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**Sunday 31 January to Sunday 7 February**

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Sunday 31 January 2021

# Spotlight

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘For God … made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6).**

Read 2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Having been an art student and teacher for many years, I have always been impressed by the effect of Rembrandt’s use of the painting technique, chiaroscuro. This is an Italian word meaning a strong contrast of light and shadow. It adds drama and focus to his work. Rembrandt used it to shine a spotlight where he wants you to focus as you view his work. There are many good examples of his paintings that demonstrate this. Two are the very famous The Night Watch and The Descent from the Cross. I encourage you to find these on Google.

Reading these verses from 2 Corinthians 4, we are struck by the imagery and contrasts of light and dark: ‘light of the gospel’, ‘the glory of Christ’, ‘let light shine out of darkness’, ‘has made his light shine in our hearts’ and ‘to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory’.

Just as Rembrandt used chiaroscuro to focus on parts of his work, so also God wants us to think of our before and after. We were in darkness and condemned by our sin, but, by grace, God has saved us, through Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice, for eternal life with him. That is a life in the spotlight.

**Dear Heavenly Father, there are times in our life when we want to hide in the darkness. Please give us the courage to embrace the light of the gospel every day. Amen.**

Monday 1 February 2021

# Truth in action

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?’ (Psalm 15:1).**

Read Psalm 15

This psalm has a theme of justice. David meditates over the character of a person received into the presence of God. The sacred tent or tabernacle of God was the great tent of meeting, which God instructed Moses and Israel to build for him during their exodus from Egypt (Exodus 25–31). Through the work of the priests and the practice of sacrifice, the sacred tent was where the priests met with God. David’s question ‘who may dwell in your sacred tent’ is his longing and desire to abide in the presence of God.

David goes on to list all who would be worthy of this privilege: ‘one whose walk is blameless’, ‘who speaks the truth’, ‘who despises a vile person’ and ‘one who keeps an oath even when it hurts’. In describing the character of a person who can live in God’s presence, ‘walks uprightly and does what is righteous’, these represent the Old Covenant. None of us can live up to this expectation. We constantly fall short of this standard. We just don’t stack up to this requirement!

Thank God that we live within the New Covenant, which gives us a different relationship with God. This is only due to the love of Jesus Christ, providing the ultimate sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. Simply, it’s faith versus performance.

Does this mean we don’t need to ‘do’ anything about this now? David knew that our new righteousness is best reflected in how we treat each other and how we behave. A wonderful quote from Martin Luther is ‘God does not need your good works, but your neighbour does’. It’s truth in action.

**Dear Heavenly Father, help us to be of service to others, out of thankfulness that God, through Jesus, has forgiven us by his ultimate sacrifice. Amen.**

Tuesday 2 February 2021

# The year ahead

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6:8).**

Read Micah 6:1–8

At the beginning of the 2020 academic school year, our Executive Leadership Team gathered for a day of reflection and planning before staff and students commenced Term 1. We had to choose a Bible verse to be our focus for the year, to help guide and inspire us through the year’s inevitable ups and downs. Today’s Scripture is the Bible verse that I chose. I sourced a graphic presentation of each member’s verse and had these laminated to display in our office, so we could always have these in sight and top of mind for the year ahead. Little did any of us know what lay ahead in 2020.

As with any major challenge in our lives, there is the inevitable uncomfortable feeling of undergoing a trial and difficult times. Interestingly, there are also many silver linings to this cloud. During 2020 it was extremely challenging to be the leader of our two Lutheran schools in Geelong. Having the responsibility to keep our 1050 students and 130 staff safe during this pandemic was very difficult at times. There were many times when the Executive Leadership Team made a week’s worth of decisions every day. Each day I would read this Bible verse from Micah 6:8 and feel grounded, encouraged and supported. I thank God for the outstanding team of staff that he surrounded us with.

