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**Sunday 21 February to Sunday 28 February**

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Sunday 21 February 2021

# Beloved

by Sue Westhorp

**‘And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”’ (Mark 1:11).**

Read Mark 1:9–15

Today, we hear from the Gospel of Mark, the gospel that doesn’t include any stories of Jesus’ background, family or birth – there are no shepherds, angels or wise men. Instead, we are taken straight to the announcement and confirmation of who Jesus really is. God himself says, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased’. So, the very first thing that Mark does is to tell us exactly who Jesus is. For Mark, this is the starting point of the gospel, the very first thing that matters.

You know, one of the things that I love about this event out in the Jordan River is what God does not say. God doesn’t say, ‘I’m well pleased with Jesus because he has proved to me that he deserves it – he has quiet time with me each night, he always reads the Scriptures, and he really knows how to heal people’. No, nothing like that. As far as we know from all the gospels together, this is the start of Jesus’ ministry – so far, he hasn’t really done anything, and yet, he was called beloved – the one in whom the Father was well pleased.

And at your own baptism, you didn’t have to do anything. In your baptism, God proclaimed that you are his beloved child, and claimed you and named you as God’s own. God’s love is his free gift to you – just like your baptism is his gift, too. Baptism is not a ritual that we give to God, but God’s act on us.

As Mark recorded, Jesus’ baptism was an event of cosmic proportions, one that prepared him for what came next, because immediately following his baptism, that same Spirit – the one who first looked like a peaceful dove – sent him out into the wilderness for 40 days. Perhaps you know something of the wilderness, of uncertainty, of fear. In the midst of the wilderness, what is it that we can hold onto? What is it that we know? We know who and whose we are – God’s beloved children, with whom he is well pleased. Live in the love, light and promise of this good news!

**Loving God, thank you for claiming us as your own through baptism. When we experience wilderness in our lives, remind us of our identity in you. Amen.**

Monday 22 February 2021

# God will provide

by Sue Westhorp

**‘So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided”’ (Genesis 22:14).**

Read Genesis 22:1–19

I remember vividly the picture that accompanied this story in my children’s Bible – a young boy lying on a stone altar, trusting and calm, and a man with a beard, arms raised above the boy and holding a knife. It always struck terror in me, which is probably why I still remember it. I also remember the questions that ran through my young mind:

Why would God ask Abraham to do such a horrible thing?

Did Isaac have any idea what was about to happen, and, if he did, would he have run away?

What if God asks my parents to do the same thing to me?

As an adult and a parent, I now wonder, what was going through Abraham’s mind as God asked him to sacrifice his only son? What was he feeling? There is no emotion portrayed in this passage, but our humanity and compassion call us to imagine how he felt. As a mother of an ‘only son’, my heart breaks – what God asks in this passage seems cruel and unfathomable. And if we leave it there, the love and grace of God seem absent.

And yet in this text, God, in his love and grace, provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. In doing so, God blessed Abraham with many offspring – offspring that would form part of Jesus’ lineage. In our New Testament ears, the parallels between this sacrifice and the suffering, death and resurrection of God’s only son, Jesus, ring loud and clear. The message is clear – God does provide!

How I wish I had Abraham’s faith! God’s provision can be difficult to remember when I am in situations where I feel desperate, helpless, and unable to see a way forward. Perhaps it can be like this for you too, in these ever-changing times where COVID-19 dominates our lives and hope can feel fleeting. It’s at times like these that the words of the psalmist in many of the psalms (eg Psalms 10, 38, 130) remind me that my lament is not the whole story – God has provided before and he will provide again!

**Loving God, help me to trust in your promise that you will provide all I need. When I am struggling, remind me of your love and grace in my life. Amen.**

Tuesday 23 February 2021

# A stuff-up of epic proportions

by Sue Westhorp

**‘Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them’ (Numbers 20:12).**

Read Numbers 20:1–13

Have you ever stuffed up? I mean, really stuffed up? Perhaps you made a mistake at work, sometimes referred to as a ‘career-limiting move’. Perhaps your actions caused a relationship to break down. Maybe you’ve even had failures in ministry, in trying to lead God’s people.

Today we hear about Moses and his stuff-up of epic proportions. Moses had been called by God to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land – a holy role of authority, trust and prestige. Moses and Aaron also had special access to God’s presence in the tent of meeting, a place where God would appear to them and give them instructions for what they needed to do next. The people were grumbling because there was no water, so God gave Moses and Aaron some pretty simple instructions in verse 8:

Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

Could it be any easier? And yet Moses, perhaps sick of the whining or maybe wanting to give a demonstration of his own power, disobeyed God and instead struck the rock. The result was the same – water flowed abundantly – but Moses’ lack of trust had consequences.

