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**Sunday 7 November 2021 to Sunday 14 November 2021**

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Sunday 7 November 2021

# Called to give

by Sue Westhorp

**She, out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on (Mark 12:44b).**

Read Mark 12:38–44

Money. It’s an uncomfortable subject, isn’t it? Especially when it comes to the church. I wonder how many pastors sweat over writing a sermon about giving or how many treasurers dread having to report on the financials at the church annual general meeting. Perhaps this text, often referred to as ‘the widow’s mite’, seems to answer – we are called to give all we have, no matter the cost.

How easy it is to judge those beside us in the pews by the colour of the note they placed into the collection bowl. How easy it is to feel pride when we are in the position of being able to contribute financially and know that others are taking note of our generosity.

And perhaps it’s this ‘taking note’ that creates problems for us. When our motivation for giving becomes clouded by appearances or what others will think of us, our focus can shift to ‘quantity’ rather than ‘cost’. We can focus on what we can afford out of ‘our’ money rather than acknowledging that all we have belongs to God. Giving can become about ticking a box, something that we do without feeling the cost.

We know that in this passage, the widow certainly feels the cost – she gives everything she has, all she has to live on. But if we dig a bit deeper to note who the widow is contrasted with, we learn something of what may have led to her state of poverty. ‘They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’ So says Jesus not about the governing authorities, but about the scribes – those meant to protect and preserve widows! And in the midst of what may have been corrupt treatment from those seen to be doing God’s work, this widow responds to God’s radical generosity with gratitude by giving all she has.

Jesus’ words. They can be uncomfortable to hear, can’t they? Especially when we place ourselves in the shoes of the scribes – do we, as the church, ever contribute to the inequity of some people in society?

And they can be comforting words when we do not have much to give – God sees us and uses whatever we have. In whatever way these words land in your heart today, know that they are only part of the story. God’s generosity to us is the story. We have abundant life only because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. How are you being called to respond to this generous gift?

**Thank you, God, for your generosity to me. Give me that same spirit of generosity in response to you and for the sake of others. Amen.**

Monday 8 November 2021

# A prayer on coming out of lockdown

by Sue Westhorp

**My steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 45:10b).**

Read Isaiah 54:10–17

I’m tired.

Not just short on sleep or feeling my age.

Not the tiredness that comes from a night of celebration now that we Victorians are out of lockdown.

I’m tired.

Soul-tired.

The tiredness that comes from many months of anxiety, isolation and fear.

Tired from working in a healthcare setting where staff are exhausted and traumatised by looking after COVID patients.

Tired of being separated from family both locally and overseas.

Tired of wondering when God will fix this mess.

Tired.

And then, your voice: My steadfast love shall not depart from you.

Steadfast, in the face of all that is changing, day by day.

Steadfast, never leaving, never finding it all too hard.

Staying.

I feel my spirits lift.

My head is not bowed down.

But then comes turmoil.

Who is in, and who is out?

Who is safe to be around?

Who needs protection?

Turmoil and conflict.

I am tired, and I crave peace and harmony.

And then, your voice: My covenant of peace shall not be removed.

Okay, then. Show me how this works.

It feels too hard, trying to balance

the safety and the needs,

the rules and the soul-care.

I am tired.

Show me how, I say to the Lord who has compassion on me.

And I am tired.

And I am held.

And I am comforted.

Tuesday 9 November 2021

# Will only a few be saved?

by Sue Westhorp

**Someone asked him, ‘Lord, will only a few be saved?’ Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:23,29).**

Read Luke 13:22–30

How many followers do you have on social media?

How much money do you need in your superannuation to be able to retire comfortably?

What number do we have to reduce carbon emissions by in order to prevent a climate catastrophe?

Numbers and data are important to how we make sense of the world, aren’t they? The past 18 months have seen many of us fixated on the number of COVID-19 cases in our country or state. Perhaps in your church, the issue of numbers has become pressing as well. You may be asking, ‘How do we increase our membership?’ or ‘How do we get more young people involved?’

Questions about numbers are often important ways to track how we are going in many different areas. In today’s reading, Jesus challenges us to reframe our thinking about numbers. The question is asked, ‘Lord, will only a few be saved?’– a question that reveals a preoccupation with numbers as if that is the most important sign of the presence of the kingdom. Jesus directs attention away from numbers and instead replies, ‘Strive to enter through the narrow door’. The invitation here is to follow Jesus and know him, not just know about him. When we know Jesus, we respond to his invitation to take up the cross and follow him every day of our lives. It is the cross that will bring us joy and everlasting life. It is the cross that enables us to enter through the narrow door.

