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CREATION TO NEW CREATION

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LENTEN STUDIES

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YEAR A

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## “PILGRIMAGE: WHO RULES?” FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

*Genesis 2.15–17; 3.1–7; Psalm 32; Romans 5.12–21; Matthew 4.1–11.*

### **Genesis 2.15–17, 3.1–7**

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

<sup>3</sup>Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ <sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

The book of Genesis is a carefully crafted literary narrative about origins; about the cosmos, human beings, civilization, religious traditions and more. That is the shape it takes. It is not a scientific monograph, a modern history, sociology or anthropology. It is a literary event that takes on a journey using the different genre available to the authors and editors to capture our imaginations and encourage us to ask questions and God and humans, that most fundamental question of all.

And that is where our passage takes us today. Both stories come from the second story of creation that begins in Genesis 2.4 and concentrates itself on exploring a limited space and time in the Garden of Eden. The big explosive picture of Genesis 1 now becomes the setting for an intense human drama that will turn everything upside down.

In the first creation story the human creature will live in God’s world, with God’s other creatures no matter how dangerous, on God’s terms. That creation story ends in the praise of Sabbath because it is very good; the second sinks in the mire of alienation and despair.

### **Till the garden 2.15–17**

The first thing to notice is that the human is told to go and till a garden (see 2.5). The human is the product of the soil in this account (2.7) and will serve it (the meaning of ‘till’, see Genesis 12.6; Exodus 5.9; Exodus 4.23). The human will serve the earth as it depends on soil for life and livelihood. This view contrasts with the view stated in

Genesis 1.26, 28 where the human beings have dominion over the earth. The grounds for this dominion lie in the creation of humans as not only animals but ‘in God’s image.’ That is the nature of human authority; it is under God on God’s terms.

‘Dominion’ does mean to rule over (Leviticus 25.43; Psalm 72.8). Some have used these ideas to grant humans unregulated and unlimited licence and power to exploit the creation for their own use. As the Bible story shows such human rule in any sphere can be either violent and destructive or benevolent and just. We know from our experience that power and authority are necessary to human life but are complex and messy in operation. To help us the Biblical writers are not frightened to put two perspectives in tension for us to meditate on, to find our place in the world and our responsibility in it.

God gives the humans a calling to tend and keep God’s garden. God is prepared to entrust the garden of creation to the humans so that the human can share in God’s creative work. God’s first speech to humans does not mention God’s place in the world; God sees the human as a co-worker in creation and not a rival or a possible upstart. God trusts the human creature in this special garden, His own making. This is the warrant for being in the garden.

Then God gives the humans a wide permission, and a wide range of freedom. They can eat of anything at all, even the tree of life (2.9). Everything is permitted (1 Corinthians 6.12; 10.23). Creation is for the sustaining of life.

In this light the prohibition does not seem repressive. There is no explanation given for the prohibition; it just is because that is the way human life is. It is the fact of the prohibition that counts and nothing else. It is the authority of the One who speaks that counts and the unqualified expectation of obedience that matters. And that requires unqualified trust in the One who speaks his Word on creation.

Human life becomes a balancing act between these three, calling, permission and prohibition. One without the others becomes perversion and thus destructive. In popular imagination the God of the Garden is only remembered as the one who prohibits.

*Questions:* Human authority and the power that flows from it are a constant in human life. What is Jesus’ take on it Mark 10.35–45? Is God the great prohibitor for you? How do you see your calling in ‘the garden?’

### **Did God say...? 3.1–7**

If 2.15–17 was Scene I in this drama this is Scene III (we skip Scene II and IV). What we read today is fragmentary; what sense can we make of it? The two scenes that precede this one leave us with the human vocation to till and keep the creation, with authority and boundaries in place to protect it and Scene II ends with a human

community of men and women at one in covenant relation of solidarity and trust. There is no shame in the human social relationships depicted in in Scene II and in a society that lived by honour and shame this was the sign of harmony, equality, and wellbeing.

Now the scene is truly set. And the serpent comes on the scene. And the serpent appeals to the prohibition and warning of 2.17. In doing so the wild animal utterly distorts what God has said and thus sets up the false discussion to follow. It is important to see that the serpent is a literary device, a wild animal, a part of the garden and part of its tilling and keeping. The serpent is not the Satan or a phallic symbol or some principle of evil and death. It is a wild voice that introduces the first theological speech into the story. And what a bombshell that is.

The theological voice analyses the prohibition as though it were not a given but an option. This is talk to avoid the claims of God not serve him. God is an object, the serpent speaking of God in the third person. Neither human nor wild animal speak to God or with God but about God. The serpent gives a lecture on the sociology of law to relativise the rule of God.

More than that the serpent speaks directly to the warning “you shall die.” This is not a threat in the original but a simple statement of the boundaries of existence and trust. Now in the voice of the serpent it becomes a catastrophic threat to human existence. Death not life becomes the primary human agenda. Shame has become the primary human social category. Harmony, equality and wellbeing are gone displaced by fear and terror. Trust and obedience at every level of human life and relationships is broken into self-interest.

The serpent theology is conspiracy theology; God in conspiracy against the humans. This is a theology classroom and the humans practise theology rather than obedience. Their failure of theology and obedience is devastating. Focussed on self, shame and guilt there is no more talk of the garden and its care, their calling is neglected, the permission is perverted in the violation of the prohibition. It all sounds so modern. It could a narrative reflection on the crises of ecology, culture, poverty, and freedom.

If you have followed closely you will have noticed that the text is not interested in questions of the ‘human predicament’; questions of sin, death, origins of evil and the devil, sex and fall. We will have to look elsewhere to find answers for them and let this story speak for itself.

*Questions:* What role does trusting the Word of God and obeying it have in the Christian life? How can we subvert that trust and obedience?

### **Psalm 32**

Of David. A Maskil.

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

*Selah*

<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

*Selah*

<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding-place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

*Selah*

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Psalm 32 must be one of the better-known Psalms. Its theme, the joy of forgiveness, strongly resonates with Christian theology and experience. It also recalls Psalm 1 with its "Happy are those..." beginning. Traditionally, Ps.32 has been called the second of the penitential psalms (6; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143).

### **Joy of forgiveness 1–2**

The Psalm begins with two beatitudes that recall Psalm 1. Happiness lies in the way of forgiveness. The psalm uses three words for sin: transgression denotes wilful rebellion, sin means to miss the mark and iniquity/guilt suggest the enduring, destructive effects of disobedience. This is Israel's basic vocabulary for sin. Despite the psalm being about

sin it is a song of thanksgiving and joy. That again characterises Israel's understanding of sin and forgiveness.

Sin in the psalms is not about minor personal peccadilloes or trivial behaviour. It is portrayed in Genesis the act of "casting God out of God's own garden" and taking control ourselves. It is about our actions to take control on our own authority to determine what is best for human life. It is taking authority to determine our own goals (goals) and the final end of creation and humanity. Sin is not moral: it is theological.

The consequences that flow from this are moral. They involve the exercise of power to determine our goals (our god's goals). Justice, love, mercy, truth, faithfulness all come under the hammer and the poor and weak go the wall.

Trapped in our own cage of self will, deceit, and the hollow authority of autonomy we cannot rescue ourselves. To be released into the freedom of God's love, justice, mercy, truth and faithfulness is perfect freedom.

*Questions:* What do you think freedom is? Think on the freedom of forgiveness.

### **The tragedy of unconfessed sin 3–5**

The psalmist's life is characterised by all three and the results are very real, even physical (3–4). The psalmist's silence, the human incapacity to confess to God and take responsibility for wrongdoing, is the real problem and it is the solution that sets free the healing power of forgiveness and restoration. Silence before God on these matters is rejection of grace. Disintegration is the result; the human being slowly unravels.

God's forgiveness on the other hand encompasses sin, transgression and guilt thus setting the recipient free to live once again; to integrate and bind the strands of life back into a whole (5). Human transparency in the presence of God is the key. We are so used to deceiving ourselves and others that it becomes a habit. The psalmist reminds us just how destructive a habit deceit is.

### **Celebrate 6–7**

The psalmist witnesses to God's surrounding him and encompassing him, as well as hiding him. After the release from sin and deceit the psalmist is free to pray and enjoy the presence of God in any situation whatever, no matter how dire (6–7). Notice how deeply relational and personal the psalm is. God is not an accountant doing theological or moral arithmetic but the very source of life itself reaching out to us and rejoicing in us.

*Questions:* Is this your experience of God?

## Teach us 8–9

It might be God or the psalmist who teaches in vss. 8–9 but both point to the learning process that must follow restoration. God will teach us how to live again if we are amenable. God will take us on afternoon walks in the cool of the day (as in that great story of Genesis 3) to teach us what our true end is. That is the only point of Christian spirituality, not simply an academic study, witnessing to the joy of freedom that forgiveness brings, entering into a restored and living relationship and learning to love again.

## Rejoice in the Lord 9–10

Human sin brings great torment to human life (10) but God’s everlasting steadfast love surrounds the forgiven and gives great joy that is worth shouting about. Praise and worship are the best response to the new found freedom of forgiveness. We can only teach one another or witness to one another not from high moral ground but out of the humility appropriate to grace. We are set free; we do not set ourselves free. It is the divine love and steadfastness that surrounds and upholds us not some inner resource of our own.

*Questions:* What is your experience of sin? Does forgiveness make you shout for joy? What is your witness to others about the wonders of God’s great love? How has this psalm contributed to your sense of what a Christian spiritual life is?

This psalm celebrates what is the very heart of the Christian tradition, God’s grace and forgiveness that allows us to know true happiness. Yet we rarely take time to celebrate this pivotal act of daily grace. Why might that be and what can we do about it?

## Romans 5.12–21

### Adam and Christ

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—<sup>13</sup>sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. <sup>14</sup>Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

<sup>15</sup>But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. <sup>16</sup>And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. <sup>17</sup>If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

<sup>18</sup>Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. <sup>19</sup>For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. <sup>20</sup>But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, <sup>21</sup>so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is a tough, terse passage, but the theme is clear enough. The passage outlines the way in which the creator and covenanting God has successfully dealt with the problem of human sin and death, which is the theme of his next section of the epistle. This is a 'big picture' of ideas and the flow of ideas is not always clear. The thesis is clearly stated in 12, but is not taken up again until 18. Verses 13–17 are two asides in which Paul explains the issue of sin and death between Adam and Moses (13–14) and the imbalance between sin and grace (15–17), grace being much more abundant. Indeed, grace is superabundant, which is surprising in a world we live in: a world that seems hard, cruel and unfair. We have been taught to be suspicious of everything and that leads into the waters of despair. Sin and death are not the final answer; grace far exceeds them. Jesus Christ is the mediator of this grace through the justification of the sinner. The law cannot help us because it just helps us see how far we have gone and if we sin in knowledge of the law then our situation is worse than ever. We must ever look to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In reading this letter imagine Paul dictating to a secretary so the communication is really oral and not a polished work for publication. As in speech sentences sometimes remain unfinished or go in unexpected directions. There are no ways of correcting such things as resources are limited to what is on hand. Further he expected the letter to be spoken in public and not read in private, except by very few.

### **Compare and contrast 12**

Paul starts his discussion with a reference to the Genesis 3 passage we have studied already. Paul like some of his contemporary Jewish commentators on Genesis 3 thinks that this passage reveals to us some important matters about the human condition and the God relationship.

Paul is fond of comparisons like this from the Hebrew Bible. He has used Abraham in the letter already to illuminate a Christian understanding and experience of faith. Now he turns to the subject of sin because he is looking to lay a foundation for his analysis of the Christian life which he finally gives in Romans 8. The discussion from 5.12 through chapter 7 allow that chapter to emerge with full force.

The comparison here is between the effects of Adam's actions and the Messiah's actions. Adam's action of disobedience, self-will and unrestrained autonomy and the

desire for self-rule it displayed had the effect of spreading death (the consequence) and the continued disobedience to fulfil the desire. If you struggle with this verse let me share with you that most commentators do too. It has some syntactical and grammatical knots that are very hard to untie, perhaps the most difficult in Romans.

This little unfinished half sentence has been used to support a doctrine of original sin. Such a doctrine requires a great deal more evidence than this snippet can provide. But Paul does seem to say two things without constructing a theory to hold them together: humans die because of Adam's sin, but that is a just outcome because all have sinned. Humans do not die because of Adam's sin, but because of Adam's sin and their own.

Biological death means cessation of life, dissolution of personhood, separation from all who matter. That death has been there from the beginning of humanity and life on earth. Death as a metaphor of the effects of unbridled human autonomy is the terrifying portrayal of the disintegrating of human personhood when we take our stand over against God.

#### **First aside 13–14**

Here he explains a puzzle that might get in the way. A long time passed between Adam and Moses, a time when there was no law. Now the law of Moses is important to Paul and he has to clear this point up for his hearers. Human beings went on sinning and dying between Adam and Moses. How come?

