Book of Leviticus describing the sacrificial duties of the Levites concerning sprinkling large volumes of blood all over the altar in the tabernacle. We have stories of the Israelites straying from the Lord God and adapting pagan practices of sacrificing their own children, which again involves the shedding of blood.

As we live with Jesus as our King, we are used to Holy Communion, which is the transformation of wine into blood just as Jesus instituted it at the Last Supper. Teaching about the blood of Christ redeeming us literally oozes out of the Epistles. Finally, the Book of Revelation uses blood as a very vivid picture. Saints wash their robes in the stream of the Lamb’s blood, and they come out as white as snow.

Blood! A bit of an awkward thing to talk about normally, unless you regularly go to the blood bank or work in the medical profession. Yet we Christians seem to talk and sing about it all the time. Why? Could it be because it is so central to our faith, such a key feature of our identity? Have you ever pictured yourself covered with the blood of Christ? What reaction do you have to that thought? Once you get over the strangeness of it, can you see that it is immensely comforting – because Christ literally has you ‘covered’? He’s got you covered for everything you may face today or in the future. And you can make use of this special cover by praying the blood of Jesus over the people in your life. Jesus died for them, too, whether they know it or not. His blood covers them all the same. It is part of our role as God’s messengers to help others see this unusual reality. We are all covered with the blood of Jesus, and that is a cover more precious than silver or gold.

**Dear Lord Jesus, I stand in awe of the sacrifice you have made for me, while I was still a sinner. Thank you for covering me with your blood and for redeeming me by giving up your very life. Help me to live a life worthy of the sacrifice you have made for me. Amen.**

Saturday 13 March 2021

# A hospital for the soul

by Maria Rudolph

**He sent forth his word and healed them, he rescued them from the grave (Psalm 107:20).**

Read Psalm 107:1–3,17–22

I recently had a big medical procedure done. I was in hospital numerous times, and I needed bed rest to recover. For weeks, I wasn’t able to take part in normal life. All outings in the car (that I couldn’t even drive myself) were trips back to the hospital or to see some kind of doctor. Finally, I was able to go on my first non-medical outing. It was Ash Wednesday and a friend took me to church for a special service. I sat there, breathing in the holy space after weeks in bed, after staring at ceilings in hospitals and at home. It suddenly struck me: on this outing, too, I had actually come to a hospital. The church is like a hospital, a place of healing for the soul. After weeks of living so outside of the norm, my innermost being was yearning for the sacredness of the word spoken, prayed and sung by a group of Christians in church. It enveloped me with peace.

The psalms are so raw; the psalmists captured human struggles and emotions so well. Today’s psalm describes a parched soul who hungers and thirsts for the Lord after straying from God’s path. But as soon as they are ready to turn back to God, there he is. He is like a well-watered garden, like a spring that never stops, filling them up and healing them instantly.

We might not experience the healing hand of God in a physical sense, although that can also happen to some. But absolutely every single one of us will experience the refreshment the Lord brings our weary souls when we are parched and open ourselves up to God.

What does that mean for where you are at in your own life at this moment? Here is Matthew 11:28,29 for you in The Passion Translation: Jesus says,‘Are you weary, carrying a heavy burden? Then come to me. I will refresh your life, for I am your oasis.Simply join your life with mine. Learn my ways and you’ll discover that I’m gentle and humble. You will find refreshment and rest in me’.

**Dear Lord, thank you for refreshing my soul time and again. I praise and thank you for nourishing me more than the choicest food and healing me more deeply than the most knowledgeable doctor. Amen.**

Sunday 14 March 2021

# Gravestones

by Rev Thomas Paulsteiner

**Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms (John 14:1,2).**

The devotions for the coming week are taken from LCA International Mission’s 2021 '40 Days – a Lenten Devotion and Prayer Guide' and are written by mission partners around the world. LCA International Mission invites you to pray for God’s global mission and churches beyond our borders. You can download an electronic copy of the '40 Days' guide at the LCA International Mission website or request a printed copy by emailing lcaim@lca.org.au or phoning 08 8267 7330.

Read John 14:1–14

Maybe it sounds a bit strange if I tell you that I love strolling around cemeteries. It is not because I have a hidden desire to die but because I love looking at gravestones.

We know what gravestones look like and what we can read there. It is usually the name, date of birth, day of death, ‘RIP’, or sometimes the person’s profession. Sometimes we can find symbols of life, like a branch of a palm tree, a cross or even a Bible verse. Gravestones speak their own language. Some messages go much deeper than many long sermons.

On the stone of a 16-year-old girl who died in a car accident, I noticed there were none of these Christian symbols. There were only a few capital letters, chiselled with heavy hammer blows: ‘WHY?’. At the age of 16, life is only just starting – finishing school, dating, looking for a job. All the despair, impotent anger and grief of this family cried out of this one little word: ‘WHY?’.

More than 30 years ago, I discovered a very different gravestone at the cemetery in Neuendettelsau, Germany. Shaped like a simple cross and at the bottom, you can read the name and the dates – nothing special. But what impressed me was one single word, written at the crosspiece: ‘Daheim’, translated as ‘At home’. Not a long sermon on a resurrection – only the German word meaning ‘At home’. What a deep peace and comfort that flows out of here. Of course, the relatives of that person were crying and mourning as well. This farewell was definitely not easy for them. But they had a view and a perspective that reached further than six feet under.

What enables and drives people to turn a gravestone – the ultimate sign of death – into a sermon of life? Hope in the presence of grief – this is what Christ brings into this world and what we celebrate at Christmas. Life in the presence of sickness and death – this is what we celebrate at Easter. Christ is not the great magician who spirits away all our doubts, difficulties, challenges, sickness and death. He is the one who comes into our life. He is the one who walks with us side by side like with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. He is the one who leads us through. He is the one who promises to take us home.

What do you want to be chiselled at your gravestone?

**Prayer: Pray for Christ to lead you through life in the presence of doubts, difficulties, challenges, sickness and death. Thank God that he promises to take you home.**

Rev Thomas Paulsteiner is Head of Department for Papua New Guinea/Pacific/East Asia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.