And this is not all that Jesus wants us to know. If we think we can predict who will be saved and who won’t, then we’re in for a big surprise! How easy it can be to judge others and exclude people from salvation. We are reminded that God’s loving offer of salvation is open to all: ‘Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.’And what a feast it will be!

**Loving God, give me joy and hope in your offer of salvation to me and to all. Help me to always know you as my Lord and Saviour. Amen.**

Wednesday 10 November 2021

# Our vulnerable God

by Sue Westhorp

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who … emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness (Philippians 2:5,7).**

Read Philippians 2:2­–18

What does Jesus teach us about who God is? This is the question that arises when I read the great Christ hymn in Philippians 2. This passage reveals so much to us about who God is in the person of Jesus. We know that God’s people expected the Messiah to come in a blaze of glory, seizing power from the authorities. Instead, Jesus empties himself of all power, taking the form of a slave. There is no blaze of glory. There is no seizing of authority. There is no power over the other. Only the desire for love, compassion, mercy, humility and vulnerability. And this vulnerability takes its ultimate form on the cross.

How then might we hear the call to ‘let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’? As a church, we sometimes lament our waning influence on society and our lack of voice in places of power. As we wrestle with this, having ‘the mind of Christ’ can help us change our focus to how we relate to each other, our community and our world. We are invited to cease striving for power and instead follow Jesus by identifying with the lowly and offering ourselves to the world as humble servants. The great paradox of Jesus emptying himself is that, in doing so, he gave us a much fuller picture of who God is. Not only who God is, but what God does. Our God takes on the form of our humanity, becomes vulnerable and, ultimately, saves us by his vulnerability to death on the cross. God has done all of the work! God’s call to us then is to remember our vulnerability and how we can serve others through it, never resting on human power but on our ultimate dependence on God.

**Loving God, your son Jesus emptied himself to serve us and save us. Help us to have the same mind as Jesus, serving others and serving you. Amen.**

Thursday 11 November 2021

# I have confidence

by Sue Westhorp

**Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward (Hebrews 10:35).**

Read Hebrews 10:32–39

One of my favourite movies is The Sound of Music. I’ve always loved the scene where Maria leaves the confines of the abbey to begin her work as a governess to the Von Trapp family. She begins the journey tentatively, wondering what the future holds and feeling apprehensive and worried. A couple of minutes later, Maria is dancing down the streets singing about all of the things she has confidence in, finishing with ‘I have confidence in me’. There is something stirring and inspirational about how Maria faces her fears, recounting what she knows about the world and herself.

What or who do you have confidence in? What happens when life experiences shake or damage this confidence? The writer to the Hebrews addresses these questions to the early church. The writer appeals to them to remember how they felt at the time of their conversion to the faith and that the light they experienced then also shone into the dark times that followed as they suffered for their faith.

When you are suffering or struggling, what is it that reminds you of God’s love for you? What is it that reminds you of who you have confidence in? Perhaps it is recalling times past where God has answered your prayers. Maybe it is remembering a time where you felt God was absent, but on reflection, you realised he was there with you in your suffering. For some of us, the journey of faith consists of days where we are confident of God’s goodness and presence in our lives, while on other days, well, we’re not so sure – the mystery of faith and doubt living side-by-side as we make sense of our existence as God’s beloved children.

So, what is this confidence that we hear about in this passage from Hebrews, and what is the reward? What we have confidence in is the reward! Our confidence is in the God who saves us through Christ. The God who is always with us in times of joy and in times of sorrow. When we feel less than confident about our ability to handle life’s challenges, we can have confidence in the one who loves and saves us, no matter what life brings. Go, live in that confidence!

**Loving God, give me faith in you, confidence in your saving promises and endurance for the journey ahead. Amen.**

Friday 12 November 2021

# Wake up and listen!

by Sue Westhorp

**Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Revelation 3:2a,6).**

Read Revelation 3:1–6

‘Wake up! You’re going to be late!’

‘Wake up to yourself!’

‘That was the wake-up call I needed!’

Do any of these phrases sound familiar to you? They do to me! Particularly the struggle to get up and get to work in the morning or the admonishment I’ve heard about my attitude or behaviour. And then there are the lessons I’ve learned just in the nick of time, saving me from some catastrophe or drama. These examples assume that we have been asleep or complacent in some way and need to become alert and attentive. We need to pay attention so something can change.

