
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING
WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

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“BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS”, FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Deuteronomy 26.1–11; Psalm 91.1–2, 9–16; Romans 10.4–13; Luke 4.1–15

Deuteronomy 26.1–11

²⁶When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, ‘Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.’ ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: ‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.’ You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Safe at last 1–4

Thankfulness, celebration and confession are the key themes of this closing chapter of the main part of Deuteronomy (12–26). Those chapters anticipate the future life of the people as an agricultural community. This beautiful little cameo outlines what the people must do within the first year of their possession of the land (and is the point of departure for many a harvest festival in the past). Worship is infused with thanksgiving for the land and the fruitfulness of the land in the production of food. Land and food are blessings from God. They come by grace and are themselves the substance of grace.

By whose hand? 5–10a

But thanksgiving is not offered to any god. This God is the God of the ancestors, who followed their God’s directions in faith.

So profession follows thanksgiving (5–10a). Profession gives meaning to thanksgiving. The ancestors’ faith and suffering, and God’s reversing of their situation are the content of profession. This ancient ‘creed’ is not propositional or doctrinal in character but is theology in story.

The story is about Jacob who is called a wandering Aramean (Syrian). The wanderer is a metaphor for the landless, homeless person who is vulnerable, even destitute without food security and protection from climate and all predators. The profession emphasises the weakness of the refugee in the politics of the day and God's salvation in the rescue from under the imperial power and into safety.

The story is a theology; it illustrates the being of God. God became known and accessible to Israel in God's actions. It emphasises that the worshipper has no claim on God other than God's own gracious and outgoing nature.

You once had no security, now care for the vulnerable 10b-11 (and 12-15)

The substantive grace of food and land to produce it must be shared as an act of worship. (Read 12-15 and see how the good gift was to be shared in the third year of their occupation and thereafter).

Questions: What does the 'confession' remind the worshipper about the nature and purposes of God? What is the human trusting response to such gifting?

Worship

The present experience of salvation and the care of God are related to God's past salvation in the history and cultures of long gone human beings. Worship bridges the past and the present generations and their experience of God's work and character; the experience of salvation. It also bridges the orders of creation and redemption, the material and the spiritual. Worship bridges the realm of God and the everyday world of work and home and food. Worship binds them together so that they do not separate from each other as is so common in western thought. Humans are embodied spiritual creatures, in biology and culture and always will be so. That is the source of celebration, the joyful use of God's abundance.

Questions: What part do thankfulness and celebration play in our lives? How can we bind creation and redemption in worship? What is the place of well-structured and well-planned worship in our common life?

Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

²will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'

³For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

⁴he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day,

⁶or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

⁸You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place,

¹⁰no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

¹²On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

This psalm is an eloquent expression the faith of the psalmist, another profession of faith as is Deuteronomy 26. The psalmist wants answers to a fearful question that is put elsewhere in the psalter; what do we have if land, king and temple are in ruins and we are enslaved (Psalm 89)? This psalm is traditionally used at the beginning of Lent because it is utterly God-centred. It stands as a stark reminder that Christianity is not a branch of the self-help movement and helps us avoid triviality.

The shelter 1–2

The answer is to look to God who provides a secure place (1–2): himself. Faith is not placed in a proposition but a person. Faith is relational. Having said that we have to believe that the person we put our trust in will respond in good faith; that they will offer a safe place for us to be.

Safe place, safe journey 3–13

Hence the confession of the past acts of God (3–8). The ancestors found God to be a refuge (see above). God also provides a safe journey for the pilgrim people of God (3–13). God's protection is effective everywhere at every time. Surprise attack, war, violence, disease, and demonic powers are no match for God and his angels or messengers. God responds to trust (9) with protection. The text does not imply that

the pilgrim will not face trials or suffer greatly. They most certainly will. But God's power is more than adequate.

Questions: Is God that trustworthy? See 2 Corinthians 6.4–10.

God's response to trust 14–16

God responds to the psalmist's desire for an intimate friendship with an affirmation with a compact seven-fold response of commitment (14–16). The psalm has often been misused, as seen in the temptations of Jesus. The psalm is not about magic: many Christians and Jews have worn copies of portions of this psalm to magically ward off danger. The psalm is about personal relations. Faith is not magic; it is personal and relational.

Questions: Tease out the commitments of God in 14–16. Meditate on them for a time. What would it mean for you to live like that?

“Genuine self-denial begins with the kind of radical affirmation of trust that is found in Psalm 91” (McCann). What do you think? Where might it lead?

Romans 10.4–13

⁴For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ ⁶But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).⁸But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.¹¹The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Romans 10 has to be read as a part of a whole; an extraordinary piece of reasoning called the Epistle to the Romans. It is set in the particular argument Paul makes in Romans 9–11. To our ears so many aeons later it sounds convoluted and difficult. But he was arguing with a particular view of righteousness and the law in his own day that restricted God's restoration of right relationships to an ethnic group (Jews) and the badge of covenant belonging as confined to ‘works of Torah’. Paul is engaging with views in his own days and that were taken for granted. He did not want simply to assert his own view but argue it in the way best understood by those he engaged. But he always engages them with God's renewal worked in Jesus, Israel's crucified, risen

and reigning Messiah who ties all the pieces together and opens up God's purposes for the whole world including Israel.

The main theme of the passage is the covenant renewal and redefinition brought about by Jesus for all. God has done what he had always promised he would do, especially in Deuteronomy 30: that he would, after the exile, restore Israel, enabling it to keep the law in a new way. Paul's kinsfolk did not understand this righteousness of God and that caused him great pain.

The Goal of God's purposes, Christ 4

Christ is the goal or climax of the law (4), the pinnacle of the story of Israel. Christ does not destroy the Law but brings God's purposes in Torah to reach their goal and zenith in the Messiah. The result is accessibility and availability of righteousness for all who believe.

Everything renewed in Christ 5–13

Let's break the passage into bite size pieces and begin with 5–8. The voice of Moses speaks first from Leviticus 18.5 and it restates the common idea that righteousness is found in Torah. The in contrast another voice speaks called 'the righteousness that comes from faith'. This speaks from Moses too from Deuteronomy 9.4, 30.12–14. So this little teaching device focusses the reader's mind; Moses against Moses!

The righteousness from faith states its case that righteousness is not a matter of human searching or striving. We do not need to have a heavenly vision to find Christ or take an apocalyptic journey into the abyss either. The word spoken and living is at hand as Deuteronomy shows. The word of faith about Jesus and the righteousness of faith that comes a relationship with him can be embodied and confessed.

Thus a true confession lived in a living trust in Jesus leads to salvation (9–10), God's ultimate goal (1 Corinthians 12.3). Jesus is confessed as Lord and in the Greco-Roman world the title Lord is reserved for great personages like Caesar. Unlike Caesar Jesus lives. Once again the politics of power for self-interest, violence and destruction receive their comeuppance.

In verses 11–13 the emphasis is on the impartiality and inclusiveness of God's plan of salvation. In verse 11 Paul quotes Isaiah 28.16 but to emphasise his point adds the word "all" upfront.

Every person who trusts Jesus can never be put to shame but will find honour, an amazing promise to poor people and those of little interest to the great and the mighty who composed the church. The whole world was after honour, and would wage war die for it. It is found in Christ for all without distinction.

God's impartiality is a familiar theme of Paul's (12). There is One Lord for all and this Lord is not ethnocentric.

Paul brings this tiny section of his argument to a close (13) quoting Joel 2.32 and once again reinforces God's universal plan. It is for all. It is not for a few elect who live in the Torah (or some other source of social and religious righteousness). On the contrary, anyone who seeks the righteousness of faith and confesses the name of Jesus as the only Lord raised from the dead will be saved. Paul stresses the wideness of God's mercy.

Questions: What other forms of righteousness other than the 'righteousness of faith' are we prone to fall into? How can we confess and embody the word of faith about Jesus and the righteousness of faith in the living Jesus?

Do you believe the promise of vs.11? Reflect on Jesus' life of shame and honour. Dare you live believing that promise?

