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**Sunday 13 November 2022 to Sunday 20 November 2022**

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Sunday 13 November 2022

# Christian life – a marathon, not a sprint

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**By your endurance you will gain your souls (Luke 21:19).**

Read Luke 21:5–19

Many of you would recognise the name Usain Bolt. He is the only person to have won the 100-metre and 200-metre gold medals at three consecutive Olympics. I imagine that very few of you, however, would recognise the names of Samuel Kamau Wanjiru, Stephen Kiprotich and Eliud Kipchoge. These were the gold medallists for the Olympic men’s marathon in the same years. Why does the sprint hold such a high status for us? Perhaps it is because we are so often drawn to what is immediate, exciting and dramatic rather than what is long-term, seemingly ordinary and gradual. There is something important to notice here in relation to our Christian life.

In the longer text for today, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the end of the temple and the end of the world. In either case, there is a need for Christians to be spiritually prepared for the great calamities of history and not be led astray by those who would deceive them. He encourages the disciples that he will help them bear witness by his Holy Spirit in the face of betrayal and persecution. Through all this, our Lord says there is a need for his disciples to have endurance. The trials Christians face in this life aren’t to be met by short bursts of spiritual energy but rather by the long-term durability of the ordinary Christian life. Following Christ is more like a marathon than a sprint.

We cannot, of course, endure by our own strength. We look to the one who, for us, ‘endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Hebrews 12:2). He sends us his Spirit, who works in us an abundance of hope (Romans 15:13), which pulls us forward when we feel like giving up – an experience every marathon runner feels at one time or another. In your struggles through personal spiritual growth, life in the church, vocations in the world, mission and evangelism, remember the big picture of the marathon we are in and hear the call to endurance. By it, you will gain your soul.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for protecting and providing for us amid trials and temptations. Encourage us when we are downhearted or afraid, and give us the gift of endurance. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Joshua is married to Kimberley. Together they have four children. He is a pastor of the Lutheran Church of Australia and previously served at St Paul’s, Nundah, in Queensland, and Bethlehem, Adelaide, in South Australia. Currently, he is pursuing doctoral studies at Concordia Seminary St Louis, USA, and enjoying the adventure. He posts videos on a YouTube channel called Kairos ([*www.youtube.com/JoshuaPfeiffer*](http://www.youtube.com/JoshuaPfeiffer)).

Monday 14 November 2022

# Infant immortality rates in the new creation

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days (Isaiah 65:20).**

Read Isaiah 65:17–25

One of the most poignant places you can ever visit is the children’s section of a cemetery. We walk past those often tiny graves, plaques and headstones, read the birth and death dates and do the calculations: one week old, a few days, even just a few hours. As our modern society claims to become increasingly comfortable with death as a ‘natural’ part of life, the children’s section of the cemetery cries out in protest: ‘No! This is not as it should be. There is more pain and grief here than any family should need to bear!’ For death to intrude precisely at that moment when the promise, hope and joy of new life has come brings a grief rarely surpassed by anything else.

Our verse for today comes as part of the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the new heavens and new earth God promises. He lists a number of things that will characterise this new creation, such as a lack of weeping and distress (verse 19), a peaceful life of home and work for God’s people (verses 21 and 22), and the absence of violence as even the wolf and lamb feed together (verse 25). However, what strikes me most powerfully among these characteristics is the prophet’s description of infant mortality rates. ‘No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days…’ (Isaiah 65:20). There will come a day when children’s sections in cemeteries will be no more – in fact, where cemeteries themselves will become redundant.

What the people of old could scarcely have guessed, though, is that Isaiah’s vision of the new creation would be brought about by the suffering servant he also predicted (Isaiah 53). And although somewhat strangely, Jesus’ own birth was the indirect cause of many infant deaths at the hand of the murderous Herod, through his own life, death and resurrection, Jesus has ushered in this new age where he is making all things new. Our Lord Jesus Christ will raise his people from their graves – including the infants – and then the perishable will put on the imperishable, and the mortal will put on immortality. Then death will be swallowed up in victory, and we will be able to say, ‘O death, where is your sting’ (1 Corinthians 15:54,55). Until then, we still grieve, but not as those who have no hope.

