

Serving Jesus by Serving Others

6 March • Monday of the First Week in Lent

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Meditation

In what is known as the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus as Judge divides humankind into two groups. To the sheep on His right, He welcomes them into His blessed kingdom. To the goats on His left, He relegates them to eternal damnation.

What makes the difference is the way they took care of, or failed to take care of “the least of these my brothers” (v 40) referring to the hungry and thirsty, those without home or clothes, the sick and the prisoner. That immediately raises the question of whether salvation is awarded according to works. If so, it would run counter to biblical teaching elsewhere (e.g. Eph 2:8-10).

But note how Jesus describes the place for the sheep: “the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v 34). If it has been prepared before they were born, how could good works make them deserving of it? Consistent with the rest of Scriptures, the call is not to do good works to merit the kingdom, but to express our identity as people already of the kingdom by the grace of God.

Such expression has seen Christians down the centuries taking care of widows and orphans, the poor, the homeless, refugees, prisoners, the sick and dying, and others often neglected by society at large. Jesus calls them “the least of these my brothers”. When we look into the eyes of these needy people, we see Jesus in them, and hear Him say, “you did it to me” (v 40). There is no greater work we can do than to serve Jesus by serving those in need.

Prayer

Lord, help me to see You in the people in need, and do it for them as I would do it for You.

Action

Think of someone you know who is in need, and reach out to him or her today.

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They All Alike Had Broken the Yoke

7 March • Tuesday of the First Week in Lent

Jeremiah 5:1-5, 14-15, 18-19

¹Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
look and take note!

Search her squares to see
if you can find a man,
one who does justice
and seeks truth,
that I may pardon her.

²Though they say, "As the LORD lives,"
yet they swear falsely.

³O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth?

You have struck them down,
but they felt no anguish;
you have consumed them,
but they refused to take correction.

They have made their faces harder than rock;
they have refused to repent.

⁴Then I said, "These are only the poor;
they have no sense;
for they do not know the way of the LORD,
the justice of their God.

⁵I will go to the great
and will speak to them,
for they know the way of the LORD,
the justice of their God."

But they all alike had broken the yoke;
they had burst the bonds.

¹⁴Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts:

"Because you have spoken this word,
behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire,
and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them.

¹⁵Behold, I am bringing against you
a nation from afar, O house of Israel,
declares the LORD.

It is an enduring nation;
it is an ancient nation,
a nation whose language you do not know,
nor can you understand what they say.

¹⁸“But even in those days, declares the LORD, I will not make a full end of you. ¹⁹And when your people say, ‘Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?’ you shall say to them, ‘As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.’”

Meditation

What is it in the attitude and behaviour of God’s people that would cause the Lord to rain judgement and punishment on them? Today’s passage deals with a situation in Israel’s history when there was widespread social injustice and idolatry amongst God’s people. Verses 1-5 capture for us the rootedness of malevolence and falsehood in the hearts of those from the highest to the lowest echelons of society. Reading on in verse 19, we see how God’s people turned away from Him and put their trust in foreign gods. All the time when they were forsaking the ways of God, they openly asserted that the Lord was powerless to do anything about their actions and that the prophets He had sent merely made empty verbal threats! (vv 12-13).

All this provoked God into action when Jeremiah prophesied the impending arrival of the Babylonians, whom God used to expel them from the promised land and send Israel into exile (vv 14-15).

In his article “At the Heart of Christian Spirituality” Dr. Graham Cole notes that authentic spirituality cannot merely be a matter of affirming orthodoxy about God. For him, authentic spirituality—like a three-legged stool—is evidenced when orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxis (right practice) and orthokardia (right heart) are present. It is interesting that when we apply this test to God’s people in the time of Jeremiah, all three expressions of authentic spirituality were lost.

What about us living in 21st century Singapore? How easy it is for us to hide behind a big show of one “ortho-” while not showing evidence of the others. Yet history reminds us that if we do that, the absence and disregard of the other “orthos” cripples authentic spirituality and erodes our passion for God and His ways. This translates not just in bad witness in our personal lives, but how our lives are lived out at home, church, workplace and the society.