The goal of Paul's argument is vs 12–13. How can that help us to define our mission?

Luke 4.1–15

⁴Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him,

'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹and

"On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

¹²Jesus answered him,

'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The temptations are traditional fare for the first Sunday in Lent. Usually we read them as offering us a model for resisting temptation. That is an appropriate response: how

to use scripture, how to discern the real issue in temptation, the key elements of temptation. But there are other ways of reading the text.

The Spirit 1–2

It tells us something about Jesus himself. We know that Jesus has been anointed with the Holy Spirit (3.21–22) at his baptism and immediately before the temptation passage Luke reminds his readers of Jesus' human lineage (3.23–38) with the aside that he was the son (as was thought) of Joseph (23). Luke is providing the legitimation for Jesus' mission in the world and among humans. He has a human lineage and a divine one.

Once again Luke points out that Jesus is both full of the Holy Spirit and is led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God's agent, but that agency is always in the power of and in concert with the Spirit (4.1). This relation of Jesus and the Spirit in the performance of God's mission needs further reflection on our part. In our church tradition in the West we have often replaced the Spirit with the institutional church. Luke however is inviting us to reflect on the way Jesus' mission and ministry is not only the proclamation of the kingdom in Jesus' words and deeds but also the leading, power and role of the Spirit. Hidden from sight the Spirit is an active partner in God's mission in Jesus. More than that, the relationship of Spirit and Jesus is the foundation to Jesus' identity.

Questions: Sometimes we make big thing of defining the church's identity by denomination or even a sect within the denomination (evangelical, Anglo-Catholic). Can this story help us here?

Another spiritual force

But there is another spiritual force at work and this force desires mightily to bring the mission of God undone. And in the wilderness this force has its moment as Jesus is separated from all that supports normal communal human life and functioning. Jesus is vulnerable and made the more so by his severe fasting. Jesus is not renowned in this Gospel for fasting (7.34) but it was not uncommon. Now the scene is set.

The first temptation homes in on Jesus' most obvious vulnerability, hunger (3–4). Make yourself a loaf of bread and feel better. After all you are the son of God. The temptation is to set aside faithful obedience in serving God. Will Jesus act in concert with the Spirit and show resolute trust in the God who provides, or will he relieve his hunger by acting out of concert with the Spirit? Jesus' answer based on Deuteronomy 8.3 acknowledges the need for bread but asserts his own commitment to work in the power of the Spirit and the provision of God.

Questions: What are our temptations not to trust God's care and provision for us?

The second temptation moves the reader from mundane to spectacular (5–8). Caesar thought he ruled all the kingdoms of the world (2.1, 3.1) but now the true lord reveals himself (see Revelation 13). The devil offers Jesus what is not his to give. He may have some control of the human order but he is no more able to control his end than any creature. The temptation for Jesus is accept a way forward that is too good to be true and promised by the father of lies! There is only one God who alone is worthy of praise and honour (Deuteronomy 6.13).

Questions: What are our temptations to believe that we are in control?

The third temptation takes place in Jerusalem so in a way the ministry begins and ends there (9–13). Because Jesus will act in concert with the Spirit he can interpret scripture so he is not fooled by the devil's interpretation of Psalm 91. The promises of Psalm 91 are given to those who live and suffer in faithful obedience, those who, like Jesus, will take up God's agenda through suffering to redeem the whole of creation. Jesus' response from Deuteronomy 6.16 makes that clear. God is not up for examination.

Satan contests the nature of the sonship of Jesus, his commitment to walk with the Spirit and to follow obediently the path laid out for him.

Questions: What are our temptations to drop our commitment to walk where the Spirit leads us?

Further reflections

In this passage Jesus identifies with Israel's past; Israel as God's son (Exodus 4.22–23), their wilderness testing of 40 years and the testing of bread (Exodus 16), testing God (Exodus 17) and their idolatry Exodus (32), and Israel's rebellion against the Spirit (Isaiah 63.10).

The temptations mirror the conflict of the reign of God with the reign of evil. The whole of Jesus' ministry is an attack on the power of evil to bind and cripple human beings. As Luke has written his Gospel the first temptation is the rejection of populism and the use of his sonship for his own benefit. The second temptation rejects gaining power and authority by compromise; the rejection of the idea that evil is the true power in the world. The third temptation is the rejection of magic and paganism. Jesus shows faith in the care of God that does not seek power over God. So the ministry begins (14–15) in the power of the Spirit. The devil bides its time but Jesus has confirmed that he will live his life in the Spirit's power and presence. Nothing can break that bond which is essential to the fulfilling of the purposes of God.

The readings have been bound together by the narrative frameworks of beginning and endings in God's purposes for his people. The ancient people of God stand on the verge of a new adventure in a new land as a new people living within the framework of God's loving and faithful covenant.

The psalmist encourages the people who return from the exile in Babylon with all its loss and disillusionment fresh in their memories to live in the same trustful way as their ancestors amidst all the troubles, suffering and ambiguity of the present times.

Paul encourages the Roman Christians to move beyond a religious understanding that encouraged ethnocentrism as a ground for having a right relationship with God and instead to embrace faith in Christ as an adventure into God's future for the whole world.

Jesus, finally ready, has his calling and commission from the Spirit in baptism to take up the road of the cross for the sake of the world tested by the power that would destroy him and the world. What a story.

Questions: Which of these stories speaks to you? Explore why that might be. What can you learn about living out faithful obedience? What are some of the forces hostile to God's purposes that you meet within and without? What is your response to them?

“TRUST ON THE WAY”, SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Genesis 15.1–12, 17–18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3.17–4.1; Luke 13.1–9

Genesis 15.1– 12, 17–18

¹⁵After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ ²But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ ³And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ ⁵He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ ⁸But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ ⁹He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

What a pivotal chapter this is for the development of the theology of faith. God had called Abram and Sarah to a pilgrimage of hope based only the promise of YHWH that called them out of their barrenness (Gen 11.30, 12.1–3). Their pilgrimage was based on no other basis than the promise of YHWH. But by chapter 15 the barrenness persists. The promise delays and has not overcome the barrenness. The evidence is all against the promise of God.

Faith in crisis

That crisis of faith is detailed in 1–6. God begins the conversation with a prophetic word, touching on Abraham’s most fundamental fear (see Psalm 27 below on fear). Abraham and Sarah had despaired of having an heir through natural generation. They have appointed an heir to serve them in their lifetime and to bury and mourn then in their death. That was their Plan B. The command not to fear is matched by God’s fundamental promise. The command ‘Do not be afraid’ disorients Abram who was fearful of his future. He thinks that call from barrenness was a false alarm. God gives a

metaphor for His character (shield) and his action towards Abraham (reward). God protects, God gives but the promise comes in its own time.

All this sounds terribly transactional and Abram protests (2–3) in that vein: he resists the promise and the giver. Faith is not pious acquiescence but a deeply argued conviction for Abraham. Whatever YHWH promises as reward or protection is worthless without an heir. That promise must find fulfilment.

Faith lived

YHWH responds with another prophetic word, reciting the promise again (4–6). There is no coercion, no persuasion only the invitation to rely on the maker of the promise. Abram may turn away but he does not: he will not rely on what he can see and touch but on the God who turns barrenness into fruitfulness, the exhausted present into a buoyant future.

Abram's faith is not in a proposition but a person; he does not believe in God he believes God. He fixes his heart on God and rests back in the arms of the promise giver, the shield. Thus his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness. Righteousness means doing justice to a relationship in which one stands. It puts the question, 'what does this relationship require of me?' Righteousness is a relational word not a transactional word (keeping of accounts). God declares Abram righteous because he has done justice to the relationship with God; he trusts the promise.

The sacramental seal, faith confirmed

That faith is sealed in the ritual of covenant, a dramatic affirmation and enactment of the promise and YHWH's unfettered commitment to it (7–18). God's ever living presence is in the covenant. It is not a 'you do' then 'I do' arrangement but God's commitment of righteousness to the relationship with Abram.