It can be the same for us. The temptations of power and authority can lead us to become impatient and lose focus on where true authority and power comes from – God. And we suffer the consequences, just as Moses did when God prevented him from entering the Promised Land – the one thing he had been called to do.

The good news is that God is not limited by our stuff-ups. We are not that powerful! Moses may not have led the Israelites into the Promised Land, but they eventually got there, led by Joshua. And so, God continues to work through us and despite us, calling us to repent and refocus when we stuff up and continuing to love us as we live with the consequences of our actions. I thank God for people like Moses who show us that God’s story of salvation is much bigger and powerful than the individuals who are part of it – including me!

**Loving God, you are bigger than any mistakes we make. Lead us to repentance so that we can refocus our eyes on you. Amen.**

Wednesday 24 February 2021

# Why me?

by Sue Westhorp

**The Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’ (Job 1:8).**

Read Job 1:1–12

In my work as a hospital chaplain, one of the most common questions I hear from patients is ‘why?’. Why me? What have I done to deserve this? Why now? I’ve just retired and now I’ve been told I only have three months to live. Where is God in any of this?

When suffering enters our lives, it is very normal to ask these questions, to try to make sense out of our experience.

Today’s reading introduces us to Job, a ‘blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’. ‘The satan’ (which literally translates to ‘the accuser’) is a member of the heavenly court who makes a bet with God that if God destroys all of Job’s blessings, then Job will curse him to his face. There follows a story of suffering, innocent suffering, that hasn’t been caused by Job’s behaviour or his choices.

From the beginning of the story, where bad news and loss after loss cascade onto Job, to the end of the story where God restores Job’s fortunes. This book of the Bible gives us an example of how to live through crisis and tragedy. The majority of the book is taken up with Job’s response to his suffering – his bitter complaint and lament. And yet, he continues to trust God even though he is never given a reason for his suffering. How often do we see suffering in this world that has no logical rhyme or reason? And we know that being a Christian does not protect us from suffering or help us to fully understand why we suffer. We are called to live in this tension and still trust our God. And, it is difficult.

The book of Job also guides us on how to be present with others in their suffering. Job’s friends start well. For seven days, they sit there with him, silently acknowledging the depth of his grief and pain. But then the need to ‘do something’ prompts them to start offering unhelpful advice. We’re not great at sitting with our own feelings of helplessness, are we? I know I like to think I can offer words of wisdom that might help ease another’s suffering. I also know that often this is not the result. Just as God sits with us in our suffering, we are called to come alongside others, to be a companion to them in their suffering and questions.

**Loving God, in the midst of suffering, remind us of your constant presence with us. Give us patience and empathy to sit with the suffering of others. Amen.**

Thursday 25 February 2021

# The gifts of armour

by Sue Westhorp

**Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm (Ephesians 6:13).**

Read Ephesians 6:10–20

When I was a teenager, a good friend asked me to join the local hockey team with her. I readily agreed and set off to the sports shop to find out what equipment I would need. I came home laden with a sports top, sports skirt, footy boots, footy socks, hockey stick, shin pads and a mouthguard. Just a tad more equipment than my previous exploits in tennis had required! I’ll never forget the feeling of turning up to my first match, fully ‘armoured’ and ready to face the opposing team. I felt invincible! As it turns out, I wasn’t, but I still had a lot of fun and some bruises to show for it.

The truth is, I have no experience of what it is like to wear armour or experience physical battle. Often, I find it hard to relate to military or battle imagery in the Bible. Yet, it is there for a reason. This forces me to think deeper about what the battle with the devil can look like in life.

Perhaps it is the voice that causes you to question whether you really are saved. It might be the voice that says, ‘How could God love me after what I’ve done?’ Or it could be the feelings of shame that cause you to doubt your identity as a beloved, baptised child of God.

In today’s text, Paul lists the parts of the armour that help us to withstand the devil’s attacks: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. All gifts that we have been given by God. All gifts that remind us of who we are in the light of the gospel and God’s redemptive love. And to top it all off, we are given the gift of prayer, which allows us to call on God in times of need or attack. So, we can venture forth into life boldly, knowing who we are and being equipped to deal with whatever attacks may come.

**Loving God, in our baptism you give us all we need – our identity in you. When we are attacked, help us to draw on the gifts of armour that you have given us, trusting that you will be with us. Amen.**

Friday 26 February 2021

# I know exactly how you feel

Sue Westhorp

**Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2:18).**

Read Hebrews 2:9–18

Have you ever had the experience of telling someone a part of your story and had them react with the words ‘I know exactly how you feel’? Perhaps it is a phrase you use to show that you understand and feel empathy for the other person. Sometimes this can be helpful for us, creating a sense of solidarity that helps us to feel less alone. Sometimes we might question whether it is actually possible for someone to know exactly how we feel. After all, we are all unique human beings with unique experiences, aren’t we?