Today’s reading from the Book of Revelation calls for the church in Sardis to ‘wake up’. Scholars posit that perhaps this church and its members, in a city of great wealth, had not experienced the same testing and persecution as some of the other churches and so had become complacent in their faith.

I’m writing this reflection on 31 October – Reformation Day – a day when we celebrate the church ‘waking up’ to the good news of the gifts of grace and freedom. Like we hear in Ephesians 2:8,9, ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of Godnot the result of works, so that no-one may boast’. And this was not just a once-off back in 1517. The Spirit continues to speak into our understanding of God, his word and his church, reawakening our faith when we have been asleep. What is God’s invitation you are ‘waking up’ to today? How will you listen for the Spirit’s voice in your life, community and church?

**Loving God, where I have become complacent, reawaken my faith. Send your Spirit to speak into our lives today. Amen.**

Saturday 13 November 2021

# The path of life

by Sue Westhorp

**You show me the path of life (Psalm 16:11a).**

Read Psalm 16

For as many years as I can remember, I have visited my auntie in Cudgee in South West Victoria – first during school holidays with my parents and siblings, then on my own as a young adult, and then with my own family. An important ritual of these visits is taking the dogs for a run along a beautiful part of the Hopkins River. This part of the river runs through farmland, with cows usually greeting us as we drive through the gates. As we walk (while the dogs run), I’m always fascinated by the skinny paths worn by the cattle's hooves over the years. These paths meander up the side of hills and skirt the edge of the river, providing safety for us as we navigate the uneven ground and saving us from twisted ankles.

I’ve always been the type of person who feels most comfortable sticking to the ‘path’ in life. I find safety and security in knowing that the way ahead is tried and true. Occasionally, I get adventurous and detour off the path, but my naturally cautious personality means I am soon back on track, not wanting to get into any trouble or danger. There are often many pathways laid out for us – education pathways, career pathways, parenting pathways. How do we choose the right one?

In today’s reading, the psalmist outlines the blessings of following the path God has set out for us – refuge, counsel, security and joy. These blessings are wonderful enough in themselves, but the path of life is the ultimate blessing and gift. Life in all its abundance and freedom is ours through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. God does not call us to a path he has not walked himself – we are not alone! As we walk the path of life, God walks with us, strengthening us, protecting us and rejoicing with us, and calling us into his presence where we can live forever.

**Loving God, continue to show me the path of life with its security, refuge and joys. Always be my companion as we walk it together. Amen.**

Sunday 14 November 2021

# Structures or relationships?

by Pastor Peter Bean

**As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his followers said to him, ‘Look, Teacher! How beautiful the buildings are!’ (Mark 13:1).**

Read Mark 13:1–8

Perhaps you have visited some of the cathedrals of Europe, or possibly, like me, each year watching the Tour De France, you become mesmerised by the ancient monasteries, basilicas and churches. They are indeed beautiful. The stonework is often amazing. I usually wonder how they managed to construct these buildings without modern equipment. Marvels of the modern world!

This follower obviously thought the same of the temple in Jesus’ time. And perhaps rightly so. The temple was, after all, where God resided and where the high priest encountered him. Why would it not consist of beautiful buildings?

Yet Jesus was not interested in or impressed by this sort of beauty. He focused on the beauty inside a person. Jesus was not interested in God being confined to a particular place. In fact, as The Message version of John 1:14 puts it, God has moved into the neighbourhood! That’s Jesus. His focus is on people, on relationships.

Buildings have their place and serve their purpose. If they reflect the glory of God in their design and structure, that is even better. But they will rot; they will eventually fall down or be replaced.

Jesus’ relationship with us is constant; it is secure. We could even say it is beautiful. Jesus’ love for us will continue no matter what wars, earthquakes or famines come. Our reality is to walk and live in that relationship; allow the love of Jesus to permeate our lives; live in the gifts of grace and forgiveness; and gain our security from a God who became a human being in Jesus Christ, who lives in and with us wherever we are.

Value your churches; admire the cathedrals; praise God for the human effort that went into glorifying God in these buildings, but above all that, value the presence of Jesus in your heart. Allow the Holy Spirit to enable you to see God’s beauty everywhere.

**Thank you, God, for the gift of beauty. Thank you for loving us, for gifting us grace and forgiveness. Help us to live as your people wherever we may be. Amen.**