

EASTER DEVOTIONS

MARCH 30TH - APRIL 6TH
2015



Monday, 6th April

Poked and Penned Graeme Shanks

Read - John 20:24-31

Commentary - How is Thomas feeling as we encounter him at verse 24? He is feeling like his world has collapsed. This Jesus who he had set his hopes upon, it appeared, had failed so spectacularly. John is careful in letting us know that Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them at verses 19-23. As they told him about their encounter he no doubt thought it was a figment of their wishful imagination, 'Enough of the lie', you can imagine him thinking. Understandably, Thomas states that, 'Unless I see his hands, I won't believe.'

It is here that Jesus so graciously meets Thomas. No public scolding, no public embarrassment, just pure grace. He stands among them, notice not beside them or near them, and declares "Peace be with you." As Thomas touches and sees Jesus nail pierced hands we are met with in return by his awe filled declaration, 'My Lord and my God'. He began at verse 24 with his world having seemingly collapsed, now his whole outlook on the world and his life has changed. This Jesus wasn't a spectacular failure after all, he is the real deal. Not even the grave can contain him. Jesus has us today in mind as he declares, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

At verse 30, John wants us to know that he's not put this gospel account together simply to record history. He's written it so his readers in every generation can know life in the one who changes history. 'How can we believe in a man that we cannot see for ourselves?' you can imagine John's generation asking. A 1st century objection as well as a 21st century objection. Well, writes John, here is the testimony of a man who doubted, saw the evidence for himself, believed in Jesus and found life in his name. Thomas, therefore, stands as the ultimate example John's pattern of faith.

Reflections - Do you have sympathy with Thomas's initial reaction to the disciples at verse 25? Is there a barrier to belief in your life? How does the truth of the risen Jesus change the way you look at the world and your life?

Prayer - 'Lord, I thank you that you are the all-powerful God. Help me to allow the truth of the risen Jesus to shape everything I do today for your glory.'

Monday, 30th March

Betrayed and Arrested Peter McGregor

Read - John 18:1-14

Commentary - I think it's interesting to imagine this scene from Judas' perspective. How do you think he feels as he sees Jesus arrested and taken away? He must have been going over and over this moment in his mind for a long time as he considered firstly whether to betray Jesus and, secondly, how to betray him. I'm sure it was with trepidation that he led the soldiers to the garden: how would Jesus react? Would he go quietly? We know, from Matthew's gospel, that Judas was filled with remorse after Jesus was convicted. I imagine Judas might have started having doubts over what he'd done when he saw Jesus' reaction to the soldiers.

When the moment comes, Jesus does something remarkable: he makes the first move! "Who do you seek?" he asks, knowing full well what their answer would be, but it allows him to make the most wonderful statement in the passage: "I am he." This phrase, along with the reaction in verse 6, strongly implies Jesus' deity since, throughout the Bible, God is referred to using the words 'I am'. This is God himself, being led to his death by man, his creation!

Notice also the lack of resistance, the willingness with which he hands himself over. We are told in verse 4 that he knew everything that would happen to him: his arrest, unfair trial, torture, and brutal execution. Yet Jesus calmly allows them to take him away. How wonderful that Jesus loved us enough to choose the cross! You can see in verse 8 a picture of how Jesus takes our place. Jesus goes to the cross, but his followers can walk free. Remember the freedom that we find in the cross: we can walk free because Jesus chose to take our place.

Reflections - Take some time to consider the love Jesus displays by going willingly to the cross. How does the incredible love shown here affect your love for God? How does it affect your love for others?

Prayer - 'Lord, thank you for Jesus' willingness to go to the cross for me. Help me to appreciate your vast love for me every day and show that love to others.'

Tuesday, 31st March

Examined and Denied Alice Pirie

Read - John 18 v 15-27

Commentary - As we follow Jesus in the final days of his journey to the cross, in today's passage we see him being questioned by Annas. At the same time, John intersperses the questioning of Peter outside in the courtyard.

Annas's questioning focuses on Jesus disciples and His teaching. Rather than listening to Jesus' message, the authorities were worried about the threat to their power and position. The Christian message still causes offence to some people because it can run counter to their own selfish motivations. However, Jesus has nothing to hide and gives an honest response. This displeases one of the officials, who strikes him on the face.