Now while God’s word reminds us that reprimand for wicked behaviour, presumptuous attitude, and a lack of godliness is to be expected, what also needs to be noted is that punishment and exile is not the final word that God leaves with His people. For in the mix of angry, condemning words that God hurls at His people, we hear a declaration of grace (v 18)—a glimmer of hope and restoration for a remnant after they endure discipline under the hand of God.

Let us learn from the lessons in Scripture and order our lives aright before the Lord. Let us not take His grace for granted and yet be ready to receive the gift of restoration should we ever fail or fall.

Prayer

Lord, help me and my church family to aim at authentic wholistic spirituality and by doing that, allow You to transform my life, my home, my workplace, and Singapore society. Where I fail, help me to receive Your grace and restoration and allow You to transform me more and more into the likeness of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Action

Many of us do not think of social justice as a way to express our spirituality. Where around us are injustices experienced? What are some things we can do to right these social ills?

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Jerusalem Above... Is Our Mother

8 March • Wednesday of the First Week in Lent

Galatians 4:21—5:1

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband.”

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” ³¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

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¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Meditation

“Jerusalem above... is our mother” (v 26). What does Paul mean? Verse 24 tells us that Paul is speaking, not literally, but allegorically. What is his allegorical point? Verses 25-26 give us the answer: Jerusalem above is free whereas Jerusalem below (where we are at present) is in slavery. Paul tells us that our mother is Jerusalem above, not Jerusalem below. So we are children of a mother who is free, not a mother in slavery (v 31), and we should “not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (v 31).

Heavenly Father, is there any “yoke of slavery” that we, Your children, unwittingly make others and ourselves submit to? In Paul’s day, the temptation was to enforce rules such as “You must not accept employment that makes you do work on the sabbath” or “You must fast (do not eat or drink) at least once a week out of devotion to God” (cf. Rom 14:1-6). Do we still argue and divide over such rules today, Father?

A blog post describes the “brand of love” displayed in today’s church as “incredibly selective and decidedly narrow; filtering out all the spiritual riff-raff,” which sadly includes far too many of us.

It feels like a big bait-and-switch sucker-deal; advertising a “Come as You Are” party, but letting us know once we’re in the door that we can’t really come as we are... can you love us if we don’t check all the doctrinal boxes and don’t have our theology all figured out? It doesn’t seem so.

Can you love us if we cuss and drink and get tattoos ...? Can you love us if we’re not sure how we define love, and marriage, and Heaven, and Hell? It sure doesn’t feel that way.” (<http://tosavealife.com/inspiration/dear-church-heres-why-people-are-really-leaving-you/>)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, is there any truth to this?

If there is, please forgive us. Save us from turning godly rules into human restrictions that turn the freedom of knowing Your love into a dreadful slavery that desires “the approval of men more than the approval of God” (Jn 12:43).

Remind us that “Jerusalem above is our mother”, and as her children, we are free to help people be free indeed. In the name of Jesus Christ who came to set us all free. Amen.

Action

Is there someone whom I can “set free” from bitterness or guilt by my choosing to forgive?

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Where Are We to Buy Bread?

9 March • Thursday of the First Week in Lent

John 6:1-15

¹After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ²And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

¹⁵Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Meditation

Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fish is the only

miracle to be found in all four Gospels. Each Evangelist provides a different perspective of this miracle. For John, it is the fourth sign that he highlights, and points to Jesus as “the Bread of Life”. He also adds Jesus’ interaction with two of His apostles, Philip and Andrew.

Living with Jesus was a learning journey, and His teaching method always included questions. Jesus saw the hungry crowd (numbering over 5,000), and was moved to compassion. He asked Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” While Jesus focussed on the possible sources of food—and in the other Gospels, the apostles suggested that the crowd be dispersed to find food in the surrounding areas—Philip thought of the means, the money needed to buy the provisions, and calculated that the cost would be beyond their means. Yet Jesus challenged them to give the people something to eat.