The sin of Adam was a transgression, a deliberate violation of God's Word in favour of self-rule and self-interest. The sins of the generations between Adam and Moses could not be like that as there was no law. Yet death reigned and sin was wreaking its havoc on the human relationship with God. Paul goes no further with this aside, for this is all it is, and we are left with questions that remain unanswered.

One way to reflect on this is to remember that sin is theological not simply or only moral. Even though there was no Mosaic law human beings still claimed their autonomy, left God out of the equation, and went their own way making their own goals and gods as suited.

#### **Second aside 15–17**

This little aside contrasts with Adam's lust for autonomy which trapped him in an iron cage that we have described above. He cannot release himself. The free gift of Christ is the very opposite. No longer having to try and justify ourselves from within the cage we can be free and that is the key to unlock us from our prison where our autonomy has landed us. It is the free act of Christ for us to put all things in the right (righteousness is a relational term not solely moral one). It is God's free gift to us so setting us free so that we exercise our true authority to be fully human in the presence of God, fully restored.

*Questions:* Christianity is intensely relational and personal (not private). God, ourselves and others interacting in God's love, justice, mercy and faithfulness. Is that your experience? Reflect on your answer. Where do you want to go from here?

### **Matthew 4.1–11**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' <sup>4</sup>But he answered, 'It is written,

“One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,  
and “On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written,

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him,

‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
“Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.” ’

<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We read one or other version of the temptation stories each First Sunday in Lent and each has its own special insight. It is hardly surprising that in each account the moment of confrontation comes immediately after Jesus' great moment at baptism, a moment when the love and the calling of God are heard, that he should hear the voice that tells of another way: the way of suspicion, conspiracy and disobedience. Jesus' calling as the son and beloved are really put to the test. Once again, the Satan conducts a theological debate about calling, freedom and limits. Like the first humans Jesus is called to balance the three and the Satan tests at that very point. Notice how the themes of calling, permission and prohibition work their way through this passage as well as Genesis. A new creation promising a new freedom is signalled and immediately the prosecution of another case, one that will incarcerate its prisoners in decay and death, begins immediately.

This story, embedded deep in the Christian tradition long before Matthew put it in his account immediately slaps us in the face with a dose of reality. Everything about this story, everywhere, and in every time will be contested to the very end.

### **Demonic**

There has been a tendency in recent times to dismiss the demonic in accounts such as this. That is understandable when one listens to some accounts from some Christian preachers, for they are often full of nonsense. It is not in the least rational to dismiss it out of hand on the grounds that matter alone exists. That is a whole other philosophical debate.

There is no space to give a full account of this matter. I shall be treating the Satan as a creation of God and answerable to God. The Satan is not an eternal force of evil set over against God on equal terms but part of the created order that includes angels, and in scope, far exceeds the creation of humans and animals we read of in Genesis. The Satan is a prosecutor (that is what the word means) who does his work by framing a narrative of evidence in such a way that he convinces listener of the plausibility of his case. The other title, devil, means a slanderer and that should throw up a red flag for the reader. It links to ideas like deceiver, father of lies; being plausible is not the same as being truthful as any court on any day knows. Plausibility is often about self-serving.

We tend to interpret Satan as prosecutor against individuals, but the New Testament sometimes speaks in terms that imply a far more social and political activity. Writers like Paul speak of principalities and powers and many modern scholars link that to political, cultural, and social life. In this understanding the prosecutor pursues his case against/for human beings using the might of politics and other social and cultural institutions, including religious ones. So, lurking in the background of the ideas surrounding the Satan is power (without authority) to bring humanity undone. Never forget the politics when we read the New Testament; after all, both the term Messiah and Son of God are loaded with political weight (change and kingship).

### **Interpretation**

Over the long history of the interpretation of this pivotal text three themes have emerged. The first is that the story of Jesus' tempting recalls the period of Israel's time in the wilderness (40 years) after the Exodus. Jesus' use of Deuteronomy suggests the same. This is sometimes called a salvation historical view because it binds the temptation story into the whole plan of God's salvation for Israel and the gentiles.

The second is that this story probes the understanding of Jesus' Messiahship against contemporary political, militaristic, or religious interpretations. It reveals a testing of who Jesus is and what his place in the Divine plan is.

The third is that this story is given to teach tested disciples how to defeat the plausible Satanic narrative that proposes different answers to those proposed in the account. That is how it has often been used (perhaps mostly) in church life and is likely the one we know best.

We will take account of all three lines as they emerge in the story and test the balance of the three.

Now let's turn to the only thing that matters, the temptation stories.

### **Food for yourself 2–4**

The setting for the story is Jesus preparing himself for the ministry by fasting. The Spirit has taken him there, the very same Spirit of his baptism, the same Spirit of the creation now pours forth in and through Jesus the re-creation of human beings in God's love. That Spirit will burn away the chaff of our lives by the same love and grace that created the cosmos.

If you want a meditation on this theme read Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor* in which the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor addresses the present Jesus. The cardinal has had Jesus arrested because he fears the way in which love and power flow from Jesus and is affecting the crowd. He contends that Jesus' promise of freedom is too much for people and that humans are too lawless and simple to appreciate what it might mean to live free of the fear of death (remember the explanation about the idea of death as metaphor given above).

Once more we are back in the Garden of Eden. Who has authority here? The created order is under the authority of God and for God to tend not for humans or the Satan to exploit for their own advantage. The Voice of God alone matters.

Jesus is tempted to use the implied authority of the title Son of God (Adam, the king) to exploit the created order for his own ends. The narrative is plausible. It is another version of the story of Eden. True authority draws its power from the true narrative of God's Speech

*Questions:* What authority do you listen to? Do you listen for the Speech of God?

### **Something spectacular (become a religious superstar) 5–7**

The scene moves to the Temple in Jerusalem, the centre of religious power, undergirded by local and Roman political and economic power. Once again the temptation is for Jesus to use the implied authority of his title Son of God to act independently of God's Word and for his own benefit. In this case he might win the crowds over to his superstar act and avoid the cross. The Satan warrants his argument like a good lawyer with a quote from Psalm 91.11–12 which sounds plausible (but not true). For the Satan God is a dial-up help service, a servant of the human whim (remember Adam in the Garden) and under human authority.

Not so says Jesus. To tempt God is to consider God to be at my bidding, a very dangerous presumption for a human being to make.

Jesus' vocation, which we disciples are called to follow, is to be a truly human being, to be God's person, a servant to the world and to other people. No religious tricks here, just servanthood and the way of the cross.

*Questions:* What do think being a human being might look like?

### **Naked ambition and power 8–11**

This time the Satan is breathtaking in his effrontery. He takes Jesus to very high mountain and shows him the glory and power of the kingdoms of the world. Mountains have special place in Matthew as places of revelation (e.g. Matthew 5.1) and they recall the great traditions of God's revelation to Moses (see Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 34.1–4). This shameless piece of spin and deceit reveals what the first two temptations have been about; the connection between worship and power. 'Forget God, look to me where real power lies,' says the Satan.

Jesus meets the Satan's arguments with scripture (Deuteronomy 6.13) and exposes the falsity of the Satan's theology of disobedience and conspiracy. Jesus' takes as his spiritual, theological and political guide, Exodus 20.3–5.

You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not make for yourself and idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

This is the core of the matter. Politics as it practised is about worship and sacrifice to false gods. Jesus will call into being a people for whom the only sacrifice is a cross and the only worship is reserved for the crucified God.

I refer you to Dostoevsky again. The cardinal blames Jesus for rejecting this last great gift of the Satan. He says "We took Rome and the sword of Caesar from him (Satan), and proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth, though we have not yet succeeded in bringing our cause to its full conclusion." Had Jesus accepted the last gift then he could have given humankind what it seeks, "Someone to bow down to, someone to take over his conscience and a means for uniting everyone into a common, concordant, and incontestable anthill..."

As the cardinal rightly says, "And so we took Caesar's sword, and in taking it, of course, we rejected you and followed him."

*Questions:* What forms does rejection of Jesus take today? How might I reject Jesus? How can we reject Jesus in matters of power and knowing what is best for others?

Jesus is committed to the way of the cross and he will face all kinds of temptations in his life to deflect him from that way; his disciples, his opponents and others. All the time he commits to his calling and lives in the freedom God has given him. In this he is our example.

*Questions:* Sometimes we speak of being Christlike. How does this passage help us to understand what this means for us?

“PILGRIMAGE: FAITH IN JESUS AND A NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT.” SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

*Genesis 12.1–4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1–5 (6–12) 13–17; John 3.1–17.*

**Genesis 12.1–4a**

**The Call of Abram**

<sup>12</sup>Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

<sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

The call of Abram links Israel’s ancestral journey with their Lord to the primeval stories of creation, evil, redemption and the engagement of their Lord with all the nations of the earth. God’s call to Abram is the Lord’s response to the dilemmas posed in chapters 1–11.

But more needs to be said. In 11.30 Sarai is described as barren and having no children. This is descriptive, a report of a fact. This particular family has played out its future and has nowhere else to go. It is a family with no foreseeable future and they cannot invent a future. So barrenness becomes the arena in which the LORD will act and recreate human life. Unable to invent a future God will make one, full of new life, for them. The metaphor of barrenness and its consequent hopelessness for the future pervades the Genesis story (25.21; 29.31; see also 1Samuel 1.2 and Isaiah 54.1).

Then God speaks his word into this situation and everything will change (1). Sarai and Abram are without potential but then this God does not depend on the potentiality in the one addressed. God’s word makes the difference carrying all that is necessary to bring into being a new people in history. God’s word of life will overcome and overpower the barrenness of human reality. We are reminded of the word of God bringing forth creation. To stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is to have hope.

Four important theological themes, themes that course their way throughout the Bible, pervade this simple story. First, Abram must take a journey, from beautiful Iraq to a destination as yet unknown. Abram and Sarai must be risk takers. They must follow the call to abandonment, renunciation and relinquishment of all they love and know except their barrenness. We find this hard to understand because we know vast self-indulgence and cling to the securities that we build, not recognising that the way out of barrenness into hope is obedience to the creative Word of God.

Second, in taking the risk he will bring blessing to others. His journey will become wonderful news for the nations. We do not know how that will be, for this is but the beginning of the story, but that it will be so is certain. The only way to be a blessing is to receive the gift of the future in the promise of God. We live in an over managed world not a gift giving world. Yet this God promises gift; God's orders the world by gift, not the merit theology of managerialism. Well-being, prosperity, security and honour flow from promise, God's promise. We find that hard to believe but it lies at the core of biblical faith and helps explain the disastrous encounters of Israel and God in the future. Israel rejects this proposition and takes the future into its own hands.

Third, God has promised it. Promise is one of the most basic ideas of scripture. Promise brings blessing into the sphere of redemption and renewal. God will create a nation out of barrenness, make a great name for Abram and Sarai, make them a blessing of joy and gladness for all, protect them against the curses and violence of others and the nations will honour them.

Fourth, the way blessing and promise work is through faith. Abram not only believes God is, and that God makes promises, he also believes the promise and acts on it. He enters into the promise. The future belongs to God and Abram and Sarai believe that and act on it.

*Questions:* Read Mark 8.35 in the light of this story: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the gospel, will save it."

What does this say to you? God's call is dangerously open-ended. How do you respond to that? Do you trust the promise of God? Do you think the future belongs to God?

Do you believe that together God calls us as children of Abraham and Sarah to commit to bless the world? How can we do that in this social setting we live in? Are we kidding ourselves? Was God kidding Abraham and Sarah?

Can you discern the fundamental building blocks that make up God's plan for the whole creation?

### **Psalm 121**

A Song of Ascents.

<sup>1</sup>I lift up my eyes to the hills—  
from where will my help come?

<sup>2</sup>My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.

<sup>3</sup>He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.

<sup>4</sup>He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.

<sup>5</sup>The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

<sup>6</sup>The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.

<sup>7</sup>The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.

<sup>8</sup>The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and for evermore.

This is the second of a group of 15 psalms known as the Songs of Ascents. Most likely pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for celebrations used these psalms at particular stages of their journey. Each of the psalms is short and capable of being memorised. Psalm 121 is A clear forthright profession of trust in God's providence and protection.

The psalmist asks the question in verse 1 and the rest of the psalm is an answer. You might imagine the pilgrims asking the question in verse 1 (in song) and then some member (a priest or Levite maybe) of the party responding with the other seven. This is rather an anxious question as the author looks around, eyes searching for the dangers in the hills, and yet it is asked in faith. The author is looking for the assurance of the community and will feed off their trust in the LORD. Believing is a personal matter but not an individualist matter; we trust within a community whose trust supports us.

Travelling in the ancient world was always hazardous and the hills hid many dangers. The hills might be a source of bandits, guerrillas or may be difficult to climb. The source of safety and protection is made clear; The Lord, who is both my Lord and the Lord of the cosmos. Unlike humans God does not sleep, even though sometimes we think God does (Psalm 44.23), so we will be safe from the slippery climb. Even the sun will not burn us and we won't become moonstruck either. There are no circumstances beyond God's reach, not even evil: even there we can be sure of God's all-encompassing protective love. Not only that the LORD'S protection lasts forever

After Psalm 23 this is one of the most remembered parts of the Bible. Because it uses the metaphor of the journey some churches use it at baptism and others (Anglican) use it at death. But they should point us to the fact the Christian faith is a "Way" and this psalm is for daily living between birth, new birth and death.