This passage is critical for reading the New Testament, especially Paul, and understanding the nature of faith Galatians 3.7ff.

Questions: Put yourself in Abram and Sarah's place. Meditate on that for a while. What are the barren areas of your life? Do you believe that God can turn barrenness into fruitfulness in your life? Explore the way faith works in your life. Compare it to this engagement of God and Abram. What do you find?

Psalm 27

Of David.

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'

Your face, LORD, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

The psalm is a song of trust by an individual. The first six verses of this psalm are a remarkable profession of faith in God and the next six are a prayer for help while the last two verses of the psalm return to the profession of faith. The sequence is important: faith does not spare the people of God from difficulties but it equips them to live with courage and hope whatever they face.

Trust in the Lord 1–6

Faith is personal; it must be 'mine' and not that of someone else. The psalmist trusts because of God's character of light and strength and it is that that casts out fear. As in the whole Bible the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. Fear shrivels humanity in all of us.

Faith is living in the presence of God. This psalm is permeated with the desire for God's light to shine on the author's life, for the beauty of his presence and for the sheer delight of seeing God's face. The psalm celebrates the life of faith as opposed to the life of fear. The life of faith is not the safe or soft way but it is the way of life without fear. The crux is the anchoring of our lives in God alone.

The psalmist is surrounded by threats (2–3) and some of them violent. His enemies are after him (see comment on the Gospel) and he is in danger. However the psalmist is sure of God's tender protection (4–6) and his spirit rises to worship the God who saves and protects.

Questions: What are your fears, things that threaten you? Will you let God shine light on them?

Troubled days 7–12

At verse 7 the psalmist turns to prayer (7–12) and these verses help us with understanding some aspects of prayer. It is embedded in grace (7–9a) and God's desire to reveal his face to his servant; that is, to come into personal relations that touch the heart. Prayer knows that God comes to us even if our closest human relations abandon us; (10) but such love is not earned, we are not worthy of it, it comes in grace and mercy (9).

Prayer finds its natural home in the teachable spirit, not the proud wilful heart. Humility is the source of knowledge of God. And all the time the enemy is causing chaos and violence and corruption (12).

Questions: What do you do in the face of rejection and abandonment? What do you do when that rejection takes the form of lies and slander?

Trust in the Lord 13–14

The psalmist returns to his profession of trust (13–14). God will display his goodness to the psalmist and the psalmist waits, a very important word in the life of prayer. Impatience, anger and fear dissolve trust and suck the oxygen out of prayer.

Questions: The psalmist makes seven requests of God to be present in his life. Can you find them? They might form the basis for your personal prayer during Lent.

What characteristics of God does the psalmist rely on in trouble? What makes this psalm a suitable response to the story of Abram and Sarai?

Philippians 3. 17–4.1

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there

that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.⁴¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Imitating Christ's humility is a central theological theme of the epistle and crucial to Paul's understanding of the Christian life as having the mind of Christ (2:1–11). The humility of looking to the interests of others as Jesus did at such cost informs Paul's understanding of the Gospel. When Paul calls on the Philippians to join in imitating him (17), it may sound conceited but the call arises out of the fact that this Jesus has taken a firm hold on his life (3:7–16). Paul's life may be far from perfect and complete but Christ has an unshakeable grip on his spirit and imagination.

Imitating the crucified Messiah

The apostle is a role model whose example others may imitate. The Christian life is not so much a set of rules as a life lived in such a way that the life of Christ shines through. We have to learn to do that as an apprentice learns a craft. So the Christian leaders in Philippi imitate Paul and should themselves be good examples for imitation to others.

Questions: Has the crucified Christ taken such hold of your life that others might be able to imitate Him in you?

Another way 18–19

Others choose a different path (18–19). Some Christians are living lives of self-indulgence: they did not leave their propensity for gluttony, sexual immorality and greediness at the door of the church when they first came. They did not repent to use Jesus' term (see comment on the Gospel). They are enemies of the cross (Philippians 2:1–11) because they deny the One whose humility and simplicity set them free.

Questions: How do we end up on the wrong road? What are the warning signs we may have missed?

Sharing Christ's beauty

In contrast, those who imitate Paul and share the mind of Christ may confidently expect to share Christ's beauty and life (20–21). That is our citizenship; it is the commonwealth to which we belong and in which we share privileges and responsibilities. We await in hope the transformation of our humanity into the glory of the risen Christ (Philippians 2:6–11). If we suffer with him in humility we shall share his glory. His pattern will be our pattern. Thus Paul encourages his friends to stand firm (4:1). They shall be made whole, persons of beauty. As they are, they are his joy and delight.

Questions: Do we live out our citizenship taking its responsibilities seriously? How does the hope of the transformation in Christ drive our present living?

Luke 13.1–9

¹³At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

⁶Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” ⁸He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

As we have noted Luke is a connected story in which each part contributes to the meaning of all the other parts. So reading snippets as we do in church is fraught with the possibilities of misunderstanding. The passage today is a part of Luke that begins at 9.51 and ends at 19.48 and that tells of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, continuing some of the great themes of the birth stories and the Galilean ministry but often in surprising ways. Some of the themes that bind the story and we, the readers, might look out for are the coming of salvation for all people, that Mary’s son would be the cause of division in Israel, that he must suffer, die and rise which will be his exodus.

The reality of judgment

Luke 13.1–9 concludes a section (12.1–13.9) that begins in crisis as the leaders decide to stalk Jesus and look for ways to bring him down (11.53–54). So Jesus seeks to tell his disciples, the crowd and anyone who might be interested in following him what this hostility means for their life. They must learn to reorient their lives according to the understanding of God’s nature and God’s kingdom purpose. In Jesus God is bringing both salvation and judgment. Jesus wants people to hear how to respond to that reading of the situation. So themes like hypocrisy, love of possessions, anxiety over the future, fearless public confession, watchfulness, and judgment find their place in the discussion.

The warnings regarding the coming judgement that began in 12.1–3 reach their climax here. It is sometimes hard to think of Jesus as a prophet who spoke words of judgement but the evidence is unmistakable and clear. We do, however, have to put Jesus in his context as a prophet to his own people who were living under the Romans and looking for God’s coming kingdom to throw off the colonising yoke. Many were

considering the option of violence to bring about God's kingdom. Jesus sees the looming disaster that this mindset will bring about and demands repentance from it towards trusting that God was bringing the kingdom in his ministry.

Jesus rejects the notion that somehow we could interpret violence and random accidents as the punishment of God (1–5). Jesus reads their bringing of this report to him about Pilate's action as a form of self-justification that expresses the human view that "they deserve it" and of course "we do not". Judgment in his interlocutors' view is reserved for those whose sin sets them apart from "us". Jesus does not reject the view that disobedience to God's love and mercy will finally lead to judgment. He simply rejects the notion that those who encounter disaster and misfortune have been specially marked out by God. They have not.

But there is a real judgment that comes to us every day of our lives as God addresses us with the call of Jesus to follow the kingdom in all we do. God brings us up short when we are disobedient to God's love and mercy and justice in our lives and in that confrontation calls us to our commitment to the Gospel. And the way to approach that is repentance, taking up God's agenda in the Kingdom and living our lives under mercy and grace: accordingly in love, peace and justice.

However, if his hearers did not repent from their thoughts of violence they could expect that they would experience the full effects of Roman violence in murder and destruction. Sadly, it all came too true.

Questions: Reflect on the difference between living a life of penance (doing prescribed religious acts) and a life of repentance. Describe the difference.

Reflect on a time when a person or event has stopped you in your tracks. Maybe it has forced you to turn in another direction or maybe you refused the chance to change. Reflect on that. What difference did it make in your life?

Hope and grace for the fruitless tree

The point of the parable (6–9) is that judgment is averted, not because we are pious, holy or some other self-reported religious characteristic, but because of God's mercy and grace. The tree is unfruitful and yet still he intercedes with the owner of the fig tree to let it live. Mercy characterises God, not capricious destruction. On the other hand fruit bearing characterises disciples (3.7–9, 6.43–45, 8.4–15). Fruit bearing arises out of repentance and the stories in the Gospel tell us what the fruit is (Luke 6, 12 for example)

Questions: What does repentance mean in your life? What are some of the fruits we should bear? What changes would that make to your life?