**Gracious Heavenly Father, thank you for your promise of the new heavens and new earth where death, distress and weeping will be no more. We pray for those who have lost children in the womb, at birth or during infancy. Comfort them in their grief and sustain them with your resurrection hope. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Tuesday 15 November 2022

# The encouragement of realistic expectations

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Jesus says, ‘Take note, I have told you beforehand’ (Matthew 24:25).**

Read Matthew 24:15–28

Have you noticed that the extent to which we expect something to be a certain way can affect our experience of it when it comes? I remember travelling with a guy in Europe who expressed disappointment just about everywhere we went because he had particular ideas that the realities didn’t meet. I was only 18 and, in my naivety, had very few expectations, and strangely, this seemed to allow me to enjoy it more than my fellow traveller! Or take a more serious example. Many struggles in married life come because we have unrealistic expectations about how things should be. If you enter married life seriously expecting to have major challenges sooner or later (because you’re two sinners being put together), it will go a long way to getting through those moments when they come.

There is a thread in Jesus’ teaching, especially when it comes to the end times, where he does something like this. He wants to prepare his disciples for things to come so they’re not taken off-guard and can better deal with them. Notice our verse where he explicitly says that we shouldn’t be surprised when all sorts of trials and temptations come our way because he has ‘told us beforehand’. The longer text for today is to do with false prophets – and even false messiahs – coming to lead people astray. These figures may even be able to produce real supernatural signs of sorts that the naive may think automatically authenticate their message. In contrast, Jesus wants to fortify his disciples for what’s coming. In a strange sort of way, he provides encouragement by giving realistic expectations.

It's not uncommon to hear Christians bemoan the times we live in, either in wider society with its increasing secularism or in the church with all our internal problems. Sometimes I wonder whether there isn’t a connection between our surprise at these things and our decreasing biblical literacy. After all, there isn’t anything happening today that Jesus and his apostles didn’t tell us beforehand. The more the horizons of our expectations are shaped by God’s word, the more prepared we’ll be for what lies ahead.

**Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for everything you reveal to us in your word about what we can expect during our lives in this world. Encourage us with these realistic expectations and help us by your Spirit to live faithfully whatever the future holds. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.**

Wednesday 16 November 2022

# Antichrist and antichrists

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour (1 John 2:18).**

Read 1 John 2:18–23

In connection with the end of this age, St John speaks several times of the mysterious figure of the antichrist. This figure has often been understood as the same one St Paul speaks of as the ‘man of lawlessness’ (2 Thessalonians 2). ‘Anti’ most often means ‘against’ but can also mean ‘in the place of’. Both seem to be in view here. The apostles speak of one who will oppose Christ and his kingdom but also present as a rival or usurper. In other words, one of the sobering things about this prophecy is that the antichrist doesn’t attack the church from without but from within. This manifestation of evil has a religious quality to it. This is why Martin Luther and the Reformers famously understood this to be fulfilled in the papacy of their day.

But notice in our verse that St John also speaks of many antichrists coming in the lead-up to the antichrist. In other words, this title can also be used to describe the ever-present forces at work that seek to contest, destabilise and undo the work of Christ and his church. One of our seminary lecturers quoted the well-known Hermann Sasse on this point (who wrote quite a bit on the antichrist) as saying ‘before you consider who the antichrist may be, ask yourself, “Am I perhaps an antichrist?”’ That’s a confronting comment, to say the least.

As much as the New Testament warns about the coming of the antichrist and the man of lawlessness, so much more does it proclaim Christ’s certain victory over them. As St John says later, ‘the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world’ (1 John 4:4). Christ’s resurrection has conquered the powers of evil once and for all, and what we experience in this world are the death throes. In the face of these events in this ‘last hour’, we are simply called to be vigilant, stand firm and be faithful.

