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**Sunday 23 January 2022 to Sunday 30 January 2022**

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Sunday 23 January 2022

# Christ as the interpretation and sense of God’s instruction

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:8).**

Read Nehemiah 8:1–3,5,6,8–10

Last year, a good friend gave me his spare whipper snipper. No less than a Stihl. It hadn’t been used for a little while. As he handed it over, he pointed out the instruction book. Then he added what I really needed to know: I will need to buy a new spark plug and douse the spark plug housing with an engine starter before I try to get it going. A trip later to the auto parts supplier, and I was ready to go.

Having returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls, the former exiles gathered on ‘the festival of trumpets’, a day of rest. Thank the Lord for his law! They then asked that the law of Moses, think ‘God’s instruction’, be brought for them to hear. The priest Ezra duly obliged, and from early morning until midday, everyone listened. God’s appointed priests (verse 7) were faithful in that task to the point of helping the people understand through ‘interpretation’ and ‘giving the sense’. Just like the way my friend added how to really apply my whipper snipper instructions.

Applying God’s instruction is something I’m pretty convinced that all Christians struggle with. Too much, and wow, look at how good I am! Or bad! Alternatively, too little, not often enough – are we really taking the word of God seriously, and do we ask whether this idea in front of us originated in the word of God or the world?

In today’s gospel, Luke 4:14–21, Jesus gives the ‘interpretation’ and ‘sense’ of how to apply it all. Picture him in the centre of the synagogue, having just read from the scroll of Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1,2a) with its promise of deliverance from all that binds and its gift of entry into the Lord’s favour. Jesus proclaims, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21). Jesus’ little sentence is a power-packed Christocentric ‘interpretation’ and ‘sense’ of how to understand all of God’s instructions. Christ fulfilled God’s instructions because we couldn’t. That’s release for the captive! Yet in his gift of new life to us, he also asks us to be devoted to him by sacrificially loving God and neighbour – the basis of Christ’s instruction being the Ten Commandments (Luke 18:18–30; Mark 12:28–34).

You can probably use too much engine starter. But we can never use enough Jesus in remembering our forgiven state before God through him. Then in Christocentric devotion, apply his command of sacrificial love to God and neighbour in all we do.

**Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you make Christ known to us (John 14:25–27). Keep us Christ-centred: free from both self-condemnation and self-congratulation and free to serve in sacrificial love of you and our neighbour. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Monday 24 January 2022

# Using our spiritual imaginations to really remember the Lord

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children (Deuteronomy 4:10).**

Read Deuteronomy 4:5–13

Do you know any adults who collect Lego? The shelves in my home office have two Lego castles, one pirate ship, one four-wheel drive and caravan rig, and a large ‘baby’ Yoda figurine. I’m still fascinated by Lego. Love building it! But I don’t play the endless hours of ‘make believe’ I used to. Whole school holidays were once given over to various Lego adventures. It’s kind of sad now. I suspect my imagination, more than growing up, has just gotten a bit boring. Perhaps that’s what growing up is!

God wants us to have and gives us spiritual imagination. I don’t mean ‘make-believe’. I mean thinking more to akin to the Jewish way of remembrance. To remember as a Jew is akin to going to that earlier time and place. Experiencing it with the rest of the nation as if you were there. Like in today’s reading, where Moses in his farewell speech to the nation is told by God to tell the people, ‘Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb …  You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness.Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:10–12). For an Israelite to remember was to be able to stand with the nation, see the fire behind the darkness on top of Mt Sinai and hear the Lord give his commands … not least that beautiful gospel beginning, ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery’ (Exodus 20:2).

This healthy spiritual imagination feeds faith. Elsewhere in today’s reading, God promises that Israel’s observance of the Lord’s command will get the neighbouring nations’ attention. ‘What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?’ (Deuteronomy 4:7).

When we go to the Lord’s Supper because Jesus said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’, is it any less than being with him in the upper room the night before he died? Seeing him holding the bread and the cup and telling us, ‘This is my body … this is my blood’. We have no doubt our God is near us, bringing that blessing into the here and now. Answering prayer. Delivering us from slavery (to sin), just as he did the first Passover - of which the Lord’s Supper, on that Passover night before he died, was another remembrance.

