

Lenten Devotions 2020

Week 2

Parramatta Mission

Uniting Church in Australia

Wednesday of this coming week is Ash Wednesday. It marks the start of Lent, and the preparation by the church for Easter. From Ash Wednesday to Easter is 40 days, not counting Sundays, and correlates with Jesus being in the wilderness for forty days after his baptism, tempted, yet found without sin. Christians the world over give attention during this time to their relationship with God, reflecting upon growth in faith, how the faith is expressed in relationship with others. This year the pastoral team are encouraging Lenten devotions through providing a daily set of Bible readings and reflections. A Bible reading will be chosen for each day, and a member of the team will write 100 word reflection for that day. People are encouraged to use these reflections as part of the daily devotions, using prayers of your choice. If you have other devotional material, you might like to either suspend, or augment that material with what is provided through the newsletter. The daily prayer guide from the Uniting Church is also included, for those who wish to take this up.

Reflections will be written by: The Old Testament: Rev Dr Clive Pearson, Psalm: Rev Dr Amelia Koh Butler, Epistle: Rev Dr Manas Ghosh, Gospel of John: Rev Christine Bayless Kelly, Gospel of Matthew: Rev Keith Hamilton

Monday, 2 March:

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' 3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' 2 The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' 4 But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (NRSV)

Reflection

There are so many ways to read this text from the book of Genesis. Some we could do without. For the Christian faith the story of Adam and Eve in the garden being tempted by the serpent is a story to do with the Fall. Our Jewish forebears never read the Hebrew Bible in this way. For others through history it has been a story where blame is placed upon Eve tempting Adam and leading to our expulsion from the garden. That is an interpretation which needs to be left behind as well. It has done too much damage and sometimes been used to justify domestic violence. For others again a talking crafty snake defies belief and undermines the value of the text as a whole. It is a 'myth', a story seeking to reveal some deep truths about what it means to be human in our world. It is not supposed to be a scientific theory. I find it helpful to reflect upon what it means to be an 'earthling' (Adam) and a 'living one' (Eve). Names have meaning. What does it mean for us to be like God, to know more about how the world works, and imagine the effect of our actions upon it? What is it like to forget the call to 'till and keep' the earth and transform the Earth in ways that reflect what we think is good? What is it like to stand at the edge of our capacity and feel 'naked'? Where are the 'fig leaves' that can hide our shame?

Clive Pearson

Tuesday 3rd March 2020

Psalm 32

1. Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
2. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
3. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.
4. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
5. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah
6. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
7. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah
8. I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
9. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.
10. Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
11. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

(NSRV)

Reflection

As we pray the psalms, we realise they are very human prayers. The psalmist is conscious of sin and brokenness. The need for healing and the experience of suffering (groaning) is named. Where do you see suffering – in your own life or in the lives of those close to you? How do you ask for relief from suffering? Do you want to hide, like the psalmist? When you are distressed, what comforts you?

How can we seek comfort as we pray? Others pray with com-*passion*... people are prepared to pray with each other, if we only ask. Could this be the week where the suggestion comes at morning tea or in a conversation: let us pray together? The steadfast love of the Lord is best expressed in being steadfast with others. What opportunities may arise this week to pray with and for others AND how are you prepared to be prayed for by others?

PRAYER TO PRAY WITH SOMEONE

Together we pray.
We pray for one another...
We pray for the world...
We pray for comfort in distress.
We pray our thanksgivings for one another.
We pray for blessing. Amen.
Amelia Koh Butler

Amelia Koh Butler

Wednesday 4th March 2020

Romans 4:1-5, 13-25

1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

13 The promise to Abraham or to his descendants, that they would be heirs of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if they are heirs of the law, faith has been emptied and the promise destroyed; 15 for the law brings works of anger; and where there is no law neither is their transgression. 16 Therefore it is out of faith according to grace that the promise shall be firm to all inheritors, not only of adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith in Abraham, who is the father of us all. 17 As it has been written "I have appointed you father of many nations" in the presence of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into being all things that do not exist. (Translation by Keith Hamilton)

Reflection

Rome was the great ancient City about which the aphorism was – "All roads lead to Rome". Besides the Colosseum and many other grand buildings, they had the Pantheon, a temple to worship all gods, which still stands today. To the people who worship all gods, Paul, before his visit to Rome, wrote this letter to the church in Rome to introduce himself.

This letter is a summary of his beliefs about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the mind of God, the heart of God, the incarnation of God in the flesh. This Jesus Christ who would permeate the whole Roman Empire. The vocabulary of this letter are not easy soundbites for 21st Century audiences. But its message is relevant.

In this chapter four (please read the whole chapter) Paul emphasises what it means to believe in Christ, and to illustrate his point he uses the story of Abraham from the Old Testament.

God made three promises to Abraham: that 1) God would be with him and bless him to be a blessing to the world. 2) His descendants would be numerous, like the sands of the sea and the stars of the sky. And 3) The Promised Land.

