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**Sunday 11 December 2022 to Sunday 18 December 2022**

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Sunday 11 December 2022

# Jesus’ encouraging word for the truth-tellers

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**When John, who was in prison … (Matthew 11:2).**

Read Matthew 11:2–11

Truth-tellers of God’s word often end up being badly treated. This is despite the sacred office they hold. An early New Testament example is John the Baptist languishing in Herod’s gaol for daring to call out Herod’s sexual promiscuity. He eventually lost his head in the climax of a salacious booze-filled party.

Jesus was impaled with nails on a cross at the hands of the mob. Stephen was stoned for speaking the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave him. During the European Reformations, Brother Henry of Zütphen, a student of Martin Luther’s, was burned at the stake in Meldorf, Germany, for his Reformation teaching. Scottish Lutheran Sir Patrick Hamilton, a former faculty member of St Andrews University in Scotland and famous for his focus on preaching properly distinguished law and gospel, was burned at the stake in 1528. In the 20th century, there was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom at the hands of the Third Reich. Closer to home is the poor treatment that Hermann Sasse, Bonhoeffer’s one-time colleague on the Bethel declaration of 1933, received up to the end of World War II and its aftermath. Sasse eventually took up a position at the then-Immanuel Seminary in North Adelaide, South Australia, in 1949.

In today’s reading, Jesus doesn’t try to address the evident injustice John is facing. He just points to his kingdom work of restoration. ‘The blind receive sight, the lame walk … the good news is proclaimed to the poor’ (verse 5). In times of persecution, this is the truth Jesus will keep pointing us to. It’s the only truth that will stand the test of time. And he adds this beautiful beatitude of promise, ‘Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me’ (verse six), meaning, blessed are the ones who can accept the truth that Jesus’ cross –horrific and counterintuitive as it is – is the means by which we have peace with God and deep, lasting life.

History tells us that we shouldn’t be surprised if the world, governing agencies and even our churches treat God’s truth-tellers poorly. But history also tells us that Jesus has not badly treated us – despite our sins – and has acted to restore all those who walk in his truth.

**Gracious God, help us when we suffer for speaking your word of truth. Help us to always speak your truth in love with gentleness, respect, great patience and careful instruction.**

Pastor Matt Bishop serves the congregation and primary school at St Paul Lutheran Church Blair Athol, in South Australia, and is chair of the LCANZ General Pastors Conference. He is married to Melissa, delights in his three young adult daughters, and enjoys caring for his five chickens and five budgerigars. He says he would like to spend more time at Venus Bay on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula fishing for King George Whiting, but he loves being both a pastor (mostly) and sharing the gospel with everyone God puts in his path (always).

Monday 12 December 2022

# More than spectators

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding … of counsel and of might … and he will delight in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2,3a).**

Read Isaiah 11:1–9

Have you ever found yourself being taken through the detail of someone else’s prized collection, even though you are a bit indifferent? It might be rocks, wine, teaspoons, model trains, Wedgwood, medals, old tools, plants or copies of The Lutheran. A little polite interest initially … and an hour later, you still can’t get a word in. It’s fascinating enough, but, in reality, you don’t know or care sufficiently about the collection at hand to really appreciate it. You are a spectator rather than a participant.

There is a beautiful collection of words in Isaiah 11:2–5 to describe the Spirit’s gifts to Jesus, the stump of Jesse and the new David (Isaiah 11:1). It’s easy to skim over and observe rather than appreciate and experience. The truth is if Christ lives in us, as the New Testament continually declares he does in all his baptised, believing brothers and sisters, these gifts are also ours. It’s a godly list: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear (reverence) of the Lord and delight in the reverence of the Lord.

I speak these words of Isaiah 2,3a over each person who is confirming their faith in God. Maybe it has been a long time since you were confirmed. Perhaps you have forgotten what gifts your Saviour offers you. Like a spectator rather than a recipient. Maybe you no longer attend to them like you once did – like a shiny Christmas gift you loved receiving that got put on a shelf and was soon forgotten in the distractions of life. Maybe you were never baptised or confirmed and long to discover more about these gifts.

