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**Sunday 30 May to Sunday 6 June 2021**

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Sunday 30 May 2021

# Being born again

by Norma Koehne

**Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’ (John 3:5).**

Read John 3:1–8

When we think about birth, we often concentrate on the mother giving birth and the pain and hardship that she goes through. I would like to think about the child being born. Luckily, we don’t remember what this was like, but think for a moment of being pushed by those powerful muscles, pushed out into a cold world with bright lights and loud noises. No wonder a newborn baby cries. It is separated from the warmth of the mother’s womb, the reassuring sound of her heartbeat.

What a contrast when we are born again as children of God. A gentle splash of the waters of baptism and words spoken. As Jesus says, ‘Very truly I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’. Rather than being separated, we are embraced by the love and all the blessings our Heavenly Father gives us, including the forgiveness won for us by his Son and the blessing of the Holy Spirit to walk with us and guide us. There are some wonderful images of the closeness of God to his children. In the psalms and Matthew 23:37, we have the image of God as a hen, gathering its chicks under its wings, keeping them safe and warm. Or we have the image in Isaiah 49:16, ‘I have engraved you on the palms of my hands’. How much closer can we be to God, etched into his very skin?

Praise God that we become his children through such a gentle birth.

**Loving Father, I often forget how much you love me and how close you want to be to me. Thank you for your overwhelming love. May I rejoice in your abiding presence. Amen.**

Monday 31 May 2021

# Perfect incomprehensible love

by Norma Koehne

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).**

Read John 3:1–17

This well-known text comes at the end of the story about a searcher, Nicodemus, who comes with lots of questions for Jesus. He acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher sent by God. Jesus sees into his heart and tells him that he must change completely – be born again – before he can enter the kingdom of God as a child of God. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would be relying on his obedience to the law to achieve this. Poor Nicodemus! He is even more puzzled. He immediately thinks of physical birth rather than spiritual rebirth. Even when Jesus talks about being born of water and the Spirit, he remains perplexed, ‘How can this be?’ We might feel that Jesus is a bit hard on Nicodemus, but, as Jesus says, he is ‘Israel’s teacher’, and he should be steeped in the Scriptures. Words such as, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me’ indicate that it is God who changes us and makes us pleasing in his eyes.

Jesus sends him back to the Old Testament when Moses lifted the snake in the wilderness, and the people were saved. He tells Nicodemus that the ‘Son of man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life’. There the story ends rather abruptly, and we aren’t told of Nicodemus’ response.

Then comes this statement of perfect, incomprehensible love. God loved the whole world, all of fallen humankind, so much that he sent his Son to the cross to bear our sins and endure the agony of separation from him so that we might not perish but have eternal life with him.

We know that Nicodemus became a believer, helping with Jesus’ burial (John 19:38–40). Together with Nicodemus, we thank God for his amazing love that he has brought us to faith through water and the Spirit and we have life with him now and forever.

**We praise you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the way you have worked together to bring us your love and salvation. Amen.**

Tuesday 1 June 2021

# Adopted children of God

by Norma Koehne

**You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15b,16).**

Read Romans 8:12–17

A theme is developing this week about how God in his love and mercy makes us his children. Today the picture that is used is that of adoption. As the mother of two adopted children, I know the difficult process one goes through to be assessed and granted the legal approval of the court. Many people are involved. Lately, it has become difficult to adopt children, with foster care seeming to be the preferred option. I have read a number of times that there are children who long to have a ‘forever family’. That phrase has stuck in my mind.

Through baptism, we have become sons and daughters in God’s forever family through adoption. As children, we can talk to our Father God in the tenderest of terms, calling him ‘Daddy’, as a young child would talk to their father. If you have children, remember how special it was the day your child first called you ‘Dada’ or ‘Mama’. God rejoices every time we pray to him as our loving Father.

As children of God, we read God’s word and are strengthened, forgiven and renewed as we partake in Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament. We have no fear that God will abandon us or turn away from us. He is always there to take us by the hand or enfold us in his loving arms.

As children of God, we are his heirs, receiving the inheritance of eternal life in perfect love, peace and joy in heaven. What an amazing future we have to look forward to. Maybe right now, you are suffering from one of the many trials that we have in this imperfect life. But as brothers and sisters of Christ, we are privileged to share, however slightly, in his sufferings. And we have the promise that we will share in his glory.

