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# LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING WORLD

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## LENTEN STUDIES

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### YEAR C

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“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**

<sup>55</sup>Ho, 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.

<sup>2</sup>Why 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.

<sup>3</sup>Incline 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.

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

<sup>5</sup>See, 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.

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

<sup>7</sup>let 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.

<sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>For 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. <sup>1</sup>O 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. <sup>2</sup>So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory.

<sup>3</sup>Because your steadfast love is better than life,

my lips will praise you.

<sup>4</sup>So I will bless you as long as I live;

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

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

<sup>6</sup>when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

<sup>7</sup>for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

<sup>8</sup>My 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**

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

<sup>6</sup>Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup>Do 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.' <sup>8</sup>We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand

fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup>We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. <sup>10</sup>And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. <sup>11</sup>These 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. <sup>12</sup>So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. <sup>13</sup>No 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**

<sup>31</sup>At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' <sup>32</sup>He 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. <sup>33</sup>Yet 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." <sup>34</sup>Jerusalem, 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! <sup>35</sup>See, 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?