The good news is that the Spirit will take what is Christ’s and make it known to us as we read, study and speak the word of God (John 16:14). So think about each gift and where you see that in Jesus’ life and where you see him working in your life and the lives of those around you who profess him. We are not mere spectators but intimate participants and recipients of these gifts.

**Thank you, Holy Spirit, for your seven gifts showered upon us in our baptisms and refreshed when you forgave our sins on account of what Jesus Christ did for us on Calvary’s cross. Keep us from spectating, and drive us to a knowledge and delight in the reverence of you, starting right now! In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Tuesday 13 December 2022

# All the obstacles removed

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**With a scorching wind [the Lord] will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that anyone can cross over in sandals (Isaiah 11:15).**

Read Isaiah 11:10–16

What a wet, wet year. John 1:16, which we hear on Christmas Day, proclaims grace upon grace. In Australia, this year has been about flood upon flood. If you are a victim of these floods, you can be assured that you have been prayed for many times across the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. Many government and community agencies are offering practical help. Hopefully, you have been able to access this. No doubt, you have faced or will face many obstacles in recovery. Yet things just take time, not least in a fully employed economy still recovering from COVID interruptions.

God’s word knows a fair bit about obstacles. Isaiah 11 is a chapter on the restoration and removal of these obstacles. It may not be directly talking about the floods, but as with all God’s words, it’s not irrelevant to the practical, and we best not only spiritualise it.

The early part of Isaiah 11 speaks of the branch coming from the stump of Jesse and paints a beautiful picture of peace: lions sitting with yearlings and the cobra not striking the child. But that picture of peace needs to be operationalised. And so, the branch, Jesus, goes about removing the obstacles. It’s picture language of drying up a sea that divides and separating a river into seven shallow, small streams (verse 15). A highway to transport us, rather than rough ground (verse 16).

The seven streams are the corollary of the seven gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2,3 that were the subject of yesterday’s devotion. These gifts at work in your own life are how Christ removes the obstacles. And they flow from the spiritual realms into the practical – even to filling out insurance claims and undertaking site works, as tedious as that is! The Lord is with us in all things.

**Lord, in mercy, keep your seven gifts of the Spirit from the flood of baptism flowing in our lives: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, reverence of you, and delight in the reverence of you. Rebuild the lives of all affected in Australia by floods this year, and use your church to assist in both spirit and practice. Amen.**

Wednesday 14 December 2022

# Owning it – the bad and the forgiveness

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**I will give thanks to you Lord, for though you were angry at me (Isaiah 12:1a).**

Read Isaiah 12:1–6

Christianity has a pretty big problem today. And it is quite simple. It is that no-one really believes that they are all that bad anymore. Apparently, this has especially been the case since the Third Reich in Germany. In John Dickson’s compelling Undeceptions podcast series, the must-listen-to episode 39 called ‘Guilty Conscience’\* mentions how Adolf Hitler is the benchmark by which many people now judge their evil. That’s quite a high or low bar (depending on how you look at it!). No-one can be that bad, can they? In comparison to Hitler, I have little to confess! Surely!

No!

Isaiah leads the people in true honesty about their condition before God. Both in sin and forgiveness:

I will praise you, Lord.
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me (verse 1).

You see, it’s quite hard to be comforted if you don’t think there is anything to be comforted over. Isaiah 12 is a beautiful gift from the Holy Spirit. It is one of the most beautiful songs in the whole of Scripture. But we only receive its relief when we can admit and turn away from the depths of our transgression (what we do wrong), our missing the mark (what we don’t do right) and our brokenness (the sinful state we were born in). It’s all this God has saved us from. And it’s then that we can really get a sense of Isaiah’s delight in the happiness God’s people collectively express when they reflect on the flourishing life into which Jesus has brought us. God will bless you as you make it your own song.