**Loving Father, what a privilege I have that I am part of your forever family. May I always treasure being your child and heir through adoption into this wonderful family. Amen.**

Wednesday 2 June 2021

# Loving God with all my heart

by Norma Koehne

**Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:5).**

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–13

Lately, I have been watching a series on Netflix called *Shtisel*, which is about Orthodox Jewish families in Israel. What I have found most interesting is the way they constantly remind themselves of God and his words. I was puzzled by why they touch the doorframe as they enter the house until I read here that they write this commandment on their doorframes and gates. At prayer time, small books containing God’s word in the Old Testament is wrapped onto their hands and tied on their foreheads.

We are blessed that we have God’s full revelation of his love and salvation in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. How do we, in our busy modern lives, make sure that we love God with all our being, that he is first in our lives and our love? We can take the opportunity to worship God through word and sacrament in church and our homes through morning and evening devotions. We can try to have reminders of God and his goodness around us at all times. Perhaps we can print out Bible verses and put them on the door of the refrigerator, a place we all look at often. Maybe you spend a lot of time travelling and can put a Bible verse in your car where you can see it easily. And, of course, we keep close to God through our prayers throughout the day. Be creative!

There is a warning here to the people of Israel. ‘When you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord’ (verses 11b,12). Sadly, that has become the case in so many countries in our affluent western world. We are blessed with so many good things. It is easy to be like the unwise farmer, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry’ (Luke 12:19). God preserve us from such arrogance and indifference.

**Lord, you know how hard it is for us to love you with our whole heart. Help us through your Holy Spirit to immerse ourselves in your word so that we are constantly reminded of your love and goodness. Amen.**

Thursday 3 June 2021

# Called by God

by Norma Koehne

**I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then said I, ‘here am I, send me’ (Isaiah 6:8).**

Read Isaiah 6:1–8; Ezekiel 1:4–6,22–28

What amazing sights and sounds accompanied the call of God to the prophets of old. For Isaiah, it was seeing the Lord on his throne as well as the seraphim and the house filled with smoke. For Ezekiel, there was a windstorm, lightning, fire, angels and God on his throne. We can think of other amazing instances of God calling people like Moses and Samuel to do powerful and often dangerous work for him.

In the New Testament, Jesus called his disciples less dramatically, but the call of Saul to become Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles was just as dramatic as the prophets of old. All of these men suffered hardship, and some faced execution as they followed Jesus’ command to preach, teach and baptise. Usually, we are not called to face dangers and hardships in our lives as God’s children, although in some parts of the world, it is still dangerous to follow Christ.

God calls us in a much less dramatic fashion today, although still in a way with great power. It begins in baptism when he says to us, ‘I have called you by name, you are mine’ (Isaiah 43:1). His call to all his beloved children is to spread the word about his love and the salvation won for all by his son, Jesus. Peter sums it up well: ‘You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light’ (1 Peter 2:9). The most powerful way we can do this in our workplaces, communities and families is to follow Jesus’ command, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12).

**Thank you, Father, that you have called me to be your voice and hands to tell of your love and salvation and to show your love to all those around me. Amen.**

Friday 4 June 2021

# How deep is the love of my Lord?

by Norma Koehne

**And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power to grasp how wide and how long and high and deep is the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:17b,18).**

Read Ephesians 3:14–21

This amazing payer of love that Paul prayed for the Ephesians reminds me of a sermon I heard at Ukarumpa in Papua New Guinea. The text may even have been this one or possibly another prayer of Paul for those congregations he founded, which were so dear to him. What the preacher said was that so often, they were praying for ‘little’ things like recovery from sickness or safe travel. He then went on to unlock the ‘glorious riches’ that God wishes to shower on his children, and which we should be praying for ourselves and others.

First of all, Paul prays that we may be strengthened with power through his Spirit so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Only the Spirit can create and sustain our faith in Christ and in the salvation he won for us. When Christ dwells in our hearts, then we are rooted and established in love. This love fills our hearts and flows out into our lives as we show God’s love to those around us.