After the experience of deceit and oppression of Ps 120 which precedes this psalm it is no wonder then that this very next psalm is an eloquent profession of faith in God's protection and providence. It is a psalm celebrating the trust that can sustain the journeys of life and the journey that life is.

### **The lifting of the eyes (1–2); A profession of trust by the individual**

What the psalmist has to do is to take his eyes off his surroundings, the brutality of violence and the pain of rejection, and lift his eyes. These first two verses of this psalm are some of the best known of the Psalter.

Sometimes the hills are filled with brigands and thieves, a source of danger but in this song they are the hills that surround Jerusalem. The hills are a reminder of the presence of the Lord among his people and the promises He has made to provide and protect. They are pictures, reminders.

It is to these that the writer lifts his eyes and reminds himself of their true significance. My help comes from the Lord and my Lord is the creator of heaven and earth, of all that there is, seen and unseen.

The phrase is familiar to us as it is taken up into the Apostles Creed and is made the theological basis for our trust. It tells us that the Lord whose power in help and blessing is unlimited by anything that is. In these Psalms of pilgrimage it is the affirmation that the pilgrim goes on the journey in the full knowledge that the Lord is not constrained by even the most powerful in the created order.

I want you to notice how personal this psalm is. “I” and “my” are key. Israel, the community, believes that God is Maker of heaven and earth but the pilgrim must make that theology his or her own. It must be the basis for the journey otherwise they will never take the risk and begin.

### **The Lord the travelling companion (3–4)**

Notice the change in verses 3–8. Someone else is speaking to the pilgrim. The pilgrim confesses their faith and a neighbour or a friend, a representative of the wider community of faith now encourages them to continue to take the journey. This neighbour or friend witnesses to the character of God: It is a beautiful encouragement. They witness to life with the companion God.

This image in 3–4 fits a person who is travelling on foot. One thing walkers can do is slip. And when they sleep, not in comfy motels but among the hills and valleys of Judea they are vulnerable and open to attack.

God is the travelling companion for the journey and he intends to “keep” the pilgrim. God is eternally vigilant; he does not slumber even though we are tempted to think that is what he does, “Arouse yourself. Why do you sleep O Lord” (Ps 44.23) is often our cry too. The pilgrim has to walk in the trust that God does not take rests.

### **The Lord the keeper (5–8)**

Next the neighbour witnesses to God the keeper. The Companion God is eternally vigilant but also like a giant umbrella giving relief from the heat of the day and the

madness of the night. The sun was a deadly enemy and madness might strike at night (lunar/lunatic).

But more to the point God will not allow evil to assault the pilgrim in such a way that the pilgrim will be destroyed by it. Nothing will come between God and the pilgrim for God is 'for us', for our life. All our arrivals and departures will not separate us from God even if they separate us from our friends and loved ones because often that is what they do.

Nothing can separate the pilgrim from the loving care of God (Rom 8.38–39).

### **Further reflections**

This Ps like 23 is one of the most influential well known Psalms of the OT. We use when we reach for words of assurance amid the trials and turmoils of our life's journey. We love the sense that God has not only got the whole world in his hands but has you and me, sister/brother in his hands. The psalmist affirms that the creator and ruler of the cosmos has a personal concern for each of us.

This Psalm has also been a psalm for travellers. On the morning of his departure for Africa David Livingstone read this Psalm. Some churches use the Psalm in their Baptism liturgy and some in the funeral liturgy. From birth to death and beyond this Psalm is the psalm of journeying.

The Psalm has been called a psalm for sojourners a name given to early Christians who thought of themselves as pilgrims and sojourners (1Peter 2.11–12 aliens and exiles), as members of the Way (Ac 9.2) as people for whom the whole of life was journey (Heb 11). "For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb13.14).

Of course our best example here is Jesus whose life was journey, to a Cross (Lk 9.57–62). This journey was no pie-in-the-sky escapism but an undermining of all the arrangements for power and privilege that the world then conceived. Herod, Caesar and the Jewish establishment knew what this journey meant and were heel bent on destroying it. And the good news is that God was there keeping Jesus even on the Cross, keeping his life for the biggest surprise of all. The same god is our keeper.

*Questions:* Why do you think that the confession that God is maker of heaven and earth (see the creeds) is important for trusting God? Why is it important to remember this when we worship? Why is knowing God's character important for trusting on the way? What are the mundane (sun and moon) and malicious things that may assail us and deflect our trust? How can we learn to constantly lift our eyes to the hills?

Read this psalm in the light of the story of Abram and Sarai. What does it tell you about the nature of the "Way"? What does it tell you about the nature of trust? How does it speak to you about your trust and journeying?

## Romans 4.1–17

### The Example of Abraham

<sup>4</sup>What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ <sup>4</sup>Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. <sup>5</sup>But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. <sup>6</sup>So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness irrespective of works:

<sup>7</sup>‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup>blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.’

<sup>9</sup>Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, ‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ <sup>10</sup>How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. <sup>11</sup>He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, <sup>12</sup>and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

<sup>13</sup>For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup>For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup>as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Paul wrote Romans to explain one of his great themes, God’s righteousness, and chapters 1–4 examine the faithfulness of God. Today we read a small selection from what is a sustained development of his argument that God’s righteousness has its roots in God’s faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham, an argument that begins at 3.21 and continues to 4.25. The background is Genesis 15 in which God makes his covenant with Abraham.

Chapter 4 expounds Genesis 15 to show that God has always intended and promised that the family of Abraham would include Gentiles as well as Jews. After all the mission of God was to ‘bless the nations’ through this who himself was not a Jew but

a homeless Syrian. So Paul tackles the matters of works (2–8), circumcision (9–12) and law (13–15) as these were obstacles in his time to blessing the nations.

Abraham stood justified before God not by any works he might have done but by faith, trusting God and entering into the journey of promise. This passage is not about self-help legalism in its context but about Abraham's covenant membership which cannot be defined in terms of 'works of Torah'. Abraham was not in covenant relationship with God on the basis of 'Torah works' but instead by faith. The covenant is not ethnic; Gentiles do not have to become ethnic Jews. Paul uses a book-keeping metaphor 'reckoned' to get his point across. It was put to Abraham's account that he trusted God. Thus he was in the right. It all added up. Grace is gift; being among the covenant people is gift; it is not a wage given at the end of the day. Paul uses Psalm 32 to make the same point. God justifies the ungodly which is just what a human judge should not do according to scripture. But God does and that is amazing and both Abraham and David witness to it.

In 4.9–12 Paul now sharpens the question of 4.1. Does the covenant of Abraham apply only to Jews or to Gentiles also? Should Gentiles be circumcised? Paul's argument is clear; the family of faith does not have to regard Abraham as its physical progenitor. Abraham was justified freely by grace without works as was the sinful David. Paul is saying more than just that Abraham is an example but is the foundation of who God is and who the people of God are.

If God's promise is not just to those who are circumcised then it is not confined to those who have the Torah (13–15). The Torah comes later than the promise and cannot annul it. Paul's view that the law brings wrath needs to be linked with 3.19–20. The argument is that the law shows up sin (remember the discussion in Study One) in ethnic Israel and sin evokes wrath (judgment) just as breaking the law does in ordinary human experience. Therefore, if the inheritance is confined to ethnic Israel no-one would inherit the promise.

Verses 16–17 bring this section of the argument to a close. Abraham did not receive the promise through the law but through faith; indeed, if law is the criteria then the whole business is void. Abraham's faith is the sole badge of membership in the people of God and everyone who shares that faith God justifies. Such faith is the same as that exercised by those who believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (see 23–25). If you want to see what Paul is arguing against read Sirach 44.19–21 found in the Apocrypha a common read among Paul's opponents. The key line is "He [Abraham] kept the Law of the Most High" i.e. the law of Moses. The simple fact is he did not and that is Paul's argument.

*Questions:* Do you rejoice in God's good grace? We live in a merit-based world. How do you feel about Paul's notions of grace and the nature of God who forgives the

sinner? Is our mission to act as moral police? How does Paul's argument help us answer that question?

### **John 3.1–17**

<sup>3</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.<sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." <sup>8</sup>The windblows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup>Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What a rich text, full of word play, misunderstanding, irony and metaphor in the dialogue. That makes it hard to reduce to a single theme or idea. The mixture of story, action and dialogue pre-empts such simplification. One such a common simplification is to boil it down to being a text about "being born again" an idea that seems to frighten a lot of people because of its North American associations of individual private conversion that sets people above others, giving them a privileged status and quick entry to heaven.

*Questions:* Do you have any prejudices about the subject of being born again? Can you name them and explore them? Can you put them on hold as you read this dialogue?

The two main actors meet. The scene is set at night and the two characters are introduced (1–2a). Jesus is in Jerusalem (2.13) and here he meets Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews. We will meet these folk throughout the Gospel of John

as they constitute Jesus' most dangerous enemy. Notice he uses "we know" as though he is representing someone or somebody.

We have already been told that Jesus brings light in darkness (1.4,5,9) as the creative Word of God. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader moving in darkness towards the light found in Jesus, taking the first steps towards believing.

*Questions:* Who do you think Nicodemus is representing as "we"? Who does Nicodemus think Jesus is and why? Where has that information come from (2.23–25)?

### **Jesus engages Nicodemus**

The dialogue now proceeds between Jesus and Nicodemus (2b-12) with Nicodemus accepting a good deal of the witness to Jesus in chapters 1–2 of John such as 'Rabbi' and 'sign worker' but adds a further understanding that the Jesus comes from the presence of God, a dignity reserved for the great figures of Israel's history, like Moses or Jeremiah. This is as far as Nicodemus can get because he is still defining Jesus in terms he understands. Nicodemus is not hostile like some of his compatriots and colleagues (2.18–22) but confined by his frameworks. Jesus is new and Nicodemus is trying to fit him into the well-worn categories of those who know best, like Law, Sabbath and Temple. But it is a start and Jesus takes him at his word and as a genuine seeker of enlightenment.

*Questions:* We all live and judge within categories accepted in our group and society. We might think of ourselves as say, progressives or conservatives, then set about interpreting the world through the inherited and assumed characteristics of that group. What are your lenses though which you view the world and the people in it? Reflect on how you might try and trap Jesus in your known categories in your own life? How does that affect our mission to be Christ-like and bring blessing to the world?

Jesus builds on Nicodemus' tentative positive approach but immediately takes him out of his preconceived sets of ideas (3.3–8). The critical words of 3.3 need to be read in the light of the incredulous response of 3.4 and the real possibility of misreading Jesus and Jesus' response in 3.5–8.

"Very truly, I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

It is this response that sparks the dialogue and puts Nicodemus in a very uncomfortable position. The word 'above' in the NRSV has two meanings, 'above' and 'again' and John uses the ambiguity in this word to express his ideas. Nicodemus thinks of the horizontal meaning; birth from the womb. Nicodemus was familiar with the idea of God as king (the kingdom of God) but had some fixed ideas about how God's kingship worked and who were the subjects of it. They were centred in Law, Temple, Land and a special People. But to think that there was another way to "see" (participate in, live in the light of) God's sovereign rule was beyond his imagination.

Jesus' imagery produces incredulity and Nicodemus' response spells his utter confusion. And any reader can identify with him. Why wouldn't he identify what Jesus has said with birth from a mother's womb?

So, Jesus takes him on a mind-blowing journey.

“Very truly, I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”

*Questions:* What has changed in Jesus' response? Why do you think that might be?

Jesus is talking about a radical restart in the kingdom. Entering or sharing in the life of that sovereign rule of God, all its beauty, mercy love and justice is not about Law, Temple, Land and special People.

John's use of water and the Spirit indicates what he understands by the conversion experience; baptism that accepts the coming judgment and salvation of God and the renewal of the world by the creator Spirit. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that a new world order is beginning and to be part of it required a radical reorientation (5).

So radical is this reworking that Nicodemus has to let go of all that he thinks he knows and start all over (6–8). The birth image is very confronting. It says, ‘You know nothing and you understand nothing. Your religion and spirituality has led you up the garden path. Go back and start again. Start with the Spirit of the crucified One (11–15).’

Nicodemus did not expect such a confrontation. To be born from above has only one source, Jesus' outpouring of his own life. The only way to the promised kingdom, to eternal life (John's preferred and equivalent term for the kingdom), comes from above into the world only to be lifted up from the world in derision and suffering. This is the moment of being born again, from above.

The saving love of God is the driving force of the mystery of the lifting up of the Son (16–17) who brings the possibility of God's life to the world in salvation. Judgment is not God's final word; salvation is (see 1.12–13). The time of judgment is now as Nicodemus is faced with the revelation of the Father's love in the Son; the choice is between light and darkness (19–20). Will Nicodemus step into the light?