**Lord God, you were angry with me, but your anger has turned away, and you have comforted me. With joy, I draw water from the well of your flourishing. I give you praise and proclaim your name for what you have done. In my Saviour Jesus’ name. Amen.**

\*You can listen to the episode at https://undeceptions.com/podcast/guilty-conscience/

Thursday 15 December 2022

# Advent and Babylon

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every heart will melt with fear (Isaiah 13:6,7).**

Read Isaiah 13:1–13

The comfort and serenity of Isaiah 11 and 12 give way to an oracle about the destruction of Babylon. There is no way to gloss over this text or provide a happy ending while you take a little inspiration for the day ahead or reflect on the day that has just been in your daily LCANZ devotion. This text vividly unpacks the full horrors of war. A little like the way the Ukraine war has coloured the previously black-and-white images of WWII and the destruction therein. Vivid. Razed. Anguished.

Babylon had been the region’s principal aggressor circa 612–540 BCE. It had dispatched the Assyrians, carried off the Judeans and taken it up to the Egyptians. Land lay desolate. Cities and infrastructure were levelled.

But aggression has a price. So does unfaithfulness. Hence, Babylon did not last forever, despite its power. The armies of God mustered. As verse four, closely translated from Hebrew, puts it, they were full of ‘Ones who rejoice in God’s sovereignty’. And at the Lord’s bidding, the oracle was fulfilled: ‘I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless’ (verse 11).

In this Advent season, we can’t get away from the imperfections of the world and its brutal terror. But the message of Scripture in world history tells us that war and terror do not have the final say. Jesus declared in Jerusalem during the week he was to die:

At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:27,28).

Even as we sit uncomfortably today, we know the Redeemer is near and will have the final say.

**Lord God, this world brings us much sadness. We long for your day. We repent of the ways we are like Babylon to the people around us. Keep forgiving our contributions to instability and sadness. In Christ, the Redeemer, restore and grow us in faithfulness to serve your world with wisdom and peace until you return. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Friday 16 December 2022

# An active sacrificial love for all our rough tracks

by Pastor Matt Bishop

**Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation (Isaiah 25:9).**

Read Isaiah 25:1–9

The track between Dalhousie Springs and Mt Dare in South Australia’s north is one of the most terrible I’ve been on. It wasn’t just the corrugations. But worse – the jagged rocks in every direction. It was more of a wasted moonscape than a road. Arriving at the ‘mountain’ – Mt Dare – after being shaken to the core was blessed relief, as was a cold beer.

It’s similar getting to Isaiah 25 after the woe of chapters 13 to 24. The contrast strikes in every sense. After the corrugations, desolations and judgements of the oracles against the nations, we arrive at this tremendous place of serenity, rebuilding and nurture in the Lord.

Maybe life has been shaken up for you for a while. Or just recently. Verses six to nine are among the most delightful in all Scripture. They proclaim the promise of life in Jesus, describing how he kills death and gives abundance:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine … and he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples ... He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:6–8).

Without Jesus, the corrugated rocky road of life’s sin and destruction would never end. The shaking would never cease. That is why Jesus ascended the mountain for us. Carrying his cross, he bulldozed sin’s corrugations and shook death and its ruthlessness to the core. It’s worth remembering there was no automatic solution like a bad road that eventually peters out at the destination. No. This was an active ‘to-the-bitter-end’ sacrificial love for us upon a road of wretchedness borne by Jesus that cost him his life. And only because he loves us.

As saved children of God, we are, therefore, invited in this Advent season to confess the corrugations we cause and hand over the jarring others have caused us. See Jesus wiping away our tears and ‘be glad and rejoice in his salvation’ (verse 9). Why not do that now?