Further reflections

Journey and pilgrimage are themes this Sunday but the theme is not the beginning of the pilgrimage but what being a pilgrim might look like as we exercise our commitment to the Gospel.

So Abram and Sarai will learn what it means to exercise trust in their journey with God who journeys with them. They face fear and disappointment and look to Plan B.

The Psalmist learns how to exercise confidence in the face of ferocious fears and opposition. St Paul has learnt what the terrible temptations are for disciples to forgo commitment to the Gospel and seek another, easier way.

Jesus teaches us that pilgrims live a life of repentance always seeking God's agenda for the Kingdom of Christ for this world.

Questions: Reflect on your journey so far. How would you assess it?

“SEEK AND LISTEN”, THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C.

Isaiah 55.1–9; Psalm 63.1–9; 1 Corinthians 10.1–13; Luke 13.1–9.

Isaiah 55.1–9

⁵⁵Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for
David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the
peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not
know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified
you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our
God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the
LORD.

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your
ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In this passage the prophet offers an invitation to people who were puzzled by the terrible things that had happened to them in the exile and were trying to make a new life for themselves and with God (see Psalm 89). They had lost land, king and temple; they had suffered the indignities of exile and those events had shattered their identity and their sense of purpose. On their return to the land they had gone about the business of living; building houses; farming, having families and seeking to build a new life. But on what grounds would that new life be built? What would their identity be and what purpose would they serve now that all the old markers were gone? Now they are invited to come and sustain themselves on God’s nurturing word; they are invited to abundant life.

The magnificent banquet 1–2

God calls them to participate in the establishment and inauguration of his reign by participating in a great feast, a common image and the practice at the time (1–2). The feast is free and full of all the necessities such as water and food and some of the extras such as wine and rich food. God longs to establish his rule among the people, a rule of justice, love mercy and peace and to protect his people.

But they need to listen to the new arrangements. Listening (2b-3) is a key element of relationship with God. Listening precedes all other spiritual activities and without it we cannot obey God because we have no idea what we should be doing. Listening indicates the personal nature of the relationship with God. Listening is the way of finding life. In a world of noise and distraction such listening is often missing in the life of faith.

Questions: Meditate on the picture of the great feast. How does it speak to you? Listen carefully to God's invitation to you to join the great feast. What are some distractions? Is it believable? How much do you listen to God? Why do you think that such listening is important? What way can we find to cut the noise and distraction of modern life?

The renewed covenant and vocation 3–5

This is what they need to listen to. Instead of a king over them God would make a covenant with them as a people that they be a light to the nations, God's servant to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The covenant that God made with David (2Samuel 7.4–17) would now be renewed with the people. Their witness to justice would be the call to the nations to return to the LORD (See Psalm 72.8–14, Isaiah 2.3–4). That justice was meant to be very specific as Psalm 72 shows; the rescue of the oppressed, and relieving the distress of the poor for instance. The restructuring of their life together around the justice and covenant love of God would be the salvation of the world.

Questions: How do you see your vocation before God in the light of this passage?

So the present was the time to seek God, and call upon him (6–9). They need to repent of the ways that undermine God's justice and covenant love, leave them behind, take up God's agenda for them. They need to return to listening and seeking. They need not fear for God is merciful to his people always looking for their good especially in the blossoming of peace and justice among them. It looks a silly and vulnerable plan to redeem Israel and the world this way but God's thoughts are beyond Israel's and our comprehension.

The imagery is evocative, an invitation to seek life itself at the very source and to participate in God's glorious future for the nations of the world. The people are encompassed in God's great plan. They need to come close again, seeking God in

repentance and faith finding their security in the promise of God. That promise maybe mysterious and beyond human comprehension but waiting on God, seeking God, seeking the abundance of the promise of God is the most rewarding response.

Questions: The Christian life has sometimes been described as a life of repentance. Does that make any sense?

Psalm 63.1–9 (63.1–8 NRSV)

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah. ¹O God, you are my God, I seek you,

my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory.

³Because your steadfast love is better than life,

my lips will praise you.

⁴So I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

⁶when I think of you on my bed,

and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

⁷for you have been my help,

and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

⁸My soul clings to you;

your right hand upholds me.

Seeking God in a dry and thirsty land 1–4

The editors of the Psalter associated this psalm with David's sojourn in the wilderness and Saul's attempt to kill him (I Samuel 23.14; 24.2). Most modern commentators take it metaphorically as reflecting a powerful experience of seeking for and finding God in midst of extremity.

The psalm is a fitting response the reading from Isaiah today in which God calls for Israel to seek him. In this prayer the king of Israel (representative of all) seeks God (1). The poet likens his seeking to that of a lost traveller in a wilderness where there is neither water nor food. So the psalmist craves that relationship (1–2 NRSV) and seeks it in the temple i.e. the presence of God. The psalmist remembers the power and the glory of God revealed in the sanctuary but it is not this to which he appeals. The core of the psalm is God's steadfast love; God's gracious commitment of Godself to us, God's forgiveness, forbearance, loyalty to his promises, and redemption are the core of the relationship with God (2–4 NRSV). This is worth more than life, and is the source

of praise and worship. That beautiful character of God then becomes the source of joy and worship.

Questions: How is God's character, presence and promise like a feast to you?

Meditating on a rich feast 5–8

The psalmist can only meditate on God's enduring character of love when he lies awake (5–8 NRSV) because the subject is so great it fills his mind and heart.

Meditation of God's beautiful character is like a great feast full of good and surprising things that delight the palate and leave the participant sated with joy and pleasure.

Trust is pure adoration that leaves the self and its needs behind.

Questions: How can you use this psalm in seeking God? On what grounds do you usually seek God? Would you describe your life with God as "satisfied with a rich feast"? Why so or why not?

1 Corinthians 10.1–13

¹⁰I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' ⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Context

A debate has arisen in Corinth. It has come to him in the form of a question about food offered to idols (chapter 8). Some people are arguing that this is matter of Christian freedom; they argue that we have the superior knowledge in Christ (idols are nothing and food does not bring us closer to God) and if other Christians are offended by our actions of eating meat offered to idols then it is they who have the problem, not us.

Christian liberty is it is not freedom to do as we please, a more modern, and spiritually as well as socially disastrous, notion.

The Old Testament as Scripture in the church 1–5

He uses the Old Testament story the Exodus wanderings as a way of providing theological frameworks, examples, instructions and warnings for the church, no matter whether Jew or Gentile (1–5). Twenty-five years after the death of Jesus the Old Testament was firmly established as scripture in the fledgling Christian church.

The Exodus wanderings , Paul explains to his mainly gentile audience, is a cautionary tale about how easy it is to fall into idolatry and then how quickly releasing hold on the living God leads to self-indulgence in every element of life. The refusal to listen to God has serious social and personal consequences.

Notice how Paul includes the readers in the story. It is their story too. Notice to how he reads the story through Christ and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. So the readers can now place themselves as Passover-people, Exodus-people. Notice how he assumes that the Corinthians will be familiar with the Exodus story.

There are four elements he draws attention to; the cloud, the sea, the food and the drink. The experience was their baptism in water and Spirit and the food and drink was their experience of feeding and drinking on the Rock who was Christ. We are in the same drama as the ancient people and our life is our chapter in it.

Questions: How does Paul encourage the church to listen to God?

The example 7–13

The “ancestors” can offer positive and negative examples: the communion of saints does not mean the communion of the morally or spiritually perfect. It can be the communion of the perverse: offered the wonderful privileges of God’s care and guidance, God’s provision for their spiritual welfare and redemption, they still manage to soil their own nest. They had the revelation and the sacraments but they decided to exercise their freedom for their self-indulgence. Freedom is for love and loyalty towards God and justice and mercy towards each other.