What does the Lord require of us? Micah 6:8 links our faith with our actions. We are to care for those in need during our walk with God. It’s only through God’s grace that we can have a relationship with him. Salvation is God’s greatest gift to us. In response to all that God has done for us, this is what he wants us to do: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

**Dear Father God, we constantly fall short of what you want from us. Thank you for your undeserved grace, mercy and love. As we navigate the year ahead, please help us to walk humbly with you. Amen.**

Wednesday 3 February 2021

# The promise of return

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion’ (Isaiah 30:18).**

Read Isaiah 30:18–26

It’s just too easy to worry about things, isn’t it? How many sleepless nights have you had when you can’t imagine a solution to your dilemma? You and your family pay a high price for this: lack of sleep can make you irritable and not easy to live with, in both your personal and work life. You can end up overreacting to things, and this then creates other issues. Worry comes from the Greek word that means ‘to divide the mind’. Worry and anxiety split us right down the middle.

‘Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you.’ Those who put their confidence in God will take comfort in this, especially when life is difficult. God shows his graciousness to us through his mercy, which will give us comfort, especially in those challenging times. Our Lord is a God of grace. He has promised to return; he has asked us to wait for him.

God waits for us to return to him when we stray, and he will be ready to take us in, just as he did in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He will continually shower you with his favour and take opportunities to be gracious to you. He will listen to your prayers. God gives us not only his word but hearing ears, and not only grace but a heart to respond in love and service. The effect of this gives extraordinary comfort and joy to God’s people, as we await his return.

**Heavenly Father, you have promised to be gracious to us and show compassion. God of grace, give us the patience to wait for your return. Amen.**

Thursday 4 February 2021

# Rainbow moments

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David’ (Isaiah 55:3).**

Read Isaiah 55:1–5

The dream of things for free: water for the thirsty, food for the hungry, wine and milk. It seems too good to be true! Nothing in life is free, so what is this all about? This is Isaiah’s vision of the good life. You are invited to come to the feast. But what is this feast? It’s a metaphor of spiritually feasting on God’s word and promises and his free, gracious gift of salvation. This was written when the Israelites were in exile. It was a very traumatic time for them and affected them not only in a physical way but also emotionally and spiritually.

During the 2020 border closures throughout Australia, many of us were kept from our family, our loved ones. Many would have felt like these exiled Israelites. In Victoria, we had very strict conditions placed on our freedoms and liberty. While I don’t for a minute think that God caused the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe that perhaps it was an opportunity to recalibrate our lives. Who would have thought that we would be stopped from gathering to worship? Unthinkable! These situations cause us to think of what we take for granted and to be grateful for these blessings.

Isaiah 55 focuses on the life-giving and joyous quality of transformation through God’s word and promises to his people. God highlights the ‘everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David’. It’s a rainbow moment: God said, ‘I promise – no strings attached!’

What are we spending ourselves on? What is our focus, in the good times and the tough times?

**Dear Heavenly Father, remind us to never take the joys, blessings and freedoms we have for granted. Thank you for all that you have graciously given us. Amen.**

Friday 5 February 2021

# It’s upside down!

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”’ (Luke 6:20).**

Read Luke 6:20–26

The Beatitudes give us a vision of an upside-down kingdom. It’s the opposite of what the world thinks is right. Jesus explains to his disciples the qualities that make a happy life. There are four blessings on people with four attributes and four woes on people with the opposite characteristics.

So why is this the opposite of what we would think life should be? The world offers short term gratification but not the eternal joy and happiness that believing in Jesus offers. Jesus boldly says that those who want to follow the world’s ways will not be ultimately happy.

Jesus emphasises the central ethic of his kingdom, love, and the importance of obedience to his teachings. These blessings are to encourage his followers in the face of mounting persecution. In short, this is a message on how we should live, including the need for repentance. Jesus is encouraging his disciples (us) that God will bless them when the world hates them. Live by Christian values and not the world’s values.