Today’s reading outlines God’s plan for salvation through Jesus. Jesus is described as the pioneer of our salvation who is made perfect through suffering and ‘tastes death for everyone’. And in doing so, he claims us as his sisters and brothers, because he became human like us. It’s a pretty amazing concept, isn’t it? God had the power to swoop in triumphantly and save humanity, and yet he chose to become one of us, to experience life as one of us, and ultimately to die – something God could not do unless he was human.

And the story doesn’t end after the death and resurrection, for Jesus continues to help us in our times of testing and suffering. He doesn’t sit at a distance from us, no longer involved now that the work of salvation has been completed. No, he comes alongside us, identifying with our human experiences and helping us to work through them, not as an impartial observer but as one who knows what we are going through.

As you pour out your heart to God in prayer, in lament, and in sighs beyond words, know that Jesus has gone before you, enduring testing and suffering for our sake. And as he listens to you, he says, ‘My sister/brother, I know exactly how you feel, and I will help you through’.

**Loving God, you have gone before us, enduring suffering and the cross for our salvation. Help us to remember that no matter what testing and suffering we endure, you are there with us, ready to help us in our time of need. Amen.**

Saturday 27 February 2021

# Help us remember

by Sue Westhorp

**For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him (Psalm 22:24).**

Read Psalm 22:23–31

Psalm 22 begins with the well-known and anguished cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ It is the psalm that is set in the lectionary for Good Friday as, in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus cries out these words from the cross as he endures an agonising death, feeling abandoned by God.

Today’s reading is the latter verses of Psalm 22. The first 22 verses of the psalm can be described as a lament, complaint and petition, whereas the final 9 verses can be described as an expression of praise and adoration. Two very different moods! Yet we need the context of the former verses to really understand the latter verses. The disorientation and feelings of abandonment in the first part of the psalm speak of the experience of God being absent and being profoundly alone. Even in these verses, there are hints of how God has heard these cries in the past: ‘In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you delivered them’ (verse 4).

When we get to verses 23 and 24, these hints become full-blown cries of praise to the God who ‘did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him’. Amid the suffering, God’s faithfulness is remembered and celebrated, even as the psalmist cries to him to help, once again.

How does this work in your life? In dark times are you always able to remember and trust in God’s goodness, or, like me, can those memories and that knowledge fade in the pain? We are called to lead reflective lives, looking at how God’s hand has been active and present in every part of our lives and turning back to him in trust and love when times are tough. We can be thankful that even when we can’t remember God’s grace in the past, God continues to hear our cries!

**Loving God, thank you for all the ways in which you have answered our prayers and heard our cries in the past. Help us to remember your loving presence in our lives when times are hard. Amen.**

Sunday 28 February 2021

# The promises of God

by Pastor Tim Castle-Schmidt

**Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward (Genesis 15:1).**

Read Genesis 15:1–12

I sometimes wonder what God has promised me. Despite my many blessings, the aftermath of 2020 leaves me questioning just what we can rely upon in the future. After significant turmoil and change, it is hard to imagine just what the ‘new normal’ might look like. And yet, I know without a doubt that God has promised to be my shield. This, indeed, was Abram’s (Abraham’s) struggle. The Lord promises to be Abraham’s shield, his reward (verse 1), and yet Abraham questions how this could be true when he has no heir (verses 2,3). But the Lord reiterates his promises with enormous extravagance: ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them’. Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’ (verse 5).

Here we have a sharp exchange in which Abraham stands face to face with God and seeks to refute the promise and resist the assurance. Clearly, the faith to which Abraham is called is not a peaceful, pious acceptance. It is a hard-fought and deeply argued conviction.

The Lord leads Abraham through the depths to teach him to live by faith. Abraham and Sarah are called to live their lives despite their barrenness.

We have no promise that the barrenness we may have experienced last year will turn to extravagance, but that it can teach us to live by faith! This does not, on the surface, make sense; and yet it is a key insight of biblical faith. It’s as if this ‘gift’ from God draws hope out from within us as blood is drawn out through a needle – not easily or painlessly. But the end result is a new hope, a renewed understanding of hope, which runs freely like the blood into the syringe.

So, what has God promised me, us? That he is our reward and he will remain with us in this journey of life forever.

**Heavenly Father, draw hope out of us when life seems hopeless. Meet us when we need you and help us hear your words of comfort spoken to us. Amen.**