**Our Father in heaven, thank you for your Son’s victory over sin, death and the devil. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Thursday 17 November 2022

# Test the spirits

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Test the spirits to see whether they are from God; every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God (1 John 4:1,2b).**

Read 1 John 4:1–6

A Christian person is perusing the spirituality section at the local bookstore and notices a book on angels. The book speaks of angels like the ones from the Bible – Gabriel and Michael – and even mentions Jesus. However, the book also mentions other angel names that seem a bit unusual and says that we can talk to angels and get messages from them to guide us in life. According to this book, angels can even help us if we want to get in touch with loved ones who have died. When the person starts to dabble in the practices the book refers to, some apparently real experiences actually happen that can’t be easily explained. What to make of this?

We will always come across counterclaims to the truths of the Bible, and sometimes they can sound close to what we know in our Christian faith while being subtly different. St John encourages us in this text not to be naive and simply accept everything we come across but to ‘test the spirits to see whether they are from God’. The next question, then, is that of criteria. One temptation we have is to judge other ‘spirits’ based on whether their message seems to ‘work’ in our lives or whether they produce real experiences. However, we are given a different criterion in our text – namely, whether a person or movement can confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. There can be more to it than that, but there’s never less.

Back to the book on angels, the person later read some strange things about Jesus. This author said Jesus wasn’t really the Son of God and didn’t die for the forgiveness of our sins or rise again to defeat death but actually came only to show us how to live a truly authentic life. The person talked to the pastor at church and some other mature Christian friends, and together, they judged that this was not something from God.

In our families, fellowship groups and congregations, let’s be diligent together in testing the spirits and remain faithful to the one who has claimed us as his own.

**Father in heaven, we thank you that in your Son, we have conquered the world. Please help us to be diligent in testing the spirits and deliver us from all evil. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Friday 18 November 2022

# Don’t sweat the scoffers

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**In the last time there will be scoffers … But you, beloved … look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 18a,21b).**

Read Jude 17–25

Have you heard any scoffing lately? Here’s one definition of what it means to scoff: ‘to speak to someone or about something in a scornfully derisive or mocking way’. I’d say there’s a fair bit of scoffing in our media, politics, and, sadly, perhaps in our church too. There’s also a particular form of scoffing by some non-Christians towards Christians because of their beliefs and lifestyles. It’s that scoffing our text has in mind and how to deal with it.

It's an old problem, by the way. In the very first of the psalms, we read of the wicked, sinners and scoffers and that the one who is truly blessed doesn’t sit with them. It’s striking that the scoffers sit. In other words, they aren’t going anywhere or doing anything but are the original armchair critics.

In the Jude text, the situation is the early church where there are people intent on unsettling the young Christian congregation for their own ends. A part of what characterises them is their scoffing. In 2 Peter, we hear of these people again and even get a quote. They mock the Christians for believing in Christ’s return because ‘all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation’ (2 Peter 3:4). Sound familiar? Today, Christians may be scoffed at for believing just about any of the truths we confess in the creed or the way we seek to live.

So, how do we respond to the scoffers? Interestingly, in Psalm 1 and Jude, the counsel isn’t to respond to the scoffers at all but to turn our attention away from them and back to God. Jude says you’ve been given the gift of faith, so build yourself up in that. You’ve been given the Holy Spirit, so pray in him. You are loved by God, so keep yourself in that love. You’ve been shown mercy by Jesus – a mercy that leads to eternal life – so set your hope there. Don’t listen to what scoffers say and let that define you, but listen to the voice of the God who made you and loves you and wants what is best for you – and then just don’t sweat the scoffers.