In the present circumstances of the Corinthians they provide a warning against idolatry, the turning away from Christ to make our own gods who will serve our desires. From idolatry flows sexual immorality, putting God’s grace and justice to the test (because we do not trust either), and complaining or whingeing about God’s provision for us in Christ.

For the Christian believer in Corinth tempted to follow this path Paul has two words of advice (12–13). The first be watchful; spiritual pride is disastrous as it leads to confidence in one’s own capacities that are unjustified. The second is that we are not on our own. Testing will happen but God will be faithful to you.

Questions: Autonomy is a commonly held value these days. What are the differences in the exercise of freedom in Christ and autonomy to please yourself? What idolatry tempts us? How dangerous is it?

Luke 13.31–35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ ³²He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.” ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” ’

As we noted last week in this part of Luke’s Gospel Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, on a journey in which he instructs his disciples, so Jerusalem is very much in his mind. It is not only his destination but the city has great significance for him. It is the ancient place of God’s dwelling yet so often in the history of the people of Israel God seems to have been banished from it. Jesus, as the bearer of the word of God’s restoration and healing for his people must go the very centre of the household of the people of God and speak to the heart of the nation. Jesus speaks like a prophet and offers fateful warnings about Jerusalem and the danger it is in. This fits in with Jesus’ role as prophet who saw that second Temple Judaism had lost its way and needed to come back to God and renew its vocation as the light of the world.

The fox 31–33

Jesus must still be in Herod’s territory for some of the Pharisees to bother to warn him. Compared to the usual antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees this shows another picture: some at least care for his safety. They do not understand how Jesus will fulfil God’s will; after all the disciples struggled with the idea that God’s purposes for the world is served by the violent death of a prophet in Jerusalem.

For Jesus Herod is like a cunning and sly fox, who poses no great threat. Foxes were proverbial in the ancient world; for their craftiness making up for lack of strength, their proclivity for malicious destructiveness, and their sly self-interested intelligence. Still Herod casts a dark shadow over the story in Galilee, a warning of how power responds to God’s good government of mercy and justice.

Jerusalem is Jesus’ goal and he must arrive there and suffer the fate of prophets. He must follow the will of God wherever it leads. That is his protection against Herod. Jesus will continue his journey, not to escape Herod but to fulfil God’s will. He will continue to bring in the kingdom with preaching and the signs of healing and the overthrow of the evil one.

It is to the action of God in Jesus and Jesus' word that Herod and Jesus' listener's need to pay attention. They must listen.

Questions: Jesus confronts the political powers all the way to the cross. To those powers he was an irritant and their plan is to remove him. What is it about him that attracts such attention and malice? How could we better live out God's rule among us?

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem 34–35

Herod casts his malevolent shadow over this story too. The looming danger of the fox means that the chicks need to be protected. The people of God are not well-served by a leadership. They need protection (not for the first time in their history) and it is at hand in the prophet Jesus. Like Herod they must listen to the words and works of the prophet.

Jesus has repeatedly, and does now, offer God's people God's motherly love and protection but they reject it. They will hear the disciples celebrate Jesus coming into the city in traditional terms of Ps.118.26 welcoming the coming king but they will not join in. Today's themes of loving trust and heartfelt seeking jostle with the possibility of rejection of grace, vile behaviour and missing the point: that is, being light to the world.

Questions: Meditate on the image of God that emerges in Jesus/God's lament over Jerusalem. What resonates most with you? The theme of listening has permeated our readings today. Jesus' contemporaries had trouble listening. Do you? Why is that? The theme of listening has permeated our readings today. Jesus' contemporaries had trouble listening. Do you? Why is that?

Further reflections

The readings today have struck the note of listening. But they also encourage those who listen to use memory to meditate and come into God's presence. Everyone knows times when God seems distant, a fleeting shadow in our past. Memory aids us in realizing our blessings by remembering not only God's presence but God's power and patience and persistence in His love towards his people.

Questions: Can we find confidence in remembering who God has been to His people and is to us? What is the importance of Word and Sacrament in remembering?

The theme of listening has permeated our readings today. Jesus' contemporaries had trouble listening. Do you? Why is that?

“ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS”, FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Joshua 5.2–12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5.16–21; Luke 15.11–32.

Joshua 5.2–12

²At that time the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.’ ³So Joshua made flint knives, and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. ⁴This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the warriors, had died during the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt. ⁵Although all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people born on the journey through the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. ⁶For the Israelites travelled for forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the LORD. To them the LORD swore that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. ⁷So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way.

⁸When the circumcising of all the nation was done, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed. ⁹The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.’ And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰While the Israelites were encamped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

I am sure you will be asking: “What has this to do with anything else? It may be of some interest historically but what significance can it have for us?” The priestly writers have inserted this passage on circumcision in the middle of a story about the celebration of the first Passover in the Promised Land.

The story is all about new beginnings and the future possibilities that open up for the people under God’s guiding and leading. It is also about change; the past, such as slavery in Egypt and their loss of identity as God’s people and God’s very special provision for them in the wilderness will no longer be the marks of the future. They will be marked as God’s people living under God’s covenant and their daily bread will come from the land, the provision of God.

Joshua has just taken leadership and led the people across the Jordan River from the east and now camped on the eastern boundary of Canaan (Joshua 4.1–5.2) below Jericho. Their presence has frightened the local petty kings because it is clear that Joshua is preparing the people to take possession of the land.

Gilgal is not a very famous place but it was the place where the slaves from Egypt first set foot on the promised land of freedom after the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. Here they built the cairn of twelve stones that was a reminder that they had left behind their captivity, shame, poverty and slavery in Egypt and that their new venture was into a hard won freedom. It was hardly a freedom we would recognise but it was real enough. However, there was still a long way for the story to run. Symbols such as Gilgal are a reminder of the horrors of the past and the hope of a future very different.

Circumcision

There was one other ritual that now had to be addressed: the circumcision of those who had come through the wilderness without being circumcised. The priestly writers believed that circumcision was essential to Passover and critical to the identity of this newly forming people: hence the present passage. It was a sign of the covenant with Abraham and a reminder of their origins in the great patriarchal stories. God would be their God they would be his people. Circumcision would be the outward, personal and communal sign of that. After the exile when these books were edited into their present form the sign of circumcision became a distinguishing sign of Jewishness and in the New Testament it became a bone of contention, especially on the question of the admission of Gentile converts (see especially Galatians). The sign of the identity of freed slaves became a chain for gentile believers. Freedom takes different forms in different times.

Passover

The keeping of this first Passover in the land is also highly symbolic. The promised abundance of the land is symbolically eaten and God's special provision of manna stops. The day to day business of life is now theirs. God is always there but the special provision for the vulnerable wanderers is gone. The task lies before them. We are meant to work. Their future begins in worship and praise of the God who liberates.

Questions: How do we mark our passing from slavery into the freedom we have in Christ? Are there still pockets of slavery, poverty and shame in this country and the world that demand our attention? What are our 'Gilgals' that mark freedom from such shame and poverty into a better future? What traditions have become chains for others?

Psalm 32

Of David. A Maskil.

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

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

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

Selah

⁵Then 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

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

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

Selah

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

⁹Do 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.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

¹¹Be 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.

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).

Teach 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 if we are amenable (see last week's notes). But we can teach the joy of being forgiven.

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?

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?

2 Corinthians 5.16–21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The new situation 16–17

Christ's death and resurrection is the transforming event of all life (see 5.14–15 the context). Nothing can be the same again. And that includes how we regard Christ and others (for whom he died). We have to regard people in the new light of the great transformation not by way of the 'flesh' (here translated 'human point of view'). Flesh is an important theological word in Paul and here it means treating the other as hostile, outsider, opponent, competitor and enemy just as Paul had once viewed Jesus. No-one presents the same appearance when viewed from the vantage point of the new order of the Spirit as they do when seen according to the flesh. And this is true of one assessment of Christ.

