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**Sunday 25 October to Sunday 1 November**

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Sunday 25 October 2020

# Above all things

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ (Matthew 22:37).**

Read Matthew 22:34–46

What does it mean to love God with all my heart, soul, and mind? What does this look like? I certainly want to love God in this way, but I also find myself incapable of doing so. Am I easily distracted, or is this command just impossible?

In the search for an answer to these questions, I think about some of the things I love. If we reflect on the things we treasure here on earth, perhaps this will provide insight into what it means to love God wholeheartedly.

It strikes me that when we love something, we want to look at it, encounter it, and soak it in. We want to be in its presence.

I love flowers, especially fragrant ones. I love to look at them and smell them. Sometimes I even take the time to draw them. I love to bring them into my home and let the fragrance fill the house.

I also love my children. I love to look at their faces and observe how they react to different people or situations. I love to hear what they are thinking and see what they are doing. It is a joy to be in their presence, contemplating the mystery of who God has made them to be.

God invites us to love him more deeply than we love our earthly treasures. He invites us to meditate on him, to acknowledge his realness, and to speak to him. He invites us to encounter him in his word and to drink him in communion. He wants us to do this first and foremost.

This is not so much an instruction about what we have to do. It is an invitation to encounter God and to be in relationship with him.

When God draws us into his presence, we receive the one who is love. This experience of divine love transforms us. Only then can we start to practice what it means to love God above all things and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

**Dear Lord, I long to be in your presence and to see you face-to-face. Call me to be in right relationship with you, to think of you, and long for you more than anything in this world. Amen.**

Monday 26 October 2020

# Restoration

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘[S]hare your food with the hungry and … provide the poor wanderer with shelter ... clothe him, and [do not] turn away from your own flesh and blood’ (Isaiah 58:7).**

Read Isaiah 58:7–12

In today’s reading, God reveals through the prophet Isaiah that he is most pleased when we love and serve those in need. God doesn’t leave us guessing who these people are. He names them. They are the hungry, the poor, the homeless, the unclothed. When we love and serve these people, we please him.

Serving the most vulnerable members of our community is not just about donating to our favourite charity, good though that is. We are also called to encounter such people in the flesh. Verse 7 says that when we ‘see’ them, we are to ‘share’, ‘provide’, and ‘clothe’. In other words, we are to come close to them and serve them with our very own hands and feet.

God also reminds us that, as we care for those in need, we are not to neglect the needs of our flesh and blood (see also 1 Timothy 5:8). These are among the very people he has called us to love and serve. Strangely, however, loving and serving members of our own family can be more challenging than loving and serving someone we have just met.

Sometimes we can find the company of our parents, children, or spouses too hard, so we decide to invest our Christian efforts elsewhere. We might pour our efforts into trying to save the world, but at the same time, neglect our very own families.

I wonder whether this is something you have experienced. Have you ever found yourself investing in someone else’s child while your own child falls behind? Perhaps you’ve focused on resolving some other family’s dispute but left a conflict within your family to fester. Or maybe you’ve called on an elderly friend but neglected to phone your parent or sibling.

As our reading from Isaiah tells us, we cannot turn a blind eye to the needs of our community. But we shouldn’t do this at the expense of our own families, the very people God has placed into our lives.

Ultimately it is Christ who will repair the brokenness of the world. Only he can quench the world’s thirst; only he can shine light into our darkness; only he can bring order to our chaos. But he invites us to participate in this restoration process, starting with the poor, the hungry, and our own families.

**Dear Lord, thank you that you will make all things new. Equip us to be your hands and feet in this world, especially among those you have called us to serve. Amen.**

Tuesday 27 October 2020

# Costly love

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15:12,13).**

Read John 15:9–17

When Jesus talks about love, he is not just talking about a feeling of warm affection. According to that understanding, love is an emotion that we can fall in and out of fairly quickly.

We see expressions of this attitude towards love all of the time. Attitudes that say ‘I just don’t love you anymore’ are common, not only in romantic relationships but also in friendships and family relationships. According to the world’s thinking, when we ‘fall out of love’ with someone, we can sever ties and go our own way. After all, we only have one life to live, and our happiness is what matters most.

Have you ever found yourself on the receiving end of this sort of mentality? Perhaps you have celebrated the beginning of a new friendship, only to find that this person now ignores you. In this world of social media, they might even have blatantly ‘unfriended’ you. Perhaps you have experienced this more acutely with a spouse seeking separation or even a non-spousal family member cutting ties. Or maybe you are guilty of having done this sort of thing yourself.