Having received this power and love, we can begin to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. I could meditate on the love of Christ 24/7 and still not fully grasp the depth of this love. After all, he was abandoned by his loving Father for us, had the horrors of the sin of the world put onto him, went to the depths of hell, and then had to fight and defeat the archenemy Satan. What amazing love!

When we know this love, however dimly, Paul prays that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Again, what an amazing thought. All the love and blessings that God wants to give us will be given without stinting so that our cup will be full and overflowing, as the psalmist says.

**Loving Father, fill us with your love and blessings and give us hearts that never forget the fullness of your amazing love. Amen.**

Saturday 5 June 2021

# Waiting for the Lord

by Norma Koehne

**For with the Lord there is unfailing love, and with him is full redemption (Psalm 130:7).**

Read Psalm 130

I hate waiting! My family can tell you that if a meeting starts late, or I have to wait to be picked up or meet someone, I can get pretty grumpy.

In our reading today, the psalmist is waiting, but waiting eagerly and with anticipation, because he is waiting for the Lord. The image of the watchmen, walking around, talking, trying hard to stay awake, and then their joy at seeing the first glimmer of dawn gives a good picture of this eager waiting.

Why is the psalmist waiting so eagerly? After all, he says, ‘Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord’. We can only imagine the despair and anxiety of these depths. But he trusts in the Lord, and he is certain that the Lord will listen to his voice. Although he acknowledges his sinfulness, he believes God will forgive. God’s essence is one of unfailing love and full redemption. God does not say, ‘I’ll let you wait a while until you grow in faith and love because you are not perfect yet’. No, God forgives and loves his repentant sinners.

I pray that you can have such trust in God’s mercy and grace. He may not take away your problems, even your depths of despair, but he will be with you through all of them, walking with you, listening to your cries for help, and showering you with his love. Finally, we eagerly await our journey through death to eternal life with our gracious God.

**Lord, give me an eagerly waiting heart, one that trusts in you through the problems of life, and help me to eagerly await finally going to my heavenly home. Amen.**

Sunday 6 June 2021

# Repenting out of the divided house into the kingdom of God

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand (Mark 3:25).**

Read Mark 3:20–35

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the unemployment rate peaked at 28.1 per cent and averaged 23.4 per cent over 1930–34. To put this in perspective, during the COVID-19 economic upheaval, so far, the unemployment rate peaked at 7.4 per cent in June 2020 and is now back down to the mid-5 per cent. It is commonly accepted that the stubbornly high unemployment rate and accompanying human misery of the Great Depression was caused mainly by countries undermining each other. They should have been cooperating for the good of each other, as they have in the COVID-19 response. It’s a common theme in life: people who know better don’t try hard enough to get along.

In the reading today, Jesus is attacked by two groups that really should have known better. His family accuse him of being mad. The teachers of the law – Israel’s teachers – accuse him of being in partnership with Satan, ‘By the prince of demons he is driving out demons’ (Mark 3:22).

Jesus addresses the teachers of the law first. He points out how illogical their statement is. Jesus wouldn’t tie up the demons – as he has been doing in his exorcisms – if he were on Satan’s side. That house would not stand. He graciously warns them to not blaspheme the Spirit any longer because the Spirit can’t forgive that sin … which is commonly interpreted as meaning that they need to address their unbelief and stop relying on their own self-righteousness lest they remain unforgiven. Jesus then addresses his family, reminding them that his true family are those who do God’s will (verse 34).

It strikes me that in the church, not least our local congregations, people who really do know better spend too much undermining each other and not getting along. Like Jesus’ family and the teachers of the law, we too quickly revert to labels or impugn false motives. A house divided cannot stand! Jesus provides the answer when he tells us to do God’s will, having clearly laid it out in Mark 1:15, ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news’. This is pure gospel. It’s the offer of forgiveness, a time to make a new start. It’s an opportunity to no longer blaspheme against the Spirit in unbelief and self-justification. It’s an invitation to be embraced in God’s family. Thank God! For much more than economic misery is at stake.

**Lord Jesus, lead me to repent so that I do not grieve you or your Holy Spirit. In the confidence of your forgiveness, help me to right my wrongs and treat all people as though it were you that I was talking with or about. Through your Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.**