*Questions;* What is your response when Jesus takes you beyond what you know or challenges your long-held beliefs or wisdom? What does the revelation of the father's love in the Son mean to you? How can we share that love?

See if you can link Abraham and Sarah, the psalmist, Paul and Jesus and Nicodemus then find clues about what God is up to and what that might mean for us.

“PILGRIMAGE: FROM SLAVE NATION TO THE WORLD.” THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

*Exodus 17.1–7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1–11; John 4.5–42.*

**Exodus 17.1–7**

**Water from the Rock**

<sup>1</sup>From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup>The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink.’ Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?’ <sup>3</sup>But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’ <sup>5</sup>The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. <sup>6</sup>I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’

It is only a matter of months since God liberated Israel from Egypt; from its slavery, poverty and forced building projects (1). They have had trouble with water and shortage of supplies already in this journey towards Sinai; in the wilderness of Shur and the wilderness of Sin (15.32–16.36). (Although there is some difficulty in accurately locating all these places after all these millennia your Bible atlas will trace out the probable route they followed). It seems the leeks, melons and garlics of Egypt began to dominate their imaginations as the memory of slavery receded. The problem is simply stated; there is no water for the people to drink. The most basic element of life is missing.

Life in the desert is precarious indeed for Israel. Liberated they might be but quarrelsome and disagreeable they also are (2–3). Complaint and threat of violence are their weapons of choice in the battle with God. They pick on Moses, of course, because they think he is an easy target. Getting cross with God might be a dangerous game to play. So, they accuse Moses of ineffective and incompetent leadership. Moses’ response to the people is to suggest that they are testing God’s leadership. Moses is God’s agent but their real quarrel is with God.

So severe is the people’s anger that Moses fears for his life and his prayer reflects that (4). It is not the people he is worried about but his own safety. We are all human!

Nevertheless, God responds (5–6) and will himself stand at the place that Moses must strike to display his sovereign power and care for his people even if they prefer Egypt

and slavery. Only YHWH can give the resources of life and the desert is the place to learn that. The journey requires that Israel trust that and trust that God will work through Moses.

The place names (7) are not about geography but about theology, about trust and mistrust. They already know that God will save and protect, acting on their behalf; they have been through worse and yet they choose the path of quarrel and contention. They demand that YHWH give an account of his sovereignty to them, demanding that God perform at their behest. They long for a utilitarian religion where YHWH will do as YHWH is told and be accountable to Israel.

The Bible never paints a pretty picture of the people of God, reckless, feckless, hardhearted and violent. As Psalm 95 points out below, they stand as a horrifying warning of how quickly and how far the people of God can descend into chaotic, disintegrating abusiveness.

But more needs to be said here because it is a story the central core of which is about God's leading as well as human complaint.

The people are people on the move, on the 'Way'. They have the promise of the Exodus and its hope but no fulfillment. And that is far from pleasant; indeed, it is chaotic and appears leaderless and directionless. Hence the attack on Moses. However, this what life on the move means. That is the life of faith and it is highly unattractive because it seems to lack security, safety nets and strategy.

In all of that we learn something of God's leadership. God leads and sets the itinerary even when it leads into a god-forsaken space where reality and perception become totally confused. God's leading is not, however, coercive, so disobedience and rebellion are always possible and in this case a reality. The reason is simple God's leading does not always end up at an oasis, where we can find rest, relaxation, and comfortable. God's interests in bringing about the fulfillment of the promise is not the same as those of the people. Church and God are not always on the same page or singing from the same hymnbook.

In such a time the temptation is always to force God's hand by seeking a way to coerce God to show himself: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Well let's set about finding out. Surely we can find a way to hold God hostage to our whims of how divine life and power should be displayed.

That violates the goodness and faithfulness of God but it also endangers the life of faith. We can argue that God does not protect or heal because we (mostly others) don't have enough faith. If you had had enough faith God would have acted. God is the transactional CEO.

God's creative activity is not transactional but gracious so the Lord stands with Moses on the rock so the people do not take away the wrong impression. Moses is not the architect of creation or the promise of redemption or the fulfillment of hope. The Creator is the source of life in the midst of wilderness and human chaos.

Obedience to God's leading presence is a lifelong act of trust that can never be counted arithmetically, tallied as an account like superannuation. It is simply a lifelong trust in the One who leads on the "Way".

Someone has pointed out how this story is a model that is replicated right up to the present day. A problem is presented and a need clearly and unambiguously identified. There is a powerful intervention by God (through Moses) and a happy resolution of the problem through the gift of water. This is the form of much advertising. In advertising the product substitutes for God and when it is used some form of salvation follows; cleaner clothes, calmness, happiness.

*Questions:* How does the Exodus story critique the advertising story and what does it tell us about our world and ourselves? Is prayer about God performing at our behest? What are the problems with this approach? What does this story teach about trust? Dare we trust God to lead? Might that leave us open to risk? What do we learn about the God of Exodus and Wilderness?

### **Psalm 95**

<sup>1</sup>O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

<sup>2</sup>Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

<sup>3</sup>For the Lord is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.

<sup>4</sup>In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.

<sup>5</sup>The sea is his, for he made it,  
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

<sup>6</sup>O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

<sup>7</sup>For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!

<sup>8</sup>Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup>when your ancestors tested me,  
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

<sup>10</sup>For forty years I loathed that generation  
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,

and they do not regard my ways.’

<sup>11</sup>Therefore in my anger I swore,

’They shall not enter my rest.’

The theme of Psalm 95 is very clear: God reigns as owner of the world he created and as the creator of the covenant people; the people of God should therefore worship in joy and thanksgiving with open ears and obedient hearts. This psalm is a mixture of praise, prophetic admonition and enthronement of God as king. Psalms 96–99 express the theme of God’s enthronement as king and Psalm 95 can be thought of as one bookend to those songs and Psalm 100 the other bookend. The Psalm probably has its origins in temple worship, emphasising the procession of joy, the prostration of humble worship and the listening of obedience. It is also part of the response to the devastation of the exile which has dominated Books I-III of the Psalter culminating in the great questions of Psalm 89.

The psalm begins with a call to worship that has influenced the patterns of Jewish and Christian worship ever since (1–5). Joy, praise, thanksgiving sung in robust voices is the best ways to come into the presence of God who is the solid unmoveable grounds of salvation (Psalms 18.2, 31, 46; 19.14; 28.1; 78.35; 89.26; Isaiah 44.8; Habakkuk 1.12). Being in the presence of the God of salvation is what worship is all about.

God is the God of salvation for two reasons that underlie all worship (3–5). God is the great King. All sovereignty is in his keeping. There is no-one who can match him. There is only one God. God reveals that great kingship in creating the universe and this means that the whole world is in God’s hands.

In psalms and prophets the chaotic forces of nature or the triumph of wickedness among the nations resist God’s reign (e.g. Psalm 1; 2). The circumstances that deny God’s sovereignty in this psalm are not these; rather it is God’s own people who resist God’s claim on their personal and social life. And they do that when they refuse to bow the heart in obedience to the word of God. They stop listening (7b).

The psalmist uses the OT story as scripture, as a cautionary tale of warning about what happens when the people decide that they know better than God (Exodus 17.1–7; Numbers 20.1–13 and Psalms 78. 18–20; 81.7; 106.32). They contended against God (Meribah) and put God on trial (Massah) because they doubted that he was in their midst or had the capacity or will to care for them (see the notes above). They had experienced the Exodus and God’s great deeds in the wilderness sustaining and protecting them but they drew no lessons from that. They hardened their hearts (8) and in verse 10 that is explained to mean that their minds and wills no longer corresponded with that of God. Although God pardoned his people as a whole the rebels would not enter the land of rest. There can be no doubt that the events of Exodus 17 that we have already explored weighed heavily on the psalmist’s spirit. It also weighed just as heavily on the writer to the Hebrews (3.7–4.13) advising his

fellow Christians caught between the hope of promise and the journey to fulfillment: “Take care brothers and sisters, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.”

The underlying vision of this psalm is that in the created order the people of God have the beautiful gracious gift of being God’s loved ones (6–7). But loved ones have a responsibility to love the Lover and listen to the lover’s voice. When hardness enters the human heart and breaks up human love, when people no longer listen to each other, when minds and wills no longer correspond we find it tragic and painful. How much more when the Lover is God and the hard heart is ours.

“Today” is the clear challenge from the palmist; today is the day to listen and love again. The great God who rules the world and whose rule will one day be fully be established in Christ wants to rule the human heart today. The future is present in the Spirit.

*Questions:* Would people coming into our building see our worship as an opportunity to find the veil between heaven and earth broken? Would they hear the voice of God?

Hebrews 3.7–4.13 is an early Christian commentary on this text especially Psalm 95.7b-11. Take time to reflect on the author’s argument and themes of warning and word, faith and obedience, and the place of community and fellowship.

What are some of the challenges you have discovered on the road from promise to fulfillment? Take some time to reflect on how you faced them? Are their lessons?

## **Romans 5.1–11**

### **Results of Justification**

<sup>5</sup>Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is one of the great gospel passages of the New Testament. It begins a new section in the apostle’s letter to the Romans that explores the deeply personal reconciliation

between the creator God and the human race in and through Jesus the Messiah. This passage is the introduction to a passage that finishes at 8.39 and explores the logic and action of divine love. This is the beginning of the section in the letter that assumes that Paul has proven his thesis in 3.21–26, that God has accomplished the justification of sinners in the Messiah Jesus, and that God will then complete that task and bring them to glory. God's faithfulness to his covenant in the cross of Messiah Jesus (3.21–4.25) Paul will now express in terms of covenant love.

Verses 1–2 summarise the argument to this point; that justification results in peace with God, access to God's favour, and that leads on to the hope of glory. So we might say that salvation has a past, present and a future. God's justice expressed in the cross, has led to peace now; a deeply personal reconciliation of God and sinner through Jesus Christ and by grace alone. That means that the justified one now has hope; the glory of God. Adam is restored to his proper place as the vice regent of God and as the bearer of the glory of God's presence in his person. That remains a work in progress to be completed in the future.

But what of the present (3–5)? That, according to Paul, is marked by suffering and the work of the Spirit. Paul may boast of the hope of glory but he also boasts in tribulations because they lead to this hope. In the Spirit suffering is turned to hope because God's love pours into our hearts, and suffering turns out a tried and true person steeped in hope.

This is not a message we are familiar with. Celebrating one's suffering sounds depressingly morbid. After all, our inalienable right is not only to pursue happiness but also to attain it as soon as. We have politicians and lawyers to make sure we do.

Paul has a different view of the end of humanity; a character that reflects the character of the crucified Messiah who reflects the character of God. It is the development of that character that the Spirit flows in love. This happiness is best called peace and hope deeply embedded in the expressed love of God in the cross. This is the deep root of the Spirit's life in us that allows us to know what it means to be in right relationship with God and others. (Note: Paul is quite vague about suffering here. He will pick up the theme in chapter 8 in more careful detail.)

Verses 6–8 explain that the cross is the foundation for all of this. Christ's death 'for us' while we were still ungodly is a measure of the great love of God, the source of our hope and rejoicing.

Verses 9–11 points out that through Christ we have been justified, we have been reconciled and in the future we will be saved from judgment and its consequences. Paul thinks of salvation as the future experience of the resurrection life of Christ that we will share. That is our hope, grounded in justification, reconciliation, suffering and the Spirit. Our only response is to boast in the love and grace of God. The passage

begins with peace and ends in reconciliation. Paul's idea of God's faithful righteousness for sinners is not a legal fiction but a restoration of life and fellowship, of freedom and community with the ever-faithful covenant God.

*Questions:* Do you really believe what Paul is saying in 5.1? Do you really believe what Paul is saying about the work of Messiah Jesus? What is your hope? Where does the hope of glory fit in your life? What difference has it made for you?

Paul makes the point in 5.1–2 that the believer can have full confidence in God's work because God alone can bring peace. Do you walk the way in that confidence, not in yourself, but in the crucified God?

How might God's reconciling action in Christ become the ground and model for the reconciliation of human enemies (Tom Wright)?

### **John 4.5–42**

<sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

<sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?' <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ).

‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ <sup>28</sup>Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, <sup>29</sup>‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ <sup>30</sup>They left the city and were on their way to him.

<sup>31</sup>Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ <sup>32</sup>But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ <sup>33</sup>So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. <sup>35</sup>Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. <sup>36</sup>The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup>For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.” <sup>38</sup>I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

<sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’

Jesus is on a journey from Judea heading north back to Galilee and to do that he passes through Samaria and he stops at the city of Sychar southeast of the capital Sebaste and in view of Mt. Gerizim (4–6). It is a famous place of patriarchal life and the gift of Jacob to Joseph of water introduces the two main themes: gift and the water of life. But it was also a place of contention. Jewish hostility to Mt. Gerizim’s claims for the exclusive worship of God led to the destruction of the shrine in 200 BCE by Jewish soldiers. Jesus stops because he is weary as the middle of the day approaches having probably been on the move from very early morning in the cool of the day.