In this reading, Jesus teaches us about real love, or, what he calls, greater love. This sort of love is not based on our emotions. It’s not self-seeking, nor is it fleeting. It is a form of love that is costly. It involves sacrifice. It might even cost us our lives.

Have you ever wondered what you might be willing to suffer and endure for the sake of someone else? In our human weakness, we can miss the mark, and we may fail to show this type of love. But even then, God wants to forgive us and hold us in everlasting love.

**Dear Lord, thank you for laying down your life for me. Forgive me for the times I have loved selfishly, and help me to be more like you. Amen.**

Wednesday 28 October 2020

# A divided heart

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘You have not lied just to human beings but to God’ (Acts 5:4).**

Read Acts 5:1–11

When Christ calls us to follow him, the call is absolute. Drop everything, come. Jesus shakes up our world.

Understandably, this can cause us some uncertainty or even anxiety. We want to follow Jesus, but we’re also scared about what it will mean for us. We’re nervous about letting go of our place in the world. These fears can lead to hypocrisy. We want to appear to our friends in the church to be trusting Christ, but sometimes the things we do in secret suggest otherwise.

In today’s passage, we meet a couple, Ananias and Saphira, who struggle with this very thing. They are a wealthy couple who sell a piece of property, and they pretend to bring all of the proceeds to the apostles to distribute according to need, as was the custom in the early church (see Acts 4:32–37 for further context). But in reality, they keep some of the money for themselves.

When Peter asks them directly whether the amount they handed over was the full amount, they lie. He sees their lie and calls it out. But God sees their lie, too, and they fall dead. Their death is a result of their hypocrisy.

Have you ever told a lie to preserve an image of yourself as an upright Christian? What are some things you are reluctant to relinquish for fear of losing your place in the world?

**Dear Lord, forgive us when we have lied to ourselves, to others, and you. Protect us from hypocrisy, and let your gospel bear fruit in us. Amen.**

Thursday 29 October 2020

# From riches to rags

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Corinthians 8:9).**

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–9

When was the last time you were moved by someone’s kindness, either to yourself or others? People are engaged in acts of generosity all of the time if only we have eyes to see.

Have you ever considered God’s generosity towards humankind? His generosity towards you? If we take a short moment to reflect on God’s actions, we will see that his acts of generosity are unmatched.

First and foremost, God acted with generosity when he created the heavens and earth and placed us in it. Unfortunately, however, we ruptured our relationship with God when we insisted on doing things our way. Rather than abandon us to our chosen fate, God acted generously again and sought to reconcile us to himself.

He did this by sending his only son, Jesus Christ, into the world. That meant that Jesus left his place of glory in heaven, mingled his divine nature with the human DNA of his mother, and came into his world in the tiniest form – as an embryo – to be carried through pregnancy and ordinarily born.

If these sacrifices weren’t already enough, Jesus wasn’t born into a family of wealth or status. His mother was young (probably still a teenager), and his foster father was a humble carpenter. He wasn’t born in a hospital or a palace, but rather in a stable for animals. He became poor for our sake.

As a man, Jesus mingled with people of low social esteem and people who were sick (including those who were very infectious). He allowed himself to be bothered both by proud people and by crowds. Despite being the only faultless being who ever walked our earth, Jesus even allowed himself to be betrayed, accused, tortured, and horrifically put to death.

Jesus did all of these things for us, who are anything but perfect. He wanted to ensure that we, whom he loves and created individually and uniquely, could spend eternal paradise with him in glory. How can something as earthy and flawed as people dwell with perfection itself? Well, they can’t. And that is why Christ came, to bridge that massive chasm.

Jesus went from riches to rags, for our sake, so that we could go from rags to riches.

**Dear Lord, thank you for taking on human flesh and dying for our sins so that we might be reconciled to you. Give us faith in your word, and help us daily to remember the sacrifices you made for us so that we might give generously of ourselves to others. Amen.**

Friday 30 October 2020

# A simple life

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you’ (1 Thessalonians 4:11).**

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:7–12

We live in an age of celebrity. What started as glossy magazines and reality TV shows has morphed into social media and the 24/7 news cycle. Many of us now pin our profiles online in numerous forums and cast our opinions far and wide on the web. Sometimes we do this with good intentions and the right motives. Other times it’s an act of self-promotion.

Yet the type of life St Paul calls us to in this passage is a simple one. It’s a life that is not grasping, not trying to prove anything, and not striving for wealth, success, or recognition. It’s a life that receives what has been given to us and realises the futility and vanity in anxious self-promotion.