Faith is a gift from God (John 6:29). Nurture your faith in his word. For remember how much receiving the kingdom of God like a little child meant to Jesus (Luke 10:16)?

**Holy Spirit, Jesus tells us that you will take what is his and make it known to us. Keep feeding our faith, and don’t let our spiritual imaginations grow cold that we can no longer receive your kingdom like a little child. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Tuesday 25 January 2022

# No empty word

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land you are going over the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 32:47).**

Read Deuteronomy 32:45–47,33:1–4

On the bench behind one of the cutting boards in our kitchen is the permanently kept ‘Fluffy Pancake’ recipe for easy access. Taught to at least three generations, these are the perfect pancakes. Better than the shop-bought mixes, not least the pancake shakers. Light. Airy. Able to hold huge amounts of maple syrup as the air is displaced from the finished product on the plate. No empty word on that recipe page. No wonder it’s kept handy.

Just because Jesus died to make good that we couldn’t keep the law does not mean it’s not worth keeping the law handy. And doing. Like yesterday, the reading for today is from Deuteronomy, albeit a much later part. The message is pretty much the same, though. The law is important. Do it. Teach it to your children (who hasn’t got better at something themselves by teaching it to another?). And by this, you’ll have life. You see, as I heard a Jewish Rabbi explain the other day about the Festival of Shavuot\*, keeping God’s law brings God’s good action and life into the world.

Of course, there are life-killing ways to live in the law. For example, we want to get legalistic. And judgemental. That’s not lifegiving because it takes over from God. Neither can we live the law perfectly anyway. Too much of what we shouldn’t. Not enough of what we should. All these are things we are rightly cautious about, yet none are an excuse to throw the law out. Instead we, therefore, live beyond Deuteronomy in another: Christ. We cling to him for forgiveness, then seek to do his will. We let him be the perfect interpreter of the law and the sole judge of all people.

On this day that commemorates the Apostle Paul’s conversion (Acts 9:1–19, Galatians 1:11–24), it’s fitting to be reminded of the central place St Paul ascribes to living in God’s commands. It’s the big ‘hinge-point’ of Paul’s letters. Essentially: ‘Because you are saved by Christ … live like it!!’ His letter to the church at Rome put it this sublime way: ‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship’ (Romans 12:1). No empty word indeed. How can you make this your prayer and life today?

**Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your law. In view of your mercy, by which you gave Jesus as the sacrifice who was holy and pleasing to you because I couldn’t be, give me your Spirit so that I can offer my body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to you. Amen.**

\*Shavuot includes the commemoration of the Torah being given at Sinai. Deuteronomy 4 from yesterday is central in this remembrance.

Wednesday 26 January 2022

# Rebuilding the ruins

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated (Isaiah 61:4a).**

Read Isaiah 61:1–4

On the 234th year since the First Fleet set down in Sydney Cove, I write this from the Adelaide Plains, the traditional lands of the Kaurna people, and acknowledge the Kaurna peoples’ many continuing and ancient connections to the land. Related to this, I thank the Lord for the Holy Spirit’s leading of pastors Schürmann and Teichelmann and their work at Pilta Wodli, including the recording of the Kaurna language.

Where in Australia do you have a spiritual connection? One such place for me is Peter’s Hill in South Australia. It sits adjacent to the Heysen Trail, just east of Riverton, about 100 kilometres north of Adelaide. My dad is a son of the congregation, now officially closed as a preaching place. Often, he recalls how he came to know and love his Lord Jesus in that place of faithful teaching and preaching where he received him. My grandparents Ken and Alma (nee Klitscher) Bishop are buried there. Maybe I, too, will rest in God’s acre there one day!

Some time ago, the Friends of Peter’s Hill had to decide something. Let the old church keep crumbling or preserve this piece of Australia’s heritage. They chose to ‘rebuild’ and ‘restore’.

To me, it is no surprise that God’s people get attached to the places we receive him. Today’s text from Isaiah 61, containing so many physical promises, is the basis of Jesus’ later self-revelatory sermon preached at Nazareth’s synagogue with its incarnational (Jesus among us) main point: ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’. (See devotion from Sunday 23 January 2022 that encompasses Luke 4:21.)