There he strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman asking for a gift of water (7–26). Unlike Nicodemus, a named male leader of the Jewish establishment, she remains unnamed, a female of a foreign and enemy people. Jesus cuts through all the boundaries; historical, political, racial and gender. It is a scandalous encounter as the disciples are away buying food and Jesus is alone. Notice the number of times Jews and Samaritans are contrasted and she does open up her salvo against ‘the Jew’ insultingly. But like Nicodemus she shapes her questions and debates within the frameworks she knows; Jacob, Joseph; Jew, Samaritan; male, female; married, not married; Gerizim, Jerusalem; Messiah, prophet. And Jesus, as he did with Nicodemus,

destroys the foundations of all those frameworks and demands she look anew at them all through him.

Jesus offers himself to the woman as living water, the gift of God, and in the process does not treat her as an ignorant child, or a sexual deviant but as an intelligent inquiring person whose questions can be candidly and truthfully met. In this way he draws her to the living water. She chooses like Nicodemus to take Jesus' words at face value thinking of a stream of flowing water and suggests that Jacob's gift of water was as good as it gets. But Jesus' gift has its origins, not in a patriarch, but in the creator of water, the great giver of life and its goal is eternal life, the very life of God himself.

But the story does not stop there (16–42). As she questions him in the terms she understands again Jesus moves the story forward from 'the gift of God' to 'who it is who is speaking to you' (10). He moves the discussion from sectarian debate to true worship, worship that is not geographically or historically oriented but alive in the Spirit of truth. He reveals himself to her as "I am", the great revelation of this Gospel; the Word made flesh who brings light and life into the world.

She becomes a living witness of living water to her people, her village and her clan because she is now a growing believer. Her witness is not entirely clear, certainly not learned, but it is personal, not sectarian or doctrinal, so now the villagers must examine the claims of Jesus for themselves and respond to them. Mission is not a spectator sport but a personal encounter with the I Am, the Word made flesh, and the living water.

The disciples finally catch up with Jesus (a metaphor well worth pondering) and are astonished at the whole scene. No wonder. This is mission outside the boundaries of gender, sect and race. They are too afraid to ask questions when she is there but when she leaves they bring the conversation back to the mundane. Eat something and you will feel better and we can get over it and go about our usual business.

Jesus will not miss the opportunity to talk about His and the Father's mission. The Samaritan woman is central to it.

The key is found in verse 33. The will is God's so is the work but Jesus is sent to complete his work. We are told at the end of this Gospel to that "As the Father has sent me so I send you". We are sowers and reapers in God's harvest of the future that is happening now. It is described as eternal life and in this gospel that means, not happy ever after in heaven, but the joys and wonder of new creation, a new order of being human and creation together. And the Light of the world and the Water of life shed light and life on the present to transform it. But it is God's will and work. Our vocation is to enter that will and that work and not be distracted.

The harvest is the witness of the Samaritans who believe because, "...we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world." (42) The world is being restored to its true purpose.

This is a story of many dimensions as all good stories are and given our present interest in mission it deserves considerable reflection in the light of the misunderstandings that sometimes surrounds that subject.

*Questions:* Which dimension of this story speaks to you? Meditate on that and ask where God might be leading you? Explore your own I-Thou relationship with the Word made flesh and the Living Water. Does it drive you to want to go further, explore deeper, witness to its delight?

How can disciples misunderstand Jesus and His mission?

The woman is never judged as a sinner but portrayed as a crucial witness. What does this reveal about God and his mission?

Immediate experience of the Living Water is the key to this story. What does it tell us about God's will and work and our role in it?

“PILGRIMAGE: FROM APPEARANCE TO REALITY.” FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT,  
YEAR A

*1 Samuel 16.1–13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5.8–14; John 9.1–41*

**1 Samuel 16.1–13**

The LORD said to Samuel, ‘How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’ Samuel said, ‘How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.’ And the LORD said, ‘Take a heifer with you, and say, “I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.” Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.’ Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, ‘Do you come peaceably?’ He said, ‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.’ And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’

Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, ‘Neither has the LORD chosen this one.’ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, ‘Neither has the LORD chosen this one.’ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, ‘The LORD has not chosen any of these.’ Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.’ He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, ‘Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.’ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

This passage is the prologue to the story of the rise of David that will take up the rest of the story found in the books of Samuel. It reads like a political to us and, at one level it is just that. It is an answer to a political question: How did David succeed Saul?

The story-teller is interested in other questions and they are best summed up in the interchange between Samuel’s musings about the suitability of Eliab and God’s response (6– 7). “But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”“ This is the core of the text here. What humans want in a leader and what God looks vary greatly. The story in the books of Samuel expands on that. Surprisingly moral

perfection is not included. But then neither is injustice, mercilessness, deceit or faithlessness praised. This story is about spiritual relationships with God.

Saul has proven a ruler who could not hear God because the people's voice was louder and nearer (15.24–26). The ruler of Israel needed to heed the word of God first and obey it, and only then listen to the voice of the people. Religious and pragmatic political activity had to bend to the voice of God (15.22–23). Israel's future (and the world's; remember this is the story of God at work for the world) is at stake in Saul's failure not only to hear the word of God and obey but also in his indecision and inability to assess situations clearly (see chapters 13–15). He was not the leader to take God's plan into its next stage. So, at one level the story is about the decline of Saul. It is slow and resisted. It is also about the rise of David, slowly and in turmoil, conflict and fear that still govern human politics.

Even this little story that is only an introduction to it all is full of tension, secrecy, and fear. Samuel fears for his life. After all, this looks like a conspiracy. Although my Bible has the heading 'David Anointed as King' that is not accurate. He is anointed and God is looking for a new king but Samuel is very careful not to do a royal anointing but a very local, very secret anointing for the story is yet to play out. Anointed with the Spirit David may be but far from being a king.

After the confrontation with Saul in which Samuel announced the demise of his kingship, Samuel went home to Ramah north of Jerusalem (called Jebus then). He grieved for Saul because of his great promise and great failure and because Israel was leaderless. His grief, however, seems to have rendered him impotent. Israel is in danger not only because of Saul but because Samuel the prophet and bearer of the word of God is unable to act. God commands Samuel to get on with the business of anointing a new king over Israel specifically from the sons of Jesse. God provides for himself a new king: Israel may be bereft but God is not. Samuel is afraid because if he anoints a new king while Saul still reigns his action is treasonous. So, God tells him to take a heifer for sacrifice and head south the Bethlehem. The elders of the town are nervous because of Samuel's conflict with Saul and fear retaliation.

Samuel anoints David at the express command of God thus emphasising the divine initiative in the choice of the next king (6–13). David is the eighth son of Jesse, a shepherd from the village of Bethlehem and from a family with no claims to great pedigree, Jesse being the grandson of Ruth and Boaz. Samuel works through the seven sons of Jesse (6–10) only to find that God has not chosen any of them. The telling encounter between God and Samuel is found in verses 6–7. Samuel is looking but not seeing. Possessed by his own agenda of grief and fear, beauty and strength blind the great prophet; he seems only to be able to look at the outward but cannot discern the heart.

YHWH has another in mind; the last son who is a fine specimen but who is not significant enough to be present. He is not even significant enough to be named until after he is anointed; David, the not-yet king, by oil and the Spirit.

This is a story of God's unexpected choices of unlikely vessels to bear God's grace. All through the books of Samuel David is an unlikely instrument for Israel's hopes. Can this boy defeat the Philistine the champion? Can this upstart warrior escape the anger and machinations of Saul? Can this fugitive and bandit become a King? Can this man who sells himself to the Philistines win the hearts of the Israelite? God finds possibilities for grace in the most unexpected, even barren, places. God's anointed one, God's messiah, is neither wealthy nor powerful. Like Samuel we still confuse appearance for reality. Image and appearance may dominate our culture but God looks elsewhere – on the heart. The trouble for the modern church is that it too confuses appearance with reality and thus finds it hard to discern God's grace at work and address the needs of the human heart.

*Questions:* How can we confuse appearance and image for the kingdom of God? What can we do to learn to move from seeing to discerning? What is the place of discernment in the Christian life? Do we consider ourselves to be unlikely candidates for God's calling? What does this story teach us about that?

What can we learn about the way God 'goes about God's business'? What might it mean for us as we contemplate our mission as disciples?

### **Psalm 23**

A Psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

The writer begins with a profession of faith: The LORD is the psalmist's shepherd, the poet's king. Kings were called shepherds and their role was to enact God's justice into

the political and social life of the nation (see Ezekiel 34). God alone suffices the psalmist; God alone is the only necessity of life. The reason is simple. Relying on human kings to bring about justice is futile; God alone is the true shepherd.

The beautiful tranquil pictures of verses 2–3 illustrate a simple idea that God keeps the psalmist alive; food, water, rest and security (safe paths). The psalmist lives in trust that this is the right way to find peace.

The image of the darkest valley introduces a more disturbing but significant part of life. Even in the most life-threatening situation God's provision is sufficient. Walking on the shadow side of, even in death, and certainly in the face of all evil, God's presence is all that is necessary. The protection of the LORD dispels all fear which often paralyzes human life and allows for flourishing even in the worst circumstances.

The images turn to the household the centre of human life and God is described as the gracious generous host (5–6). God actively pursues his role as loving host even as enemies look on powerless to do anything about it. God's goodness and mercy pursue and surround the psalmist protecting and nurturing him or her.

The simple message of this psalm is that God is the only necessity of life. The tragedy is that the psalm is almost only associated with the funeral service, yet it is all about life. It is a psalm for daily living. And in its liturgical use today it points us to Jesus who sees the people as sheep without a shepherd and who then feeds the people. Jesus is the true king.

Yet even in death or near death, in deepest darkness, the shepherd's love, presence and provision is enough. Note that the presence of the shepherd does not mean that we will not pass through the deepest darkness; it indicates that we most certainly will. The threat is real and ever-present but the presence of the shepherd is our hope.

The Christian hears in this psalm the promises of the shepherd and the Lamb of the New Testament (John 10.22–30). They also remember that God is the shepherd (Ps 95.7, 100.3; Isaiah 40.11; Ezekiel 34.11–16; John 10.11, 14). They also notice that the overflowing bounty of God's provision finds its outlet to the world in Tabitha the widow who helps overcome scarcity in God's house hold (Acts 9.46–53).

And perhaps we can hear echoes in the Eucharist, in which the bread and overflowing cup of God are shared with the world. Perhaps we need to remember that the Eucharist is an economic and political enactment grounded in a theology. Is that too difficult an dangerous I wonder?

*Questions:* Read this well-known passage every day this week and savour each phrase and word. Settle on a word or phrase each day and let it speak to you.

What is God saying to you? In what ways is this psalm the foundation for living for you?

How difficult is it to hear the message of the psalm in our consumer driven and obsessed society? Is its message too naïve? What message should we present to our society, our neighbours?

### **Ephesians 5.8–14**

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.’

The writer is discussing what difference being in Christ makes to the disciples’ way of living (from 4.17) and comes to the conclusion that it is a life of imitating God in tenderness, love, kindness and forgiveness (4.32–5.2). Old pagan ways must be put away as they come under judgement (5.3–7) and because the disciples have come into the light of Christ. Christian ethics are simply an expression in life of what the Christian disciple believes to be true in Christ.

The statement that sets theme of the discussion in this chapter is found in 5.1–2. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Be like the God who is revealed in the crucified Christ. This is light.

The cross with its themes of sacrifice, love and grace cast a light on human behaviour that is devastating in its critique of the human condition (8–14). The disciple has a new status as ‘light in the Lord’ (Matthew 5.16; Luke 16.8; John 12.36; 1Thessalonians 5.5). The daily life is walking or journeying in the light.

We must let the light burn its way of goodness, truth and right through our lives so we might live the light (9). These form the framework for discernment. Goodness, truthfulness in word and deed and justice, which puts all human relationships to rights, are the light of Christ in which we walk.

Evil is the absence of light. Note that it is an absence, a negative. And we have an obligation to expose the works of darkness to make the evil visible in the light of the cross, not by using a megaphone, but by living in Christ. Morality police we are not. We have no licence to scold or berate. We have tried that and it has failed, and continues to fail, miserably and painfully, our hypocrisies are laid bare.

That is what the writer says when he speaks of discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. The NRSV “Try to find out...” (10) obscures the critical process of discernment that is required of the Christian. The word means put to the test, examine and decide. It is a

critical intellectual and spiritual activity (Romans 12.1–2) that takes place using the framework of verse 9; “...for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true”.

Christians are not to withdraw from the world as some of their contemporaries did. Instead, they must explore the human condition for their own struggles with the darkness in the light of the cross. Then they are ready to discern and lay bare the tawdry life that makes oneself the centre of the universe, encouraging greed, and self-absorbed pleasure at the expense of others, the very opposite of goodness, justice and truthfulness (11).