The possibilities this opens up for all is infinite; being in Christ means being in the One who has risen from the dead. That is the new creation. It has begun already and it is taking effect here and now. Christ's death and resurrection transforms the old, the past, just as Christ's body was transformed.

Reconciliation 18–21

In 18–21 Paul outlines the basis of reconciliation with God: in Christ God has put aside their trespass (wilful rebellion) and hostility and restored the relationship of family and friend. The initiative for this is entirely God's. The agent is Christ.

Paul and his ministry friends have been given that message to bring to the Corinthians (as well as the whole world) and are its agents (ambassadors) making that reconciliation present and active. But the Corinthians do not seem to hear it. Thus Paul uses his God-given authority to appeal to them to join the family again. It is God who puts things right in Christ and that is the foundation of Paul's ministry and appeal to the Corinthians.

Questions: How quickly do we judge others from "human point of view"? What effects does that have on relationships? What has the new creation meant to you in your life? Are you willing to share the treasure with others? Can you see why Paul is passionate about the ministry of reconciliation? How can the church be ambassadors of reconciliation as Paul describes it here to the world?

Luke 15.11–32

¹¹Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when

he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” ²²But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate. ²⁵Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” ³¹Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Context

This story really begins back at 15.1–2. The Pharisees indict Jesus’ behaviour; “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” All three parables that follow have the same theme, God’s story of lost and found. What an impact this story has made on our social consciousness, and on language; the ‘prodigal son’, the father’s welcome and the ‘fatted calf’ being just some. What will happen when generations grow up not knowing this parable? How will that change how we view each other? This parable goes beyond the lost sheep and the lost coin by placing it in a family context. The loss of a son is of more significance than a coin or a sheep. The response is far more personal and challenging as well.

Welcome to the son

This parable is in two interconnected parts: 11–24 and 25–32. The story in 11–24 has a well-known main point: that God welcomes back with open arms anyone who returns. It begins with the desire of the son to have his inheritance NOW. Common advice was that this highly inadvisable (Sirach 33.20–24). Even asking was considered an insult. The young man takes his inheritance and turns it into transportable capital. The infamy increases as he then squanders that capital (the work of other’s hands) and doing that while living as a gentile (the pigs). Then comes the famine that completely

destroys their last remaining infrastructure of his life. He now sinks to just above the expendables of Roman society, beggars and thieves.

The young man comes to himself, comes to his senses but not yet to repentance. He would be better off at home as a day labourer in his father's household than in the gentile world where the rule was, "He does the beggar a bad service who gives him meat and drink, for what he gives is lost, and the life of the poor is prolonged to their own misery." (Plautus). As in Psalm 32 the young stops deceiving himself and decides to return home with his repentance speech coming from the heart. He can ask for nothing except what he deserves.

Welcoming father

The story now moves quickly to the proactivity of the father. The father is waiting and sees him, filled with compassion he runs to meet him. The stunning point is that in most cultures fathers so slighted do not act like this. After all, the son has taken his share of the property and turned it into cash, which brought shame on the family, but by asking for his share before the father was dead the younger sibling was saying, "I wish you were dead." No more complete and painful rejection could be imagined. Yet the father humiliates himself, running to meet the discredited son and welcome him home. And the welcome is not stingy; robes rings and fatted calves; and no blame, no shame, just the joy of being alive again, of being found. The story to this point portrays forgiveness, love and grace with attendant joy in vibrant human relationships.

The unpleasant surprise

We often forget that the real sting in the tail of the parable comes in the second part (25–32), the tale of the older brother. This part of the story is Jesus' reply to his critics who do not like him mixing with wicked tax collectors and sinners. They could not see God at work healing people, people being transformed physically, emotionally, morally and spiritually. They are self-centred and censorious; they cannot rejoice with God. They cannot see that God wants to invite even the gentiles in and yet there is plenty of room for them too, for they, like the elder son, have the most honoured position. The message falls on deaf ears blinded as they are the work of the kingdom.

Questions: Who do you identify with in the story? Meditate on this moving slowly through the story. Surely God cannot be like this? But what if it is true? How can we be elder sons or daughters?

Further Reflections

The readings this week deal with possibilities of the future but take seriously the past. In fact all of these readings lead us to reflect on transformation and change and our part in or our possible refusal of such change that journeying with the Spirit might require. They each illuminate the great difficulties and pain associated with letting go the past but the joy that comes from liberation in Christ.

Questions: Enter into the place in your life between past and future and explore how it affects your struggle for transformation in Christ. What do you learn?

“A NEW THING—A CROSS”, FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Isaiah 43.16–21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3.3–14; John 12.1–8

Isaiah 43.16–21

¹⁶Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

God is the God of new things

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it (19)?” This is a key theme of Lent and Easter. God is not bound by the past. God is bound by neither natural obstacles such as the sea or raging waters nor by human military or political power (16–17). The nations are impotent before God. And Babylon, the place of exile, of pain, shame and captivity, is no match for his power (read 14–15).

New Exodus

The prophet reminds the people, terrified and cowed in Babylon, that God once brought a rabble out of Egypt in the face of the greatest military power of the day and the region. He once led them through a wilderness too. That wilderness wandering was not Israel’s finest hour. Grumbling, fear and lack led to a collapse of trust and then to judgment; forty years of wandering, death and even Moses not able to enter the land. Will this new wilderness crossing be like that? Will it be fraught with danger and judgment? Forget it says the prophet (18). God will do something new.

New Provision

Just as the waters once parted now the desert will become a highway supplied by fresh water all along the way (19b-21). The wild animals will praise God. God will turn judgement into life and praise. The people are nurtured and protected from every harm.

New people of praise

He will re-form his people, his own, so that they too will declare to the world the salvation of God. The people of God are integral to God's purposes for the world. They have experienced the new thing that God has on offer; they are a people of praise and worship because of the new thing that God offers the world. They are God's 'sacrament' for the world, the substance of his grace.

God builds on what he has accomplished in the past but is always looking to do a new thing that is consistent the past but not the same. Wilderness experience might be one of judgment (Exodus/Numbers) or salvation (Isaiah).

This passage forms part of the biblical 'air' that Jesus and his disciples lived, breathed walked in. It nurtured their vision of God and what God was about to do. When Jesus declared that God's rule had begun in him this kind of theological imagination was what the people responded to. God's new thing has begun at last.

Questions: How open are we to God's new thing? How would you answer the prophet's question, "...do you not perceive it?" How do we learn to perceive God's new things? What gets in the way? What new thing might God be doing with us? How is our church, in its praise of God's new thing in Christ, a sacrament for the world?

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,

we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,

and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations,

'The LORD has done great things for them.' ³The LORD has done great things for us,

and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

This is the seventh of the Psalms of Ascents sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. They remember God's deliverance in the past (1–3), petition God for help in the present (4–5) and profess their trust in God's help (6).

The new day

It is easy to imagine the joy of the returning exiles from Babylon on the sight of their homeland and of the Jerusalem (1–4); home and free at last. The prophet Isaiah had promised a new day, God's new thing. It was like a dream come true. Laughter and joy are the best expressions for the experience of God's redemption and they are the best witness we can offer. Even other nations, often seen as enemies, take note of God's redemption and Israel was fulfilling its mission to be the light of the world (Isaiah 42.6).

But . . .

However, life is never a smooth road and now they are experiencing severe setbacks (4–5). We do not know what has happened but tears and weeping seem to be their present lot in contrast to the joy and laughter of the first few verses. They see themselves as dry wadi beds in the Negev, the desert to the South. No-one looks to them to find the amazing work of God or to find spiritual refreshment.

Instead, they long to be like the dry wadi beds after rain, filling with water and bringing life to everything that surrounds them. They can blossom again and be the place where people come to find renewal and life in a dry land.

Sowing is always an act of anticipation and hope but if drought intervenes it seems hopeless and many tears are shed. In their need they turn to God in the trust that the seemingly hopeless act of sowing turns into joyful harvesting. The key to this psalm is the hope deeply embedded in it; hope draws from the well-springs of the past. God can redeem, God can set free, and God can bring us home and make laughter flow again.