God is amongst us in the physical places we receive him (Luke 4:21). We can, unfortunately, idolise them, sinning. We should repent of that. But more positively, God gave us physical form and sent his son as a human to live among us. He will raise us and give us resurrection bodies, just like the body Jesus already has (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). The physical clearly matters to God. This is why Jesus is always building up our ‘ruins’ that result from sin. As Isaiah 61:3 promises us, we will have the oil of joy and garments of praise. Jesus gives us his oil of joy through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and his garments of praise through his garment of salvation (Isaiah 61:10, John 19:23,24). We can trust him for all our needs, not least the physical, as he walks with us in this world and brings us into the next.

What do you need to both thank him for and trust him in today?

***Thank you, Jesus, that you come to this world, build up the ruins caused by our sin and address the devastation caused by our unfaithfulness.*Thank you for all you give us, not least those places where we connect with you. Keep us gathering around you frequently and regularly so that we can be reminded of your presence and love. In your name, we pray. Amen.**

Thursday 27 January 2022

# For the sake of Christ’s gospel promises

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**At once they left their nets and followed him (Matthew 4:20).**

Read Matthew 4:12–23

Wow, I was blessed on my birthday this year! The water was as smooth as glass at the beautiful Venus Bay on the western Eyre Peninsula. I baited up and threw my fishing line out. Bang! Immediately, I got the first King George Whiting for the boat for the day – a ‘huge’ keeper. We had our bag limit by lunch. It’s only now, as I’ve read today’s verses, I realise how inconvenienced I would have been had Jesus walked out to me that morning and asked me to come and follow him.

It can be more than just inconvenient being chosen by God for his mission. On Tuesday, we had the commemoration of St Paul’s conversion. ‘I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’, said the Lord as he prepared the terrified Ananias to receive Saul, as Paul was still known then (Acts 9:16). ‘When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go’, said Jesus as he reinstated Peter after a post-resurrection fishy breakfast (John 21:18).

Why would anyone follow Jesus?

It’s because it’s good news that he proclaims, isn’t it? Astoundingly good news. And that good news makes a life-giving call on our lives, doesn’t it? ‘Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people … people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed; and he healed them’ (Matthew 4:23,24). We are children of the promise. The Holy Spirit has lodged his promise of life, healing and salvation in our hearts (2 Corinthians 1:21,22). We know it’s true. We want others to know that too. Simple as that, isn’t it?

What costs, inconvenience and pain of service in God’s mission have you been counting and need to repent of? Where can you serve anew or share his gospel promise?

**Lord Jesus, thank you for your call to repentance and for bringing your kingdom of forgiveness, life and salvation to us. Forgive me for counting the cost. Graciously inconvenience me every day for the sake of your gospel so that someone else can also receive your glorious promises. Grant this by your Holy Spirit’s faithful work in my life. Amen.**

Friday 28 January 2022

# Jots and tittles for grace and Godly living

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:18).**

Read Matthew 5:17–20

A page of Hebrew can be a fearful thing to a beginning student. I found this out in my first week at the seminary. Not only did I need to retrain my brain to read backwards (which, of course, is forwards in Hebrew!), then there were the differently shaped letters and the little dots and lines to tell us how long each vowel is … and therefore what the word is. I found it all quite ‘busy’ – at least compared to English. Especially the ‘jots and tittles’, as the King James Version translates ‘the smallest letter … the least stroke of a pen’ (Matthew 5:18). Eventually, my brain got used to it but was never perfect at doing it. I would become complacent, not looking at these jots and tittles properly. A few marks off for mistranslating. And sometimes, I got so bogged down in the detail that I failed to translate the text's full meaning. More marks off (even if my Hebrew lecturer was one of the kindest men I’ve ever met).

Jesus knew his father’s will inside out. The smallest letter. The least stroke of a pen. He got full marks for attending to the detail of God’s commandments and perfectly translating God’s will. And he handed this supreme result over to us to put on our heavenly transcript.

Not once, though, did he say that it was okay to set aside his commands or teachings. Not even the least. Indeed, he even urged us to let our righteousness surpass that of the very righteous (commandment-keeping) Pharisees. Here Jesus was urging us – and still does – to receive the gift of his righteousness by believing the extent of what he achieved for us on Calvary’s cross. Then driving us to live as resurrection people by translating his gift of new life into generous yet commandment-based living toward him and each other.