They are to live lives fully awake (14) because, after all, that is what light is for. This little quote maybe from an early liturgy or baptismal service but reflects scriptural ideas that the early Christians drew on (Isaiah 26.19; 51.17; 52.1; 60.1; Romans 13.11).

If only the institutional church had learnt this lesson instead of covering up the works of darkness in its own life.

*Questions:* How can we be light? How can we learn to critically discern what pleases God in our circumstances? How can we discern the works of darkness in our lives and expose them? How important is this discussion and insight for the way we go about our mission?

### **John 9.1–41**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is he?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others

said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

This long story and debate seethes with so many arguments and cross arguments, so many ideas and counter ideas so much jostling for power and so much at stake theologically that we may find it hard to make out any central theme. As is usual in John's Gospel the central theme is Jesus himself and the words, "... I am the light of the world" are the key to understanding that theme. The blind man moves towards sight, to the light, towards Jesus, while the Pharisees move towards blindness, to the darkness and away from Jesus (remember the themes discussed in the Ephesians reading).

I want to begin with two preliminary comments. The first is that in the Gospel of John healings like this one (and other miracles) are not wonders, something to be stared at and overwhelmed by. We can walk away from those and even forget them. John calls these events signs. Now a sign gives us an entirely different picture. It points somewhere, perhaps an unknown or mysterious place. Or perhaps it points to the possibility of going somewhere new and finding a whole new view that opens us up to greater possibilities. Reflect on that as we work our way through this the terrain of this sign.

The second comment I want to make concerns the question that the disciples put to Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” They obviously believed in a chain of inevitable cause and effect, sin and judgment, that led to this man’s condition. Thinking like this is a way of trying to hold on to a belief in God’s justice. I think the way that Tom Wright puts it is helpful.

“If something in the world seems ‘unfair’, but if you believe in a God who is both all-powerful, all-loving and all-fair, one way of getting around the problem is to say that it only seems unfair, but actually isn’t. There was, after all, some secret sin to be punished. This is a comfortable sort of thing to believe if you happen to be well-off, well fed and healthy in body and mind. (In other words, no-one can accuse you of some secret previous sin.)”

The point is that Jesus resists any such a view. The world is stranger, darker and more wonderfully mysterious than that. And God’s justice is much more personal and liberating as this story shows. It is also a reminder that all our reading, spirituality, and theological reflection is conditioned by our social and economic status. Hence the need for daily renewal, for which the Lenten season is a reminder.

So much more needs to be discussed but keep that in mind as we read this story begins with Jesus leaving the Temple as the celebration of Tabernacles continues encountering a blind man begging. The disciples mouth a common idea that someone must have sinned, either the man or his parents, as God could not be credited with evil that happens to people (1–5). As we have seen what a comfortable doctrine of justice that is for well-fed, well-off, and people healthy in body and mind. Jesus rejects this slot machine, put a dollar in and get a reward, type of theology. He does not look to the past to find some answer but to the future. He does not answer the question but puts it in another key. The chaos, mess and suffering of human life is the raw material out of which God is making a new creation (John 1.4–5). New creation always causes trouble and consternation. It threatens everyone. When lives are transformed it is like light being shone on the darkest recesses of human life but it also opens up new vistas and unforeseen possibilities.

Jesus addresses the need of the man using traditional practices and sends the man to the pool of Siloam. The man receives his sight; the Sent One sends and the man obeys. New creation begins (6–7). This is the sum total of the healing. The rest that follows is the chaos and consternation that it causes for all involved. New life turns everything on its head.

The man goes home and disturbs the status quo (8–12). The healing does not lead to praise and worship but to suspicion and confusion. The man witnesses to Jesus but does not know where he is.

The neighbours and acquaintances take him to the Pharisees as the sign had been performed on the Sabbath (13–17). Once again Jesus causes division, this time among the Pharisees. Some want to judge Jesus by obedience to Torah and some by the quality of the sign. The man's response is that Jesus is a prophet and not a sinner.

The Pharisees become angry threatening and the man's parents once called are fearful and anxious (18–23). The parents knew the Pharisaic ruling about being cast out of the synagogue and are too afraid to risk a direct answer. The Pharisees are moving further from the truth that Jesus reveals light. In attempting to prove that the light of world does not give sight they are proven wrong.

The Pharisees mock the man and his challenge to them about Jesus (24–34) and they throw him out. They subject the man to abuse; they ridicule him as a man born in sin (blind) and vigorously attack his testimony reviling everything about him. He is more than a match for their rhetoric; "You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes." But the decision against Jesus is made against all logic.

Jesus searches out the man and puts the fundamental question to him (35–38). In John the Son of Man is the one who reveals God in the human story (1.51; 3.13–14; 5.27 etc.). The man opens his heart to Jesus, believing and worshipping. He has traversed the journey from blindness to sight.

The Pharisees are now the blind ones (39–41 and read to 10–21). They refuse the evidence of the blind man who can see and walk further into darkness and blindness. They refuse the evidence and the evidence judges them.

It is worthwhile reflecting on the fact that this passage (along with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well and our next Gospel reading John 11, the raising of Lazarus) was used as part of training early for baptism and the meaning of discipleship. From the story they took the clues that discipleship began in baptism and reaches its climax in the confession of Jesus as the Son of man. It tells the story of the cost and struggle of discipleship. Its joy is that in believing in Jesus they have found life in his name (John 20.31, the purpose of it all.)

*Questions:* Read this story very carefully. Take your time. There are many layers, strong irony and also paradox.

What does the journey of the blind man tell you about coming to believe in Jesus? Look at the reactions of the neighbours' friends and family. What does this tell you about the journey to worship the Son of Man?

Why the opposition? What has Jesus said or done that gives his opponents so much grief? How does that reveal some of the costs of discipleship?

Meditate on the journey into unbelief by Jesus' opponents. Where do you fit in this story?

“PILGRIMAGE: FROM SPIRIT TO RESURRECTION.” FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT,  
YEAR A

*Ezekiel 37.1–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6–11; John 11.1–45.*

**Ezekiel 37.1–14**

<sup>37</sup>The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.’

<sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

<sup>12</sup>Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’

This has to be one of the best known of Old Testament texts among Christians and Jews. We know it through a popular African American spiritual (‘Dem bones, dem dry bones’) as well as hearing it read most years in the lectionary at either Lent, Easter or Pentecost. Jewish people read it every year at the sabbath of Passover week in conjunction with Exodus 33.12–34.26, the renewal of the covenant.

We best start from the beginning; the exile in Babylonia. The Judeans are in exile in Babylonia (596–539 BC) and the prophet Ezekiel is among the deportees in 596. He was taken to Nippur, a city south east of Babylon and lives with the exiles. He prophesies from 596–593 and those form the first 32 chapters of his book. Ezekiel receives the news that Jerusalem has finally and utterly fallen in about early 585 BCE. It sets him free to turn from judgment and explanation to restoration and renewal. Chapter 37 fits into that pattern.

The book of Ezekiel addresses a variety of questions arising out of the experience of exile. Why is Israel in exile? Is God unjust? Why could not God protect the land of promise? Is God able to do anything in this situation? Such questions lead to a profound loss of hope: “our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” 37.11. What hope do they have having lost everything they hold dear; land, temple, and the Davidic covenant (Psalm 89)? They lament that they are as good as dead!

Jerusalem’s destruction caused many Judeans to question both the Lord’s power and the feasibility of the Lord’s religion. Why continue to worship a deity who, at the crucial hour was either unwilling or unable to protect his chosen people, the Davidic dynasty and the Temple? Ezekiel is not immune from suffering and grief and suffers these questions with his people. Read Psalm 137 for an expression unmitigated grief, loss, trauma and desire for vengeance.

But Ezekiel believes that God’s deepest desire is to dwell among the people forever 37.26–27. My dwelling place shall be with them. God’s goal, according to Ezekiel is to reconstitute a people whose character corresponds to the holiness of the Lord, and whose identity declares the Lord’s righteousness and justice among the nations.

This moving, evocative passage has two parts, a vision (1–10) and a prophecy of salvation (11–14).

Ezekiel’s experience is a visionary one as indicated by the use of the ‘hand of the Lord’ and the ‘spirit of the Lord’ (1) both depositing the prophet in a valley or field somewhere in Mesopotamia. YHWH leads Ezekiel through the valley full of dry and desiccated bones. The valley of the dry bones is a battlefield where the bodies have been left to rot unburied; left the ravages of scavengers, eagles, vultures, dogs. Ezekiel is struck by the number and dryness of the bones. So, YHWH puts a rhetorical question to Ezekiel (3a Mortal, can these bones live?) and the expected answer should be a resounding NO. Instead, Ezekiel answers with a YES; it may not have been a resounding yes but Ezekiel always believed that nothing lies beyond YHWH’s power or control.

YHWH commands Ezekiel to do what prophets do; prophesy; but to the bones (4–10)! How can dry bones hear the Word of the YHWH? They hear the word of their renewal, their reconstitution in the reverse order to which they decayed; and they hear that God will put spirit in them. Note in this passage the play on the word ‘spirit’ meaning God’s spirit, human life and wind. Don’t be confused. Ezekiel is indicating simply that humans only live because of God’s spirit and human spirit or life depends on the wind of God. All life flows from God’s spirit.

Ezekiel hears the bones coming together and it is almost like an earthquake; very dramatic. But they have no life and the breath of God must come to them from YHWH only then can they live and be a vast number.

What they receive is God's vision of the state of things. In God's vision these dry bones can live because God will restore them to full humanity with a body and enlivened with the Spirit of God. The word of God through the prophet is the means God's vision comes to be.

The word of restoration and salvation (11–14) is a response to the people's utter despair in exile (11 and see 33.10). Their hope has perished (lost) and they are dead and buried (cut off from all life and hope). But YHWH is not limited by limited human vision and promises a return to Israel and the formation of a spirit-enlivened community. Even death is no barrier to a God who raises the dead. Every generation needs to learn to look at its situation through the eyes of God who raises the dead. Every generation needs to learn that these dry bones can live and that the lowest point is the best point to start the lesson.

We have no source within ourselves to create a new future. God's future must come to us.

*Questions:* Where does your hope lie? Are we a Spirit-enlivened community? Why is the lowest point the best point to start afresh with God's Spirit?

God does not answer the big questions with a theoretical discussion on the human condition or suffering or justice. He offers himself and his Spirit to renew their world. What do you make of that?

### **Psalm 130**

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.  
It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

This psalm is the eleventh of the Songs of Ascents probably sung by the pilgrims on their journey to and in Jerusalem. It is also one of the penitential Psalms the church has used in worship since the fifth century CE (Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; and 143). The reason is the psalm penetrates right to the heart of Scripture: the human predicament and its dependence on divine grace.

The word is a metaphor, an abbreviation of the phrase ‘the depths of the sea’, that brings images to mind of chaotic forces that bring devastation, destruction and death to helpless human beings (1–2). It speaks of drowning in distress, being sucked down by the bottomless waters of trouble (See Psalm 69.1–2). To be in the depths is to be where death prevails instead of life, where all I can cry is “I am lost.”

The psalmist is recalling the Exodus in which the people cried out (Exodus 3.7–9; Isaiah 51.10). As with the ancestors the poet wants freedom and liberation from the chaos of human destructiveness and death and the only recourse is for the psalmist to cry to YHWH and throw himself on God’s mercy.

The second stanza describes what is drowning the psalmist. The writer speaks of iniquities, a common word to designate human alienation from God; the constant human desire to be free from the God who loves us (remember where we started this pilgrimage in our first study). The only hope left is mercy and forgiveness (3–4). Verse 3 makes it clear that the ‘depths’ has to do with the writer’s own sinfulness and are not someone else’s doing (as in Psalm 129). Even in that situation the psalmist will dare to call on God for help, not out of any sense of pride or privilege but out of humility and helplessness. The chaotic forces unleashed by the psalmist’s sin have driven his life to destruction, devastation and death. The poet believes that God does not keep a strict tally of sins (mark iniquities) because the Exodus story tells him that God will be gracious, God will forgive and God will renew the covenant relationship and his covenant love will never cease (Exodus 32–34; especially 34.6–7; also Nehemiah 9.17). This is God’s essential character and it is why YHWH is revered.

As the only hope is God’s word speaking of forgiveness and hope the poet waits, and waits and waits until, like the sun, it finally breaks forth in glory and light dispelling the darkness (5–6). He waits for God’s time of restoration and renewal in his life. Waiting is not about thinking that God needs time to make up God’s mind but waiting with anticipation to see what new thing God will work out of the renewal of forgiveness. It is trust that finds strength and courage now in the certainty of what is yet to be. Waiting is a way of being and trusting, drawing its strength from God’s future which the Gospel reading below will explore.