**Behold, you are my God. By your Spirit, keep me waiting on you, knowing that you save me. You are the Lord; I have trusted in you, and you give me faith. I am glad, and I rejoice in your salvation. In Immanuel’s name, I pray. Amen.**

Saturday 17 December 2022

# Sourced in tears but given for glory

by Eden Bishop, on behalf of Pastor Matt Bishop

**You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure (Psalm 80:5).**

Read Psalm 80:1–7,17–19

In The Lord of the Rings, renewing food and drink are important devices that JRR Tolkien employs. One such example is miruvor or the cordial of Imladris. It is used by the Fellowship early in their quest in times of suffering, such as when they are stuck in a blizzard on Caradhras, or when marching through the Mines of Moria. It is said to bring ‘new strength of heart … fresh hope and vigour’. Similarly, upon their departure from Lothlórien, the Fellowship are gifted lembas, the waybread of the Elves (also known as coimas, which translates to life-bread). This waybread is used to feed those who go on long journeys and heal those on the brink of death due to injury.

The function of miruvor and lembas has a striking resemblance to the bread and wine we receive in the Lord’s Supper. Tolkien was once questioned about the link, which he never denied.

In today’s text, we hear how God’s people have been fed with the ‘bread of tears’ and given ‘tears to drink in full measure’. The use of ‘bread’ immediately brings to mind how Jesus gave up his body – the bread of life. The tears that God’s people have been given to eat and drink are the body and blood of Jesus, who took on the anguish, suffering and sins of all people when he died on the cross. Before his death, Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper (see Matthew 26:26–28). He tells his disciples to eat the bread – his body – and drink the wine – his blood that has been poured out for the forgiveness of sins. However, unlike in today’s psalm, these don’t denote sorrow, even if they were given in agony by him. Instead, they provide forgiveness and a place in God’s family. We receive these benefits ‘in full measure’. God never skimps on his grace! Jesus bore everyone’s sin and suffering – embracing our tears – and he died for all. We are offered full forgiveness. Nothing is left unaccounted for; no sin is too great. All our tears in suffering are now shared by Christ in his union with us. It’s now a case for us of ‘tears of joy’. And just as the Fellowship received renewal and strength in drinking miruvor and eating lembas as they walked on their quest, so Jesus’ body and blood are our food for his walk with us to eternity. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

**Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for the grace we receive in your Son’s body and blood. His anguish and tears were for us; by them, we now cry tears of joy and restoration. Renew, comfort and strengthen us in times of suffering as you serve us in Jesus’ special supper. Amen.**

Sunday 11 December 2022

# Just do it!

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

**When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife (Matthew 1:24).**

Read Matthew 1:18–25

As a trained social worker, I have learned that rather than giving advice, it is more helpful to listen, point out options and talk through the implications of such choices. I don’t know about you, but I know that if someone tells me to do something, I am just as likely to go and do the opposite.

I wonder how Joseph felt about his decision to split with Mary. It would seem he had some reservations about it. He did not want Mary to be shamed. And then the angel came to him in a dream and told him what to do! How hard was it for him to change his mind? How did he feel when he did?

Not much is known about Jesus’ earthly father. We know he was not Jesus’ biological father and that he was descended from David. In Matthew’s Gospel, we read that Joseph had several dreams, each of which resulted in decisive action. He was told in a dream not to desert Mary, to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus, to go to Israel, and to settle in Nazareth. Each time, he unquestioningly followed the instructions delivered to him while he slept.

Joseph took the angel’s advice on trust – he accepted the spiritual direction that was offered.

When faced with life-changing decisions, it is good to talk them through with others; it’s also good to pray about them and commend our decision-making into God’s good hands, asking that our decisions are blessed. And perhaps looking at the options and the likely outcomes of each is helpful to use for yourself and when others come to you to discuss a decision they have to make.

And, of course, if an angel comes to you in a dream, be sure to trust their instruction!

**God of wisdom and strength, be with us as we grapple with decision-making. Help us to accept spiritual directions when they are offered. Bless our decisions so that they may glorify you and benefit those around us. Help us be respectful listeners when others need to talk things through, and thank you that Jesus decided to come to earth so he could bring us to eternal life. Amen.**

Colleen Fitzpatrick trained as a social worker and worked in foster care and adoptions. She was the director of Lutheran Community Care in South Australia. Colleen is now retired but is a member of several committees and boards within the LCA and the community. She has a husband, John, two daughters and three granddaughters. Colleen lives in Adelaide, South Australia.