At this point, Andrew (“Simon Peter’s brother”) brings a boy to Jesus, with his lunch pack of five barley loaves and two pickled fish, but he wonders, “what are they for so many?” These five loaves and two fish and their multiplication have been imprinted in Scripture and memory, but we often forget that they came from a young boy, introduced by an apostle who loved to bring people to Jesus (Jn 1:40-41; 6:9; and 12:20-22)!

There are significant learning points for us today, as we seek to follow Jesus. First, the Lord Jesus is also asking us where we buy our bread—not the physical bread that will perish, but the Bread that will last forever. That Bread is the gift from our heavenly Father to the world—the sacrifice of Jesus Himself, which we need to receive personally by faith (Jn 6:32-33, 51-56). That soul food, as the prophet Isaiah revealed centuries before, is received freely, “without money and without price”, and

gives everlasting satisfaction (Is 55:1-3).

Second, our Lord acknowledges His dependence on His Father by giving thanks for the loaves and fish, and then distributing them to the multitude. This is why He instructs us in the Lord's or Family Prayer, in addressing our holy heavenly Father and submitting to His will, "Give us this day our daily bread..." (Mt 6:9-13). This does not refer just to physical bread—for Jesus was mindful that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). This is the bread that we as His followers are commanded to eat ourselves and to share with others.

Finally, our Lord Jesus keeps applying these lessons in different ways to His disciples, then and now, because we are prone to misunderstand the signs, and fail to trust His power to provide for our every need. As we meditate on this passage afresh, may His words become "spirit and life" to us (Jn 6:63).

Prayer

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68-69). Amen.

Action

Eat and share the Living Bread, by word and deed, with someone who needs Him today, and thank and trust God to multiply the loaves and fish.

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Have I Any Pleasure in the Death of the Wicked?

10 March • Friday of the First Week in Lent

Ezekiel 18:21-28

²¹“But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²²None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. ²³Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? ²⁴But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.

²⁵“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ²⁶When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. ²⁷Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. ²⁸Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

Meditation

“Turn and live!” is at the heart of the call of God to His people. He takes no pleasure in punishing the wicked, but stands ready to forgive all who turn to Him.

The prophet Ezekiel was calling the Hebrew captives in

Babylon to return not only to their homes, but to repent and go back to their God. However they blamed their captivity on an earlier generation quoting the popular proverb, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Ezek 18:2). But the Lord told Ezekiel that they are not to use this proverb as an excuse for their own sins. Instead, He said that everyone was accountable for his own sin and responsible to turn from it (vv 21-22).

"Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." (Ezek 18:31-32).

Today when something goes amiss, we tend to blame heredity, environment, parents, teachers or the government, except the individual himself.

Take for example, a Northwestern University professor was arrested for collecting his mother's social benefits for six years after her death. When put on trial he blamed his errant act on "extreme procrastination behaviour" caused by his depression (source: RBC devotional, *Our Daily Bread*).

It has been said, 'There's no excuse for excusing sin.' No matter what your situation, you are responsible for what you do. We will have to answer to the all-knowing Judge for any behaviour that violates His holy law. Our only hope is to turn to Christ who sets us free from sin, so that we may live the liberated life that He came to give (Rom 6:22-23). Remember God's gift in Christ, to "turn and live" always.

Prayer

Reflect on and/or sing the song and follow by a personal prayer: 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace... Thru death into life everlasting He passed, and we follow Him there; over us sin no more has dominion—for more than conquerors we are!' (Helen H. Lemmel)

Action

Take time off and invite the Holy Spirit to do some soul-searching within you, 'Is there anything done or said recently which you have been troubled about?' and which you come to the awareness that it's just a blame-shifting on others, or a convenient self-excuse not to do anything about it. Go back to the promise of God's Word, "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9) and take up Jesus' invitation in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

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My Soul Thirsts for You

11 March • Saturday of the First Week in Lent

Psalm 63

O God, you are my God; earnestly 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;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,

⁶when I remember you upon 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 will sing for joy.