As we have seen in the devotion texts for this week, there is nothing to fear in this. Just Jesus’ grace and wisdom to receive and live out of!

What aspects of God’s commandments do you need to brush up on?

**Lord Jesus, you are righteous, and your laws are right. Thank you for the beautiful language of your law, which you fully kept and now gift the benefits to us. Generously give us your Holy Spirit to translate our life in you and your world according to your perfect will. In your precious name, we pray. Amen.**

Saturday 29 January 2022

# God, our instinctive refuge

by Pastor Matthew Bishop

**You have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and fortress (Psalm 71:3b).**

Read Psalm 71:1–6

It was particularly miserable weather when I went to the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland with my family. The previous day in Galway had been perfect – t-shirts and blue sky. Not so the next. Horizontal rain and the full force of an Atlantic westerly gale smashing into the rock wall, buffeting the few brave (and stupid) tourists trying to see this famed piece of Irish coastline.

What we’ll never forget is the puffin birds nestled safely into the nooks on the cliff face. How do they withstand the appalling conditions? Where is their sense of panic? In those rocks is their sure refuge. From their youth, they have experienced this. They know a new day will dawn. Their instincts tell them to stay where they are. They can wait out the storm.

Psalm 71 is the voice of an elderly person, possibly an older King David, in time of trial. They have reason to panic. ‘Rescue me from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man’ (verse 4). But they have a firm basis for confidence in their request: ‘For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust O Lord from my youth’ (verse 5). As the storms of life threaten them, they take refuge (verse 1) in their ‘rock and fortress’ (verse 2), the one to which they have continually come throughout their life (verse 3).

There is considerable spiritual buttressing to be gained from reading and meditating on the whole of Psalm 71 today. Not just the first six verses. Older people can identify with spent strength and grey hair (verses 9 and 18), yet they have confidence for the future that comes with the witness and experience of God’s mighty deeds (verses 16,17) of the past. They can share this testimony with the younger people in their life. If you are younger, you can benefit from the writer’s wisdom in mapping out how knowing God from our youth leads to a calm place of refuge and solace in all life’s future circumstances. And all ages can think of the most important rock on planet earth as the reason for our confidence: the open tomb of Mount Calvary’s garden that always tells us our most serious enemies, sin, death and the devil, will never have the final say (see Luke 24:1–3,44–47, not least the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins).

Where does Psalm 71 remind you of Christ’s refuge and help in the storms of your life?

**Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you teach us that Christ is our rock and refuge, the one who inclines his ear to us and saves us. Keep us hearing his comforting and strengthening voice today. In his name. Amen.**

Sunday 30 January 2022

# Prophets and their communities

by Kathy Matuschka

**Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5).**

Read Jeremiah 1:4–10

You may recall that in response to God’s call above, Jeremiah replies: ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child’ (verse 6). This week, we will reflect on the prophetic calling. We will consider some of the experiences of someone consenting to declare God’s word and will to others. Today, though, let’s zoom out from Jeremiah to the community that supported and protected him.

Jeremiah presents as an emotional loner, and there is no disputing that people called to share unpleasant news tend to find themselves in a lonely position! But Jeremiah was not alone: he was dependent on friends like Baruch, who wrote down the words that Jeremiah received from God and read them to the people (Jeremiah 36:4,10), and Ebed-Melech, the Cushite who rescued Jeremiah from the cistern (Jeremiah 38).

Many biblical scholars believe there was a prophetic community supporting and protecting prophets like Jeremiah, possibly even contributing to the text that has been passed on to us and continuing in the tradition that Jeremiah had begun after he died.

So what, you say? Whether you identify with the prophetic gifting or not, if you are a Christian, you are part of a prophetic community, called to weigh up the words you hear in the light of God’s word and the context in which we find ourselves … and sometimes even to speak!

**Ah, Lord God, there are many things about the times in which we now live that confuse me. Especially in the western world, I wonder what you are making of us, your church. Holy Spirit, please continue to build us as communities of insight, faith and hope, supporting and encouraging one another as we speak of the things we see. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**