This is a good Lenten (and Advent) psalm as we remember we live between memory and hope: memory reminds us of the past and hope builds on that for a joyous future. During Lent we remind ourselves of the humbling even humiliating circumstances of Christ's death; yet we do so in the light of the resurrection and the promise of the renewal of all things. We sow in tears that we may reap in joy.

We must live as a visionary people and our past helps us do that. The past should liberate us for the future, not bind us in chains of fear.

Questions: Are we bound to the past by chains of fear? How can we be a visionary people? How can we witness in joy and laughter?

Philippians 3.3–14

³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Context

To fully understand this passage it is important to read the whole chapter 3:1–4:1. This passage is one in which Paul tells us something of the significance of his conversion for his understanding of the Gospel (see also Galatians 1:13–16).

The key theme

Paul's theme is inclusiveness. Paul defends the right of non-Jewish Christians to come to the faith without the processes and demands of the law (1–4). He asserts the inclusiveness of the Gospel as opposed to the exclusivist notions of some early Christians. He does so vigorously because of his own experience as a zealous proponent of such exclusivism. Paul persecuted the Hellenistic Christians because they threatened Israel's distinctiveness and boundaries. All his previous life he had given over to ensuring that his righteousness separated him, not only from gentiles, but also from other Jews who did not share his views (4–6).

What happened?

Christ Jesus had made him his own (12). Using the image of the profit and loss account, the things he once regarded as assets he now writes off as a loss for the sake of Christ. The gain in Christ far outweighs the value of whatever Paul possessed. They are like excrement to him. What is it he has gained? He describes it as knowing Christ, gaining Christ, being found in him and having a righteousness that comes from God.

Christ has captured him, included him, and welcomed him so that he no longer had to compete with others to live a life of righteousness before God that would exclude others. In Christ he could find a righteousness that was God given and based on Christ's faithfulness (2.1–11). Paul expands the idea of knowing Christ (10– 11) to knowing the power of the risen Christ in his life.

What follows?

The consequences of that may well be suffering as he follows Christ. Paul could never be complacent, thinking that he had arrived at some perfect state (12). He concentrates on the goal ahead, no longer looking backward to what he has lost. The precise nature of the prize (14) is unstated but the context suggests that it is the moment when he shall fully know what it means that Christ has made him his own: the resurrection. Unlike his earlier zealotry this "race" is not a competition that only one can win and all the rest will be excluded. It is an inclusive race, the outcome of which depends on Christ's hold on us.

Questions: Do we know Christ's righteousness in our lives? Do we know the power of his resurrection? Has Christ taken hold of us? Has that made us inclusive in our outlook and practice?

John 12.1–8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Context

Jesus' enemies plan to put him to death (11.53) and this theme dominates chapter 11. Jesus can no longer go about freely but retreats to a wilderness area with his disciples and friends (11.54). The Passover preparations are in progress and whether Jesus will come to the Jerusalem celebrations is the talking point for many people. His enemies are powerful and they have put out that they must know where Jesus is and they have their spies and agents on the lookout among the people. They wish to arrest Jesus and begin the legal processes to put him to death. Passover and Jesus' death are now historically and theologically linked.

The end is near

Six days before the Passover Jesus comes from his retreat to Bethany, the town of Lazarus, to share a meal with the family. It is a provocative move because the raising of Lazarus which created the crisis recorded in the previous chapter and led to the plan to kill Jesus. Lazarus is there and Martha serves this time without grumbling or arrogance. Lazarus is a sign of the glory of God and the glory of the Son of man (11.4).

So the story of the anointing of Jesus makes us aware that we are rapidly approaching 'the end.' Jesus' crucifixion is near; John tells us six days away. Mary's wiping of Jesus' feet prefigures his washing of his disciples' feet in chapter 13. The fragrance emphasises the extravagance of Mary's act of love and devotion (3–4).

Unfaithful discipleship

In John's account Judas protests the extravagance. One year's salary spent on perfume, indeed! And to be wasted on a wandering prophet! The author's note on the character of Judas puts it all in perspective. How quickly we criticise to cover up our own deficiencies, even our own evil. Judas is the model of the unfaithful disciple: overtly caring covertly hypocritical, even criminal. We know about that in our own day.

Faithful discipleship

Mary is the pattern of faithful discipleship. She knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She fulfils Jesus love command (Chapter 13) before he has even given it. She embraces his death while others protest. She understands the significance of Jesus' death and anoints him in preparation for it. This maybe a violent premeditated judicial death but it is like a fragrance that will fill the world.

Jesus' words about the poor does not denigrate them (8): in the context of John it simply reminds the disciples that they have very little time left to respond to Jesus. The incarnation of the Word and the approaching death are once-for-all events and they are passing quickly. Jesus loved the poor and died to set them free. On the other hand he needed his earliest disciples to respond to him so that they could carry on his ministry and not become like Judas. Judas' selfishness is the reason there are the poor. Judas' solution to the 'problem of the poor' does not include repentance from his selfishness. It does not include Jesus' commitment to the poor.

Questions: What are the characteristics of faithful discipleship? How does Judas serve as a warning? What does Jesus' death mean for you?

Further reflections

How can God's new thing come with a cross attached? Many people find the idea stupid or repulsive or both. Our friends in Judaism and Islam both reject the idea that God's salvation of the world somehow involves the crucifixion of the Messiah. They

both define themselves over and against such a view. And yet this remains central to Christian faith, worship and service. Paul once called the cross God's power (1 Corinthians 1.18–25) being well aware of how ridiculous that sounded. Christians have always identified the Cross as the source of subversive memory that feeds the hope for freedom life and renewal. That is why the Eucharist is not just a hollow memorial, a longing for a time long past and forgotten. It is the weekly promise of renewal and life subverting all secular hope in political power.

So let me ask you the question again; what does Jesus death mean for you?

“THE COSMOS HOLDS ITS BREATH”, SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C—
PASSION SUNDAY OR PALM SUNDAY

Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Luke 23.1–49

Isaiah 50.4–9a

⁴The 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.

⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.

⁶I 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.

⁷The 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; he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

This is one of the servant songs (the third 42.1–4; 49.1–6; 52.13–53.12) in the book of Isaiah of which the best known is the fourth, Isaiah 53. The speaker is the servant and the audience is the Israelites who have fallen away from God. The servant confronts the dispirited Israelites of the exile who see no hope.

Servant prophet 4–5

The servant lives in the trenches with the weary and listens for the word of God to them. He does not separate himself from those who are disheartened or have lost hope. Like other prophets (Jeremiah 1.9–10; Ezekiel 2.8–3.3) he receives the word of the Lord so that he might reveal it to others. He encourages the weary because he is himself nourished by God’s Word. God’s Word is God’s promise and thus God’s action. Once again the importance of listening is a key to Christian spirituality.

Servant suffering 6

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. His tormentors are the deeply dispirited people of God, the church. They want nothing to do with the word of hope that he brings

The Lord helps me 7–9

The poem is not a complaint but a song of confidence in God's call, God's help and God's vindication. God is near to sustain the prophetic voice. The servant is God's answer to the problem of raw evil and the uneven nature of affliction and punishment (the Babylonian exile). 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. The injustice of it all is not resolved.

Questions: Why do you think that the word of God, the word of God's covenant love, faithfulness and justice is so provocative? What is it that human beings do not wish to hear? How can the servant be an inspiration to us? Reflect on how Jesus might have read this text and how it might have shaped his ministry.

Psalm 31.9–18 (31.9–16 NRSV, NIV)

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

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

¹¹I 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.

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

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

¹⁴But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my God.'

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

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Context

This psalm is one in which expressions of trust alternate with cries of agony over the psalmist's severe plight. It is a psalm in which the psalmist's chaotic life is played out in the shape of the psalm itself; trust, despair, crying out, trust and terror. Jesus uses Psalm 31.5 as a prayer on the cross (Luke 23.46 and Acts 7.59) to express his powerlessness and trust.