We shouldn’t be surprised by God’s upside-down approach to the way he does things. A baby born to be Saviour of the world can’t even get a decent, clean room for this momentous event? That’s upside down. And they all lived happily ever after? Only in heaven for those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

**Dear Father God, help us to always keep our focus on you and your kingdom and not the ways of the world. Amen.**

Saturday 6 February 2021

# Suffering is joy

by Jill Lange-Mohr

**‘Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you’ (1 Peter 4:12).**

Read 1 Peter 4:12–16

Peter’s letter was written to poor, disenfranchised people to whom the gospel appealed. He exhorted them by saying, ‘Don’t be surprised at the troubles you are having’; don’t think that this is a strange situation that you are suffering. Don’t expect that doing good will give you an easy life of health and wealth. It may seem very strange to us that Peter is saying that they should be happy to be sharing in the suffering of Jesus. Doing God’s will is no guarantee that you won’t endure suffering. The Christians of Asia Minor were experiencing a test. Just as a fire purifies gold from contaminants, suffering strips away the externals. It reveals who we really are.

This passage from 1 Peter is not about ‘Why do good people suffer?’ It is a letter of encouragement, reassurance and hope for people suffering rejection because they follow Jesus.

Think of a time when you were really suffering. How did you respond? Did your prayer life improve? Did you come closer in your relationship with God? I know that this has been true for me.

If you are ridiculed for being a follower of Jesus, then do not be ashamed. It is not an insult, but a badge of honour. In today’s reading, Peter alludes to Jesus’ teachings in the Beatitudes discussed yesterday: ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man’ (Luke 6:22). In the end, whose opinion will count?

**Dear Heavenly Father, please help us not focus on what the world thinks but instead on your holy gospel, the good news of salvation. Amen.**Sunday 7 February 2021

# Take a step back

by Stephen Abraham

**‘God sits on his throne above the circle of the earth … He stretches out the skies like a piece of cloth’ (Isaiah 40:22).**

Read Isaiah 40:22–24

There are times in life where we may feel hopeless:

* Your business is struggling, and you can see no way out.
* Your dearest loved one is dying right before your eyes, and you are powerless to help them.
* Your own health is failing.
* The pile of tasks you have to do seems insurmountable.
* Your refugee status hangs in the balance and threatens the peace and freedom you so desperately seek.
* Your family is fractured, despite your best efforts.

One thing I’ve learnt from my psychologist while dealing with my own failing health/disability is to mindfully take a step back and passively observe from the outside the situation I’m facing.

As I read Isaiah 40, it strikes me that the writer invokes a similar principle. The writer takes the reader out of the inwardly hopeless situation they face and shows them the larger heavenly perspective at play, namely God’s sovereignty over all. God is above and beyond political machinations, national disasters, and personal tragedy and has a larger eternal plan well beyond our momentary human comprehension.

When the hardship is overwhelming, stop what you are doing, close your eyes, mentally take a step back, and passively observe the issues you face right now from an eternal perspective – your own timeline, if you will. Passively observe what has happened, what is happening now, and maybe where things are heading. Don’t judge, and don’t engage with the emotion. Just observe things without bias and realise that God reigns over all of this. Spend a few moments in silence doing that right now.

Isaiah 40:29–31 (The Message)
He energizes those who get tired,
gives fresh strength to dropouts.
For even young people tire and drop out,
young folk in their prime stumble and fall.
But those who wait upon God get fresh strength.
They spread their wings and soar like eagles,
They run and don’t get tired,
they walk and don’t lag behind.

The promise given in verses 29–31 is profound. What are we to do in our hopeless situations? We are to qavah. This means ‘towait, to look for, to hope, to expect’. Spend time waiting for God to turn up. Take a breather with God – whatever that looks like for you. For me, it is in meditation; for you, maybe it’s a contemplative walk, Sunday worship, timeout with God listening to a favourite song or hymn, or just praying around those verses.

That is where the strength comes; not in princes, powers, possessions or politics. The strength to move forward through hardship ironically comes from what some would call ‘navel-gazing’ or ‘sitting down and doing nothing [practical] about it’!

**Almighty God, as I sit here with your word, I wait for you. Open my eyes to see your hand in my life and circumstances. Come, Holy Spirit; breath your breath of life and power into my frail human form. Lord Jesus, raise me to life to love and serve you this day. Amen.**