⁸My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

⁹But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;

¹⁰they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.

¹¹But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

Meditation

Desiring God is a worthwhile spiritual discipline for Christians to cultivate. It is an exercise that will

strengthen our relationship with God, and keep us strong and focussed in our spiritual journey, even when the journey is fraught with all kinds of dangers and distractions. Such an exercise, when practised regularly, will protect us from the evil one and help us to overcome whatever troubles we may face in life.

Desiring God, then, is a discipline of holy yearning for God which requires an intentional seeking after the way of God. This sense of yearning is captured in the Psalmist's earnest pursuit of God, and thirsting after Him.

What we should know is that desiring God cannot be a passive, carefree or superficial exercise. As shown by the Psalmist, there must be a commitment to a deep longing or, a thirsting for God. The upshot of such a spiritual discipline of desiring God is a life marked by worship from a soul which has been satisfied by Him. When carried out faithfully, there should be a doxological outcome with lips praising God, hands lifted high, and even when one is resting on the bed, God is still in the thought of those who yearn for Him. We may say that desiring God is to be God-conscious and God-centred in the way we live our life, and in the way we think about life.

Apart from finding joy in God, for those of us who seek after Him, the added blessing is that we will be able to ward off and overcome whatever threats the enemy may throw at us. Regardless of the circumstances we find in life, God is the victorious One. As the Psalmist has discovered and we can learn from him, we have a better appreciation of God's protection when we adopt the spiritual discipline of consciously desiring Him and seeking to deepen our relationship with Him.

Prayer

“Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.” (St. Augustine)

Action

Use this song as your prayer and an expression of a desire to develop a closer relationship with God.

As the Deer

*As the deer panteth for the water
So my soul longeth after Thee
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee*

(Chorus)

*You alone are my strength, my shield
To You alone may my spirit yield
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship Thee*

(Martin J. Nystrom)

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If Anyone Comes to Me...

12 March • Second Sunday in Lent

Luke 14:27-33

²⁷Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Meditation

When travelling overseas to another country, we are required to complete an immigration form where we may answer questions by ticking some boxes—at times, unthinkingly. Before or as we embark on a journey of discipleship, the Lord Jesus has some questions for us too:

- Have you renounced all that you have?
- Are you willing to bear your cross?
- Will you come to and come after Jesus?

These are tough questions for the journey.

The Lord did not promise us a rosy, easy and brief journey. There is no elective for choice of first class,

business class or elite economy class of travel. Comfort is not guaranteed. What is certain is the cross and cost of the journey. In both illustrations of the builder and the king—an assessment is required of them before they embarked on the task ahead. Likewise we are asked to make careful and thoughtful consideration—beyond the excitement of starting something new and untried, beyond the momentary zealous emotions and beyond an over-estimation of our own ability. Commitment to discipleship will cost time and resources and we will need wisdom to overcome the odds to complete the journey.

Contrast this to the excuses of those who were invited to the banquet in Luke 14:15-24, the paradox is that we have to be unencumbered by preoccupations and possessions. On this discipleship journey, there is no allowance for two pieces of cabin bag or 30 kilograms of checked-in baggage. But there is a requirement to bear the cross. Picture Jesus on His way to Jerusalem to be executed. Looking at Him dragging His bare feet, bearing the weight of the cross, suffering humiliation and pain... if you are standing among the crowds, will you renounce all that you have and go after Him? Think carefully.

At the end of that journey, you don't check out, you check in... to your eternal Hope and Home.

Prayer

Lord, grant me resilience, courage and strength to carry my cross and follow after You. Help me not be encumbered and distracted by earthly preoccupations and possessions. May I not give up halfway on my journey but be committed to follow You relentlessly.

Action

Put or put back into action one discipline that will enhance your commitment to follow Jesus on this journey of discipleship. Decide that you will not miss this action for at least the next seven days.

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