Chaos and despair 9–13

The portion of the psalm we read today reflects all those 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. He has become a complete outsider, like one whose life has ended; he might as well be in the grave. 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.

You are my God 14–16

The psalmist, Isaiah and Jesus, however, all turn over their case to God and trust becomes the dominant motif of their lives. Trust believes the promise of God. It trusts God's steadfast love, it trusts God's presence and it trust God's timing. Trust is quite realistic about pain and alienation but they cannot overcome trust. God's steadfast love remains the bedrock for living (14–16 NRSV, NIV)

Questions: This psalmist knew the sort of opposition that Jesus, the servant and Jeremiah suffered. How can we entrust our lives to God in such situations? What does it mean to live by trust? Why does surrendering oneself to God in Christ cause so much opposition? Reflect on how Jesus read this psalm and how it shaped his life.

Philippians 2.5–11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

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

Context

This famous passage has rightly shaped Christian theology, ethics and spirituality from the time it was written. Paul may be using a pre-existing hymn but that is not entirely clear. It is a passage of singular poetic power that presents Christ's incarnation, cross and vindication as the paradigm for the humble trust and obedience we live before God and as the paradigm for the submission we render to each other. Read 2.1–5 as this is essential to enter into its meaning and import. It was never meant to be the source of speculation about Christ's divine origins and nature. It answered the

question; how shall we live before God and each other in the light of Christ's exaltation and kingship.

The practical interest 1–5

Paul wants the Philippian church to share and express in their living the mind of Christ, which Jesus demonstrated in his life and death and now works among them. You will need to read verses 1–4 carefully to get Paul's point; the joy of unity is not easily gained because it requires humility; the willingness to hold and use power for the service of others. Paul reminds us that we are moral agents, we can make choices not to look to selfish ambition or self-interest and we can choose to look at others as Christ sees them, and act accordingly.

The example of Christ

Paul speaks of Jesus' free taking on of our humanity (6–8). This is one of the earliest passages to speak of Jesus' pre-existence. He has the form of and equality with God. It does not tell us what Jesus did except that he refused to grasp or exploit his position of power and privilege. There is an implied comparison with Adam who grasped or exploited his privileged position. Jesus' humility takes the form of a cross, which he chooses. He sets the interests of those who need salvation before his own interests. He subjects himself to God and those he came to save. This is what subjection or submission means in Christianity. It is not disembodied command for one to have power over another; it is the body on the cross. Jesus' humiliation is one of a piece with his vindication. In the third section (9–11) the resurrection is implied and it leads to Jesus receiving the acknowledgement of his status as the one who rules beyond any Caesar (or Pilate or Herod: see the Gospel below). 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 that same cosmic ruler joins distressed and alienated humans in the trenches and puts their needs before his rights.

Questions: Paul reminds us that the story of Jesus is the story of using power, status and resources in the service of others. We are beneficiaries of that in our salvation. How can we act redemptively towards others? What is the difference between humility and humiliation?

Luke 23:1–49

²³Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate.²⁴They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.'²⁵Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.'²⁶Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'²⁷But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

Jesus before Herod

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Jesus Sentenced to Death

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.' ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' ²²A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.']] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the

leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine,³⁷and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’³⁸There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’⁴²Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’⁴³He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last.⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

In today’s Gospel we read Luke’s account of Jesus’ trial before the secular powers of Rome (Pilate) and the local despot (Herod). The trial before the religious accusers has just concluded (22) and the ‘real’ powers of this world flex their muscles against God and his anointed (Psalm 2). They will not be denied their right to exercise judgment on God. So what does all this mean? Hints are given throughout this text but the foundation meaning story is found in chapter 22.14– 23; the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Read that passage carefully.

The Lord’s Supper

When Jesus wanted to teach his disciples the meaning of what was about to happen to him he did not teach them a theory. He gave them something to do. He gave them an act to perform, a meal to share. The meal is set in the context of Passover. Passover celebrated an escape to freedom. It celebrated the reversal of fortune from slavery to liberation. When the powers that enslaved God’s people in Egypt were at their worst God acted to judge their captors and set them free. This was Jesus’ exodus (9.31) and he had come to do what Moses and Aaron did back then only this time he would take the force of the judgement on himself and this time it would include the whole world. His death would allow his people to escape from the powers of evil. They would find liberation and life through his death and, most startlingly, through his resurrection. Jesus would be accused of being a liar, a deceiver, a false prophet, a rebel and a fake Messiah. That is what the rest of the story is about. The Satan, the accuser, does its

worst. Jesus dies. But then...the world explodes. We do not celebrate a theory, we celebrate the experience of life setting us free and being set free among us.

All of this finds its source in the covenant action of God. The covenant is the promise of God in Jesus to bless the whole world. Everything depends on the promise of God. The terrifying events that are about to unfold might cripple the hearts and the minds of the disciples. So God renews the covenant again, a covenant renewal long hoped for in Jeremiah 31–31–34 and come to pass. Whatever happens on the surface of things, no matter how terrifying, God's promise is the only sure foundation upon which to trust. The disciples were familiar with covenants and knew what they meant. God's word of promise in Jesus would find fulfilment in the action of sharing together in the Lord's Supper.

Before Pilate and Herod 1–12

What follows in 23 as the secular powers do their worst at the behest of the religious authorities is devastating to the infant church but the promise of the Lord's Supper must be trusted. On this basis Jesus makes no defence of his actions or his philosophy; he is not contemptuous of his judges as would be required of Hellenistic hero. He is mostly silent, following the pattern of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53.7). Both Pilate and Herod in this account are both reluctant and certainly blame shifting but the political pressure the religious authorities put on them through deceit and downright malice is too much. Neither man has high principles so pragmatism will rule the day and the powerful insistence of the religious elite overwhelms any small sense of justice that may still circulate in the minds of Pilate and Herod. Like the religious leaders they too have a place in the infamy that follows; political cowardice and pragmatism is always destructive of justice and peace.

Pilate and the mob 13–25

Pilate does not believe that Jesus is a common rebel with murderous political intent. He is innocent but deserves a flogging to keep everybody onside. That is political theatre but the crowd does not want theatre.

The crowd demands the release of a Barabbas someone already convicted of crimes associated with a political uprising and murder. Set free the violent revolutionary, kill the peace of the world. The populist will rule.

The prophet crucified 26–43

Even as he goes to his death Jesus is the prophet (26–43) turning to the women and delivering a sobering prediction: the violence done to the messenger of peace and justice and love will have consequences in continued violence in the world so that even innocent bystanders will suffer.

In his death, leaders, soldiers and one thief deride and mock him. The people stand quietly by, watching. Jesus forgives his tormentors but they show themselves incapable of hearing what is said. Jesus has brought salvation which is the restoration of God's people through the forgiveness of their sins. That salvation is at this moment rejected. But Jesus is still in control; he forgives, he promises a new beginning for a thief, he entrusts his spirit to his father in prayer and he dies. His death is consistent with his life. He brings the kingdom as the Lord of the kingdom, he finishes with prayer, he longs for the forgiveness of all to the end, and he holds out renewal and joy to those who will trust his promise. The world seeks to humiliate the Son of God only to find saving humility.

Truly dead 44–49

Innocent he may be but he is truly dead. The coercive powers of religion and politics have exhausted their treasure chest of violence he is dead. Darkness has enveloped him in its diabolical purpose. The innocent One leaves his vindication to God. Breast-beating and silence greet the power of the darkness as centurion, bystanders and disciples are lost in helplessness. Darkness humiliates the prophet and all he stands for. Only God can save.

Questions: Choose a scene in the story or a word of Jesus and let it be your guide for this coming week. What is God saying to me in this scene or word? What is he promising me? How can I act on that promise?

Choose a minor character like Barabbas or Simon of Cyrene or a thief, a silent watcher or a member of the crowd and look at the story through that lens. What does it reveal?

An endword

We have followed the way of the cross through the readings for Lent. We have reflected on our own journey, our journey together in our church and in our society. Where has that left you? Where do you want to go from here?

Compose a prayer for your own use that brings together your thoughts, questions and hopes.