This sort of life comes about when we have a grounded sense of identity. It comes about when we know that we were created, not self-made. It comes about when we recognise that our life and breath are given to us by God, and one day will be taken away.

There may be times when God calls us to do something extraordinary. But when he does not, we are called to lives that are quiet, selfless, and focused on others; lives that are willing to do the unseen tasks like cleaning the church, photocopying documents, or wiping the baby’s bottom.

We may feel that we are ‘above’ such ordinary tasks. This is especially true in our technological age, where we crave constant entertainment and gratification. But St Paul encourages us not to neglect the created world, which involves the slow and patient art of working with our hands.

Is there a way you can work with your hands today? Can you plant something in your garden? Offer to mind someone’s child for an hour? Iron your handkerchiefs? Put together a model plane or start a needlework project? And as you do this, pray for peace and a quiet heart.

**Dear Lord, please put to death all my worldly ambition. Let me be ambitious for one thing, which is to follow your call with quietness, humility, and trust. Amen.**

Saturday 31 October 2020

# Preaching the gospel to yourself

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God’ (Psalm 43:5).**

Read Psalm 43

Do you ever talk to yourself? Perhaps you do this out loud, in a journal, or in your head.

It seems to me that this is the very thing the psalmist is doing here in verse 5. He is talking to himself, ‘Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?’

Self-talk can be a helpful thing. It can help us untangle the knots of our thoughts and emotions. It can help us understand why we are feeling the way we are feeling or behaving the way we are behaving. Healthy self-reflection can help us find the proper paths to peace and reconciliation. It can also help us as we grow in the Christian life. Or, as our liturgy says, as we ‘strive daily to lead holy lives, even as Christ has made us holy’.

But there is such a thing as too much self-reflection. Too much self-reflection can easily lead to ungodly accusations, which, in turn, can lead to self-loathing or self-pity.

‘I can’t believe you did/said/thought that! If you were a true Christian, you would have been more selfless/patient/generous/gracious/humble/self-controlled …’

‘I can’t believe he/she/they did that! You poor thing. You’ve been dealt such a hard lot. No one understands your burdens. You have to carry this all alone.’

Do either of these sound familiar? Both, perhaps?

Here in verse 5, the psalmist models to us a healthy dose of self-talk. He notices and acknowledges that he is downcast and disturbed. But his reflection is brief. He doesn’t give unnecessary airtime to his thoughts and emotions. He doesn’t indulge them, replaying them over and over in his head.

Instead, he notices them and then lets the truth of God’s word penetrate his own heart: ‘Yes, I see you are disturbed and downcast’, ‘Put your hope in God!’, ‘Praise him!’

He is your Saviour. Nothing can be so big that it cannot be forgiven nor restored. Remember what God has done for you – what he is doing for you, even now!

In doing this, the psalmist’s gaze is redirected. He’s not stuck looking at his sins or the sins of others. Instead, he sees the God who created him and laid down his life for the world.

**Dear Lord, when we are downcast by our sins or the sins committed against us, help us to turn our gaze to you so that you can shed light and truth into our lives. Amen.**

Sunday 1 November 2020

# Virtual worship

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**‘We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses’ (Hebrews 12:1).**

Read Hebrews 12:1–2

When the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak, and you were unable to worship in your home church, you more than likely went online and accessed a church somewhere else in the country where worship was happening. And, hopefully, you didn’t just observe what they were doing, but you worshipped with them. You weren’t physically there, but you worshipped with them virtually.

Today is All Saints’ Day, sometimes known as All Hallows’ Day. In many parts of Europe, on the evening before All Hallows’ Day (All Hallows’ E’en), people go to the local cemetery and light a candle at the grave of their loved one. It’s quite a sight to see the area so full of burning candles. And on this day, you would see hundreds of flowers that people have placed on the graves, remembering and honouring those saints who have gone before. A great cloud of witnesses.

Did you know that every time you worship, you are joining with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, who are praising God around the throne day and night, continuously? That includes your loved ones who died in Christ. You are tuning in, connecting to their worship. All the biblical heroes, great church fathers and reformers, modern-day heroes of faith, people who showed you Jesus, parents, grandparents, and close friends are saints in heaven and on earth praising God, worshipping virtually. In fact, they are worshipping actually. You never worship alone. Even a pandemic can’t separate you from this crowd of witnesses.

Every now and then, close your eyes and sense all those around you, and thank God for them.

**Thank you, God, for all those who have gone before me and shown me Jesus. I join them this day in worship. All praise to you. Amen.**