Abram also faced three testings: 1) He was asked to leave his homeland Babylonia to go to the land that God promised. No official deed. No signs. Abraham believed, left his homeland and began the journey. 2) Both Abraham and Sarah went past childbearing age, but still believed, and Isaac was born. 3) This is the hardest. God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to see if he loved God more than his son. Abraham passed this test as well.

And all of this occurred before Moses and the Ten Commandments, before ethics and morality, before obeying and following the religious rules, before the Jewish religion, before the commandment to love God and neighbour.

Paul asserts that this is the deepest form of religion. Our faith in Christ must be like the faith Abraham had in God who is always faithful and keeps his promises at all times. Paul calls us to embody or to actualize faith in our everyday living and venture out into the unknown world.

Manas Ghosh

Thursday 5th March 2020

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the Devil. 2 And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 But Jesus answered saying, "It is written, 'People shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the Devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God throw yourself down for it is written, 'He will give his angels orders concerning you', and, 'on their hands they will carry you, so that your foot does not strike against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" 8 Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory 9 and said to him, "All these I will give to you if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Go Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve.'" 11 Then the Devil left him, and suddenly the angels came and ministered to him."
(Translation by Keith Hamilton)

Reflection

Who are you, and what is your calling? These are key questions any time, but they press in on us at this time of Lent. Both here and at the cross, Jesus remains faithful to the call to the mission of God. Jesus chose to follow the path of obedience. What does the path of obedience look like for us? What are the temptations we face to divert from that path? In what way might the teaching of the sermon on the mount, and the work of God's Spirit assist us to constantly choose the right path?

Keith Hamilton

Friday 6 March

Genesis 12: 1-4A

1 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 4. So Abram went as the Lord told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed for Haran. 5. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons who they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. 6. Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. 9. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

(NRSV Translation)

Reflection

Like so many migrants Abram (and Sarai) set out for a new land in hope. For so many first generation migrants today that hope is one of a job that pays well and opens up the possibility of a better education and future for children and their children. It is a familiar story. It is one which many generations of people who have come to this land have experienced. What if our forebears could see us now? What if our descendants could as well? What on earth would they make of us? But Abram's journey into a new future was of a different order. It was one that came with a promise rather than a hope. The source that promise was 'the Lord'. He is to leave his country, his kin, his father's house. He will become the father of great nation and a source of blessing. So many centuries later Jews, Christians and Muslims look back to Abraham (and Sarah) as a source of their being blessed. This promise is shared with other faiths. From another perspective the text opens up the possibility of us, living in this far off country, being included in God's plan for humankind. This God is no mere tribal god of a relatively insignificant people in a distant time. We are included – but there is a cost to Abram's departure from Haran. He will now enter the land possessed by others? Will they co-exist or will the original inhabitants be put to flight, diminished in their own home lands?

Clive Pearson

Saturday 7th March 2020

John 3:1-17

1 Now there was man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can perform these signs which you do except if God is with them." 3 Jesus answered him and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you unless a person is born from above they cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a person be born when they are old? Can a person enter their mother's womb a second time and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit they cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh; and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I say to you that it is necessary for you to be born from above. 8 The wind blows wherever it wishes and you hear its sound, but do not know from where it comes and to where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus answered and said to him, "How can this happen?" 10 Jesus answered him saying, "You are a teacher of Israel and you do not know these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak about what we know and we bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our witness. 12 If I tell you earthly things and you do not believe, how, if I tell you the things of heaven, will you believe? 13 No one has even ascended into heaven except the One who came down out of heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, just so it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up 15 in order that everyone who believes in him may have life unceasing. 16 For God so loved the world God gave the only begotten Son in order that everyone who believes in him may not be utterly destroyed but may have life unceasing. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world in order to exercise judgement upon the world, but in order that the world might be saved him." (Translation by Keith Hamilton)

REFLECTION 1 on John 3:1-17: Salvation and Grace

The gospel of John reading for today is the story of Nicodemus. This passage includes the most well-known verse of all - John 3: 16. This verse tells us much about faith in Jesus Christ. These are words of grace - the opportunity of eternal life with God for all eternity.

Nicodemus knew the scriptures and came to Jesus with a serious question. He knew Jesus was a teacher (Rabbi) and the signs Jesus was doing. Maybe he wondered who Jesus really was but somehow Jesus knew what was really bothering him. Jesus cuts to the chase and tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they've been born again or more correctly, born from above - a spiritual birth rather than an earthly rebirth.

Christine Bayliss-Kelly

Sunday 8th March 2020

REFLECTION 2 on John 3: 1-17: Salvation and Grace

Following on with Nicodemus this concept of being born from above is about a re-creation of our spirits for the spiritual person we are- underneath all of the flesh- to be in relationship with God.

Another critical concept is found in verse 17. It speaks even more strongly about God's grace. Jesus is not about condemnation but rather about salvation.

Perhaps we can get so caught up in the rules of culture, theological understanding or tradition that we forget God's grace. In Jesus it is for salvation rather than for judgement or condemnation. Maybe we can be servants of grace in our own interactions with others.

Christine Bayliss-Kelly