**Gracious Father, thank you for showing me such love and mercy and making me your child in holy baptism. Help me not to become consumed by words of mockery and ridicule but instead, by your Spirit, to meditate on what you say. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Saturday 19 November 2022

# The life-giving river

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High (Psalm 46:4).**

Read Psalm 46

Most major cities lie on a river of one sort or another. Easy access to fresh water has always been essential for human survival. Interestingly, Jerusalem does not. Its only access to fresh water traditionally has been from springs, which are then channelled in various ways. The Old Testament credits King Hezekiah with playing a special role here (2 Kings 20:20), including when the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem and access to water became crucial (2 Chronicles 32:30). So why exactly does Psalm 46 speak so confidently of this river whose streams make the city of God glad?

In the Bible, water is spoken of symbolically and literally in terms of its destructive and life-giving power. It is indeed a rather strange thing that something we require every single day for life can also be such a force for death in our world – think tsunamis and floods. In fact, in this very psalm, the water is first described in its destructive capacity, where some sort of de-creation is depicted with the mountains falling into the sea and its waters roaring and foaming (verse three). Then no sooner have we heard this aspect of water than we hear of the life-giving river whose streams make glad the city of God.

There is a long tradition in the church of taking this river to be symbolic of the Holy Spirit or the grace of God. Think of how Jesus speaks of ‘rivers of living water flowing’, which St John links to the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). The picture is that in our lives – and the Christian church as a whole – no matter what chaos goes on around us, the Spirit of God is an invisible life source, which flows secretly in and through us. This Spirit not only gives and sustains life but indeed ‘makes glad’ as the psalm says. The fruit of the Spirit is, among other things, joy.

In the church and in our own lives, we do not rely on our own strength for our ultimate protection and peace, or for that matter, to cultivate our own joy. The Spirit of God works these things in us like a secret, invisible, underground river. Come, Holy Spirit, come!

**Come, Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life! Create and sustain the life of your church and give us joy even amid the trials of this life. Amen.**

Sunday 20 November 2022

# Serving the King

by Verena Johnson

**So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. ‘Put this money to work,’ he said, ‘until I come back’ (Luke 19:13).**

Read Luke 19:11–27

I don’t know about you, but I sometimes wonder how effectively I am using the gifts, talents and resources God has given me. I can safely say I haven’t hidden anything away in a cloth like the servant in the parable. But there have been times when I have not stepped forward to do something I could have, or I have found excuses and reasons for why I can’t get involved (some of them have been really good!). Or I have been too busy or preoccupied to notice that God may ask me to use my gifts, talents and resources.

God has called us all into his service, and what is more, he has given us all that we need to do what he is calling us to do. Even more than that, unlike the king in the parable who goes away, our King is with us every step of the way as we serve him. Then there’s the set of ‘steak knives’ to clinch the deal. We have the Holy Spirit to lead, guide, prompt and equip us as we serve.

So, there’s nothing stopping us from giving our all for our King.

Or is there?

I think my problem is that I think about myself too much and what I am capable or not capable of rather than who my King is and what he can do through me. I focus too much on my faults, failures and mistakes rather than on my King’s provision. The other problem is that the clamour of my busy life can stop me from hearing the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit as he tries to prompt and guide me to use my gifts, talents and resources the way my King wants me to use them.

That’s me, but what about you? What might be stopping you from using your gifts, talents and resources the way God wants you to?

Thank God that our King is not like the one in the parable. He loves us and forgives us again and again and again when we get it wrong. He gives us new chances every day to truly live as his servants.

**My King, thank you for giving me my gifts, talents and resources. Help me use them the way you want me to in your service. Forgive me when I get it wrong or miss the opportunities you give me. Open my ears and eyes to hear and see the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Verena is a Church Worker Support Officer for the LCA Church Worker Support Department, where it is her privilege to support congregations, pastors, lay workers, employees and volunteers of LCA. In her spare time, she is involved in drama ministry, women’s ministry and prayer ministry. She has three children and eight grandchildren in three different states.