The psalmist has written the poem in the first person so far but now he calls on the whole of Israel to pay attention. Out of that experience the psalmist encourages the rest of Israel to find hope in God and seek God's offer of freedom from the chaos of sin (7–8). The psalmist will not let the good news of hope and mercy be confined to private experience but must see it played out in the national arena too. God's future of renewal and hope is for all. As Christians the Gospel will expand that to include the whole creation in that hope that waits for the future of the Risen One, the Crucified One.

This psalm has influenced the church for 2,000 years as one of the penitential psalms and helped shape lives like that of Martin Luther and John Wesley. Its message that nowhere and no-one is beyond the loving, forgiving redeeming presence of God creates a powerful assurance for those who take its message seriously.

*Questions:* Do you live trusting that God is moved, responsive to and affected by human cries from the depths? Meditate on the psalmist's trust that God's sovereignty is not an exercise of force but the power of committed, faithful love. How does that speak to your life?

Waiting is part of the Christian life. What do you think waiting means? How do you respond to waiting? How can it help in our spiritual journey?

### **Romans 8.6–11**

<sup>6</sup>To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup>For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup>and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

<sup>9</sup>But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

This tiny portion is an extract from 8.1–11, which is itself the very heart of the argument of Romans 5–8. Even this snippet should begin at verse 5.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

Setting the tone, verses 5–6 argue that those who are according to the flesh (NRSV has 'live according to the flesh' but that is not what Paul says) have a certain way of thinking and desiring' and those who walk according to the Spirit have an entirely different way of thinking and desiring. The word translated 'mind', means what one concentrates on, what one is devoted to, one's outlook and aspirations; in other words what a person desires that that it is their prime thought. One way of thinking and

desiring leads to death and the other way leads to life and peace. Paul emphasises what he calls the mind as the initial, and transformative, point of renewal (Romans 12.1–2 different word, same idea). The mind for Paul is the inner workings of thinking, desiring and imagination that create the stories that we live by. It is not the limited vision of rationality that we have inherited.

The flesh will create one sort and the Spirit another. Flesh for Paul does not mean body but human life that takes no account of God. It is human life that can find no place for God in its aspirations, thinking, desires or imagination. Logically, because it will not align itself with God's will (law), refuses the claim of God on its life and imagination (does not submit) it is hostile to God and cannot please God. Human life that takes no account of God ends in death. In contrast the human life absorbed by the Spirit means life and peace (7–8).

Paul then addresses his readers as being in the Spirit and on that basis they are assured of resurrection (9–11). To read these verses with some clarity we need to note that Paul switches bewilderingly between describing Christians as being in the Spirit and the Spirit being in them (see the same kind of switches in Ezekiel 37) and the terms he uses to denote the indwelling Spirit move between 'the Spirit', 'the Spirit of God', 'the Spirit of Christ' or simply 'Christ'. Remember, Paul is thinking this out for the first time in Christianity. No one has carved out this territory before him, so it is exciting to read this as though we are looking over Paul's shoulder for the first time and wondering where he will go next.

Verse 9 states the case clearly. The Christian is someone in whom the Spirit of God lives and who is one of Messiah's people in possession of Messiah's Spirit or, better still, whom the Spirit possesses. Without that Spirit they have no place in Messiah's people. The Christian's body is still subject to death and decay under the regime of sin but because of Messiah's saving death and resurrection (justification or righteousness; 5.21) the Spirit gives new life that survives the other side of death in resurrection. The Spirit in the Christian is the same who raised Messiah from the dead giving him a resurrection body and that is the Christian's certainty- a body enlivened by the Spirit suitable for resurrection life.

*Questions:* Where is your mind concentrated? What are your aspirations? Do you really believe what verse 10 says? What effect does that have on the way you live? You are what you love. What do you make of that?

### **John 11.1–45**

<sup>1</sup>Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup>Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup>So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' <sup>4</sup>But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the

Son of God may be glorified through it.’<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,<sup>6</sup> after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

<sup>7</sup>Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’<sup>8</sup> The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’<sup>9</sup> Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.<sup>10</sup> But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’<sup>11</sup> After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’<sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’<sup>13</sup> Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.<sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.<sup>15</sup> For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’<sup>16</sup> Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

<sup>17</sup>When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.<sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,<sup>19</sup> and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.<sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.<sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’<sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’<sup>27</sup> She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.’

<sup>28</sup>When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’<sup>29</sup> And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.<sup>34</sup> He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’<sup>35</sup> Jesus began to weep.<sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’<sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And

Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' <sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' <sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

<sup>45</sup>Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Delay, dialogue, debate, despair and disappointment weave their way through this story of the raising of Lazarus. Reading the story we sense that this is the turning point in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Three new characters appear (1–6); Lazarus who is ill, Mary and Martha. Jesus is away from Jerusalem and across the Jordan where John had once baptised. The sisters contact him and Jesus decides to stay two days longer not going to his loved ones when they need him. He will show his love for the family in a way that will glorify God and contribute to the glorification of the Son of Man.

Jesus then decides to return to Judaea (7–16) and the disciples protest because of the hostility and Jesus responds to their fears with reminders of his teaching at Tabernacles (7.1–10.21) about walking in light and not the dark. The disciples must walk in the light and with the light and not be like the Pharisees who walk in the dark. As always the conflict with his enemies flows through the story disturbing its serenity and hope.

Still, Lazarus is on his mind and once again the disciples interpret Jesus' words literally and miss the point. Jesus must be blunt and plain. Thomas agrees to go to Jerusalem with him, but with a sense of despair. Jesus will not skulk about in the dark but will do the work of God openly.

By the time Jesus arrives Lazarus is well dead and decaying (17–27). Martha is energetic, a firm believer in her own grasp on things and Jesus must wrest the narrative from her. She has made up her mind about Jesus and the nature of resurrection even though she confesses (27) that confession is like those of Nicodemus', the Samaritan woman, Nathaniel; traditional Jewish messianic expectations. They do not penetrate to the heart of Jesus true work and identity. The key verses are 25–27 as they are most far-reaching promise in this Gospel of what the relationship with Jesus offers those who embrace it.

The promise of the resurrection as stated here is not embedded in some future event. It can never be assimilated to reincarnation. Jesus announces that the resurrection life is available in him now. Jesus shares in God's life-giving mission as its source, not as an ancillary. As the resurrection and the life Jesus defeats the power of death in the future and the present.

Mary hears Jesus' voice through Martha and goes to him, and her compatriots accompany her and continue the expected cultural grieving practices. All focus on the dead Lazarus rather than on the light of the world and Jesus is deeply disturbed (33). Even Mary cannot see. Jesus' tears (a different word) reflect not his sorrow at the loss of Lazarus (why would they?) but his deep sorrow that no-one believes his revelation of the light: Even his nearest and dearest stumble in the dark.

Jesus raises Lazarus from death (38–44). Jesus deep sorrow is expressed in 38–42. He must express his relationship with the Father in a public way to make the light as clear as possible; he is the sent one, whose word has the power over death, who reveals the glory of God and is glorified by God. This breaks all the bounds of traditional categories of belief.

The reading finishes on a welcome note of trust by some Pharisees but we need to read on (46–53) to know that a turning point has been reached, and a policy to destroy Jesus for political and social reasons now comes into play.

Death is named as the greatest threat to the relationship with God and in its place are no idle words of a fatuous hope but the irrevocable promise of life with God. Death is denied power over our life with God.

*Questions:* The questions throughout this story are the same as those in Ezekiel, 'Can God raise the dead?' Can these dead bones live? Can they? Is God the God of life or is God defeated by death? Can the life of God erupt into the everyday life of human beings? How have you experienced that?

“PILGRIMAGE: FROM PAIN TO LIBERTY FOR ALL.” SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT,  
PALM SUNDAY, YEAR A

*Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Matthew 27.11–54.*

**Isaiah 50.4–9**

<sup>4</sup>The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.

<sup>5</sup>The Lord God has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not turn backwards.

<sup>6</sup>I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.

<sup>7</sup>The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

<sup>8</sup>he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.

<sup>9</sup>It is the Lord God who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?  
All of them will wear out like a garment;  
the moth will eat them up.

We have noted briefly that Ezekiel lived in Babylonia during the early phases of the exile of Judeans, God’s covenant people. They are there because over a long period of time they drifted away from God and God’s vocation for them; to serve God’s purposes to bless the nations and bring justice and mercy. They “divorced” God, left the partnership, considering it of little worth. Isaiah, who also lived in exile but later than Ezekiel, makes that case in his writings.

He also makes another case in Isaiah 49.14–16:

<sup>14</sup>But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.’

<sup>15</sup>Can a woman forget her nursing-child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

<sup>16</sup>See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;  
your walls are continually before me.

The people may have left the relationship pursuing their own desires but God's desire has always been for them. He has a tattoo of them on his hands! YHWH declares his will and power to save his people from their iniquities and rebellion.

One way in which the Lord pursues his goal is through a figure called the 'servant' who is spoken of in four poems, the best known of which is Isaiah 52.12–53.12

Who the writer thought the Servant was we do not know precisely. Some have thought it was a name for collective Israel but the context here, highlighting the difference between the servant and a rebellious Israel, indicates an individual who will be the agent of redemption and do so through the prophetic vocation. Christians have found, in these passages, a way of understanding Jesus' role as a prophet and how that led to such suffering and yet redemption. It was not meaningless but full of hope.

One thing is certain the Servant will be God's prophet, who listens to the word of God, learns it, understands it and then uses it to sustain the weary; God's word comes to cheer and save (4–5). The Servant's intimate relation with YHWH expresses itself in the redemptive word. Unlike Israel the Servant is obedient to the word of YHWH and refuses to turn away from his difficult task of bringing a redemptive word to rebellious Israel.

However, the prophetic word of liberation is not well received and the Servant suffers humiliation and abuse (6). True prophets in Israel stood at the periphery of power and influence and confronted rebellion with the redemptive word that required change. They were in contest with the world and suffered.

The powers may seek to humiliate the Servant but it is God who vindicates; YHWH alone is his confidence and assurance, his vindicator. That is what gives him strength to continue to give the redeeming word to the weary. In the circumstances his view is counter-intuitive; all the power is against him and he knows that.

But so confident is he that he is prepared to stand in YHWH's court against his accusers and despisers so they may present their case and accuse him of wickedness and rebellion. He knows that the One who will prove him innocent and who justifies him is near at hand (8–9). His accusers are as insubstantial as worn-out clothes, full of moth holes. They will rot away, their lives getting thinner and thinner punctuated with holes where there is nothing at all.

While the poem describes the servant's suffering and affliction, it is deeply infused with confidence that flows from an intimate and personal relationship with God. The poem is not a complaint but a song of confidence in God's call, God's help and God's vindication. The servant is God's answer to the problem of raw evil and the uneven nature of affliction and punishment. The servant lives in the trenches with the weary and listens for the word of God to them. The message from God provokes those who do not wish to hear it. The suffering of the servant is the suffering of innocence and God will vindicate even though how that will happen is left confidently to God.

Jesus, like this writer, will confidently declare the kingdom, bear the insults and wait for vindication.

*Questions:* Do you have confidence that God has both the will and power to deliver you from your sin and rebellion? Is listening carefully to God's word part of your spiritual life? Do you let God 'waken your ear' morning by morning? What might be the remedy for a life that is getting thinner and full of holes?

The church sometimes like to proclaim itself prophetic and often that means using a moral megaphone pointed in the direction of some government official or politician. Do you think that is what Isaiah means? Where do think the redemptive word of the cross might fit?

**Psalm 31.9–18 (APBA) 31.9–16 (NRSV, NIV)**

<sup>9</sup>Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;  
my eye wastes away from grief,  
my soul and body also.

<sup>10</sup>For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my misery,  
and my bones waste away.

<sup>11</sup>I am the scorn of all my adversaries,  
a horror to my neighbours,  
an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
those who see me in the street flee from me.

<sup>12</sup>I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;  
I have become like a broken vessel.

<sup>13</sup>For I hear the whispering of many—  
terror all around!—  
as they scheme together against me,  
as they plot to take my life.

<sup>14</sup>But I trust in you, O Lord;  
I say, 'You are my God.'

<sup>15</sup>My times are in your hand;  
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

<sup>16</sup>Let your face shine upon your servant;  
save me in your steadfast love.

This is a psalm about trusting God in all things especially in living, in trouble and death. For Christians the psalm has assumed a special place in devotion and the liturgy when in his final prayer Jesus used verse 5 and prayed, “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Psalm 31 has become a commentary on the passion of Jesus. The portion of the psalm we read today reflects two sides to this prayer for help.

The first five verses (9–13 NRSV, NIV) tell of the psalmist’s troubled, chaotic life. The language seems to suggest simultaneously, grief, sickness, depression and persecution, or at least alienation from his or her contemporaries. The image of the broken vessel (12 NRSV) is especially poignant. It seems that because of his trust in God the psalmist is experiencing the pain and alienation that is supposed to be reserved for the wicked. This passage is very close to Jeremiah’s suffering because of his prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 20). Like Jeremiah, Jesus’ faithfulness to the proclamation of the reign of the God culminated in the cross.

The psalmist, Jeremiah and Jesus, however, all turn over their case to God and trust becomes the dominant motif of their lives. Trust is quite realistic about pain and alienation but they do not overcome the trust. God’s steadfast love remains the bedrock for living (14–16 NRSV, NIV) as does God’s beautiful face alive with pleasure shining on those who trust YHWH despite the circumstances.

On this basis the psalm has been called a model of prayer that is confident of being heard. That confidence suffuses the psalm from start to finish. But, and it is a big but, the confidence that informs this prayer is NOT religious or spiritual virtue of the one who prays. It is a possibility based on the character of the one to whom the prayer is made. God is always true to himself (verse 5) and not subject to whimsical changes of mind or direction. The Lord is rock, fortress, refuge because the Lord is always faithful to his promise to be faithful to those who trust him.

In this part of the psalm the greatest statement of that trust is, “My times are in your hand.” My whole life and destiny is firmly held in the hand of the unshakeable Lord. This sentence belongs to living and dying.

*Questions:* Do you trust God in adverse circumstances? What does confidence mean for you?

Meditate on the picture of God’s beautiful face alive with pleasure shining on the one who trusts.

### **Philippians 2.5–11**

<sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup>he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This famous passage has rightly shaped Christian theology, ethics and spirituality from the time it was written. Paul may be using a hymn here but that is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, it is an exceptionally powerful and poetic expression of the “mind of Christ” (2.4–5).

The background to this passage begins in 1.27–2.4. Paul writes from prison, possibly in Rome, a beautiful friendly letter to his much-loved friends in Philippi a Roman colony in Macedonia which he visited in about 50 CE about ten years before this letter and founded a lively church, the first in Europe.

He sees that the congregation is in double jeopardy from (1) posturing among themselves and (2) opposition from outside. In this passage the internal problem is the agenda. They can't face the opposition from outside if they can't live harmoniously with each other. That is his main point.

Because they are divided in this way they are intimidated by the opposition and ridicule from outside their ranks. The divisions are very human; ordinary people getting upset that others were getting more attention; others being overbearing with other members. Evil does not need anything big. The smallest slight will do; taking offence at the tiniest slight will do.

So, Paul encourages them to put the differences, slights, and personal difficulties in perspective and proportion. He wants them to share a unity of mind with each other, not uniformity of mind but a unity of mind in the Spirit and in the gospel shaped by Christ's example.

The enemies of such a unity are selfish ambition and conceit; advancing ourselves out of our own pride and at the expense of others.

What Paul wants is humility; looking to the other, recognizing their claim on us; looking to the interests of the other. It is the active purposeful pursuit of the good and rights of each other.

Paul urges the Philippian church to share and express in their everyday living the mind of Christ, which Jesus demonstrated in his life and death and now works among them in the Spirit.

As God, he emptied himself (2.6–7). This is one of the earliest passages to speak of Jesus' pre-existence. There is an implied comparison with Adam who grasped or exploited his privileged position.

Jesus was in the form of God. This does not mean that he looked like God. It means he had all the characteristics of God. Paul concentrates on character not a theory of divinity. Jesus shares and expresses God's essential character. Paul is not saying that Jesus Messiah is like God but really not. He is the display of God's essential character. And God's essential character was to ignore his own honour, pride, ambition, status and put our honour first; our interests first. To do that required that he take the form of a servant/slave.

Jesus does not seize the advantages of power and all that it brings. Jesus rejects the ordinary view of royal power which grasps power for one's personal advantage and status. He does not regard power and status as a treasure trove which he can plunder to his own advantage especially to the disadvantage of others.

Jesus takes the form of slave. In doing this he renders himself powerless, made himself as nothing. Paul talks of emptying and some have thought that this means that Jesus somehow did the impossible and dropped his real character. Paul is not talking in this passage about divinity but humility and he sticks to his point. A slave has no power, no status; a slave is invisible and utterly dispensable.

All that, Jesus has renounced in his becoming a slave, meaning a real human being subject to the hatred, violence, pride and selfish ambition of others. Jesus Messiah has an agreed task that comes from the heart of the character of God: to use servanthood for the setting of others free.

This man humbles himself, freely choosing the death on the cross. Recognisably a human being, Jesus obediently seeks the destruction of death for us. Of his freedom as God he chooses the path of destroying death and his method is a cross; a shameful display of human violence and hatred, and a rejecting God's humility, God's love of their welfare, their interests.

Jesus' humiliation is one of a piece with his vindication. The resurrection is implied here and it leads to Jesus receiving the acknowledgement of his status as the one who rules beyond any Caesar. The universality of Jesus' vindication, its implications for the whole world, Paul clearly explains. This is no tribal God but the ruler of heaven and earth. But the same ruler joins distressed and alienated humans in the trenches and puts their needs before his rights.

God vindicates Jesus Messiah (9–11). God exalts Jesus Messiah. God exalts Jesus back into the highest possible fame and honour; that is back to where he was.

The name of Jesus is LORD. Caesar, celebrity, the wealthy whoever has a name has no name now except under the name of Jesus. Jesus determines what real status is; it the status of the servant. It is the status of one who does the will of another.

Homage and the witness of all peoples, all beings in the cosmos to the supremacy of the servant/slave Jesus Messiah is the final goal of the universe. Then God's glorious character will be really known; the character that has always looked to our interests at the expense of God's own honour. Then we will truly understand the cross and what it means.

*Questions:* How can we better live the life of the cross? How can we better join our mind to the mind of Christ? Do we despise humility? Do we desire humility above all else? Why? What might be some of the counterfeits of humility?

#### **Matthew 27.11–54**

##### **Pilate Questions Jesus**

<sup>11</sup>Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' <sup>12</sup>But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. <sup>13</sup>Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' <sup>14</sup>But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

##### **Barabbas or Jesus?**

<sup>15</sup>Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup>At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' <sup>18</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. <sup>19</sup>While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' <sup>20</sup>Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. <sup>21</sup>The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' <sup>22</sup>Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' <sup>23</sup>Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

##### **Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified**

<sup>24</sup>So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' <sup>25</sup>Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' <sup>26</sup>So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

##### **The Soldiers Mock Jesus**

<sup>27</sup>Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. <sup>28</sup>They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup>and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' <sup>30</sup>They spat on him, and took the reed and

struck him on the head. <sup>31</sup>After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

### **The Crucifixion of Jesus**

<sup>32</sup>As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. <sup>33</sup>And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), <sup>34</sup>they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. <sup>35</sup>And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; <sup>36</sup>then they sat down there and kept watch over him. <sup>37</sup>Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’

<sup>38</sup>Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup>Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup>and saying, ‘You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ <sup>41</sup>In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, <sup>42</sup>‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.’ <sup>43</sup>‘He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son.” ’ <sup>44</sup>The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

### **The Death of Jesus**

<sup>45</sup>From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>46</sup>And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ <sup>47</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘This man is calling for Elijah.’ <sup>48</sup>At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. <sup>49</sup>But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.’ <sup>50</sup>Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. <sup>51</sup>At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. <sup>52</sup>The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. <sup>53</sup>After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. <sup>54</sup>Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’

Note: The Gospel reading for today is Matthew 26–27 and far too long to comment on. So I have chosen a small section of the reading as example and even that is too long on which to offer an extended commentary.

We now come to the point in the Gospel narrative (also in Mark, Luke and John) when all the critical questions that the gospel story reveals in interactions with friend and foe, parables, miracles, exorcisms and teaching now come into sharp focus.

What is going on in regard to God and the world?

Is Jesus’ work destroyed?

If Jesus' vocation has been to announce and display that God's kingdom has now come as it is in heaven what does this do to his hopes? Where does it fit?

This part of the story begins with the trial before Pilate who collaborates with the Jewish elders and is ultimately responsible for the crucifixion (11–26). The Jerusalem elite has handed Jesus over to the Roman governor. Only Rome can execute and this self-interested alliance will bias 'justice' towards the elite against the low status provincial. He has no chance.

The confrontation is one of two empires. In Matthew 2.6 Jesus is identified as a 'ruler' coming out of Bethlehem, exactly the same designation as that given to Pilate in this passage. They face each other as governors and rulers but of vastly different kingdoms. Jesus' silence here is not intimidated submission but the quiet confidence that God's liberation, promised in the Passover and the Last Supper, will now come to its mysterious conclusion. The kingdom will come.

The Barabbas passage displays Pilate testing out Jesus' popularity with the elites' rent-a-crowd. He has none. The only voice to speak up against it all is that of a woman, a Gentile and part of the elite. She is troubled by the revelation in her dreams that Jesus is righteous (not 'innocent'), that is, God is with him. The righteous will die and that is the key difference between the two empires. God reveals Godself in ways that the elites despise. Mrs Pilate is an important witness to the kingdom coming.

In this passage we must be extremely careful especially in the light of verse 25 which has been used throughout Christian history as an excuse for violent anti-Semitism on the basis of inherited Jewish guilt for deicide; a view rejected by most Christians today. A weak and unjust Rome is the real villain here. Already in the Lord Supper Jesus has spoken of his death as forgiveness. That is open to all.

The next section is the crucifixion of Jesus (27–44) in three scenes: The mockery of Jesus as King of the Jews (27–32), the crucifixion (33–37) and the derision of Jesus (38–44). This passage is full of irony centred on the notion of king. The clown king is saluted as king and yet he really is King. This king will exercise cosmic judgment and rule (25.31–46; 28.18–20). But what a different rule that will be.

The crucified revolutionary does bring change. The scriptures are fulfilled especially Psalms 22 and 69. The passers-by refer to the destruction of the Temple deeply ironic to Matthew's readers who have watched the Romans dismantle the Temple in 70CE.

Finally, Jesus dies, a story again told in three scenes (45–56); death on the cross (45–50), the portents (51–54) and the witness of the women (55–56). Once again, the scriptures form the framework. In the crucifixion Psalm 22 and 69 are the basis as is Amos 8.9. For the portents Zechariah 14.4–5 form the interpretative framework. One day, through Jesus' death, Israel will be restored. Jesus' death takes place in accord with the scriptures; a clear recognition of Jesus' death at the hands of the rebellious

and violent would overcome rebellion and violence. Death would be overcome and Jesus' word vindicated according to the scriptures.

In the end the soldiers have the last word: "Truly this man was God's Son!" It is not the emperor who rules, nor the elites but God crucified.

The story of Jesus' death is told in stark simplicity. Everything is understated. There is no heavy overlay of theological reflection and abstraction. Instead, the reader is invited to make whatever he or she will of this event in the light of the whole story that began with a birth that promised peace but that sparked violence and now ends in violence. The King, however, will not take up the cudgels of violence. He will work to set his enemies, mockers and tormentors free from their lust for power and position (20.28). Matthew gives us no theory about how that might happen but invites us to find God present in this terrible event actively working to set humans beings free just as the ancient scriptures promise. This is an earth-shaking event but only a few locally recruited soldiers intuitively grasp that great things are happening. And, of course, the women. They know.

In some modern understandings the crucifixion is interpreted as an angry father lashing out at an innocent and defenceless son. That interpretation has its basis in the real experience of the abuse of power in human life which is destructive and not redemptive. For his whole life Jesus' story is one of redefining power so that people are set free in love. That is the very nature of the Father which the Son shares and, in this story, displays its workings.

Two key elements weave their way in this story. The great powers that govern human life and keep humans chained and deceived, represented in Pilate and the elites with their hidden spiritual masters (remember the temptation story in Matthew 4.1–11 where we started this journey?), have their power broken.

Forgiveness now flows, and fellowship and reconciliation replace estrangement. That is the key to the nature of forgiveness. This is a profound subject that has sometimes been trivialised into meaningless "it doesn't matter". I cannot explore this vital subject in the way I would wish but I will make a couple of comments and trust that they are helpful. (My thoughts come from many sources but the works of Vincent Brummer are important)

Estrangement can only be overcome by forgiveness. Loving fellowship is a relationship in which two persons identify with each other by each making the others' real interests his or her own. I love you as myself. I love God with my whole person. When I stop such identifying with the other and serve my own interests I create estrangement. What will bring that relationship back together? The person I have broken with can condone my action, punish it or seek some satisfaction for it. Each has its place but none will restore fellowship.

What will restore loving fellowship is if the person wronged accepts the wrongdoing to him, absorb it in his own suffering the consequences of the wrong that caused it. The price of forgiveness is the suffering of the one sinned against.

That is God's role here in these stories. God does not demand satisfaction or punishment. Forgiveness is totally a gift, but it refuses to condone the rebellion that created the break.

All I can do is repent. By repent I mean I renounce the 'I' who trashed fellowship with you by not identifying with your interests. My life is given over to identifying with you in seeking your interests as my own. My repentance cannot buy fellowship or satisfy injustice. I am dependent on the other's freedom and favour for restoring and maintaining the fellowship between us.

In the Eucharist Jesus says, "...this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

*Questions:* Spend time this week taking any aspect of the story of Jesus' death and let it speak to you? What changes to your life might you make? How much do you value God's loving fellowship with you? How can we identify with God's interests here and now?