It is humbling to think that although Jesus had done nothing wrong, he patiently suffered this humiliation and abuse out of love for us. It is difficult to imagine how the disciples must have felt, having just witnessed the Lord they loved being arrested, bound and led away. But despite their fear, Peter and another disciple have followed him.

One of the most striking things about this passage is the contrast between the responses of Jesus and those of Peter outside in the courtyard:

- Peter has already shown violence (v10) – Jesus shows no violence
- Peter denies the truth – Jesus tells the truth
- Peter is worried about the consequences – Jesus is prepared to face the consequences
- Peter is out in the cold (v18) – Jesus is in communion with the Father (see His prayer in John 17)

Peter was weak, just as we are. In his moment of temptation he took the easy way out, just as we so often do. If the story ended here, we would go away despondent. But see John 21:15-19 where Peter's relationship with Jesus is restored. John's purpose in telling the story this way is to highlight that Jesus work is sufficient to cover all our weaknesses. Even when we think we have failed, God has a plan to bring about more than we can imagine.

Reflections - How do you think that you would have responded if you were in Peter's shoes when challenged as to whether you knew Jesus?

What can you do to prepare yourself to be a better witness for Jesus? When you feel you have failed, do you have the faith to believe that God can take your failure and use it for his purposes?

Prayer - Lord, I thank you for your amazing love that led you to willingly endure humiliation and suffering on my behalf so that I might be freed from the penalty for my sin. Help me to have the courage to stand up and be counted as one of your followers, even when the going gets tough. Help me to trust you even when I feel that I have failed.

Sunday, 5th April

Risen and Revealed Ian Wilson

Read - John 20:1-18

Commentary - There was no doubting Mary Magdalene's devotion for her Lord. She had followed Him all the way from Galilee to care for Him (Matt 27:55; Luke 23:49). She had been at the cross and witnessed everything that happened – she knew He had died (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25). She had followed Joseph and Nicodemus when they took His body, wrapped it in clean linen and laid it in Joseph's tomb (Matt 27:61). She had come to the tomb to anoint His body (Luke 24:1) (she did not care that it would make her ceremonially unclean). It was still dark (John 20:1). The tomb was guarded by soldiers from an occupying force (Matt 27:66). She knew there was a great stone sealing the tomb (Mark 16:3). When Peter and John left after witnessing that the tomb was empty - she stayed (John 20:11). She was prepared to carry away the body of the Lord if she could find it (John 20:15) (probably physically impossible for her, but given the opportunity she would try!). And she is overcome when the Lord reveals Himself, so much so that she would cling to Him, perhaps to prevent Him leaving her again (John 20:17).

Are we surprised then when the Lord tests her devotion once more?

He does not immediately reveal His identity. He asks "Why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?" (John 20:15)

Could we paraphrase this to read "What is your heart's desire? Who do you want to follow?" What would be our response to these questions?

The Lord's presence meant more to Mary than anything, but His resurrection was more important than probably even she understood at the time. Paul later wrote to Corinth – "If Christ is not raised your faith is futile, you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17). The Lord said "Because I live you shall live also" (John 14:19)

How important is His resurrection for us? It is everything.

Reflections - The Lord constantly challenges us – He knows we are weak – He knows we have moments on the mountain top and moments in the valleys. Among His closest followers He has experienced betrayal, denial and desertion, but also intense devotion like Mary's. Devotion like hers is what He is seeking from us.

How great is your love for Him?

Apply John 14:21 to your life. Are you open to his commands? Are you prepared to obey them without question?

Prayer – Lord, my love for you will never reach the heights of Your love for me, I owe you my all. Help my love to grow and to be evident in my readiness to obey You in my life.

Saturday, 4th April

Dead and Buried Jonny & Rachel Towler

Read – John 19:28-42

Commentary - Three times in this passage we see specific things happen “so that Scripture would be fulfilled.”

1. Jesus says, “I am thirsty,” and the soldiers give him sour wine to drink (v28-29; Psalm 69v21)
2. “They did not break [Jesus’] legs.” (v33; Psalm 34v20)
3. “They pierced [Jesus’] side with a spear.” (v34; Zechariah 12v10)

So why is it significant that Jesus fulfilled every prophecy that was made concerning the Messiah in the Old Testament? Surely it’s because it gives us confidence that in his life, death and resurrection Jesus dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t.’ He left no room for doubt that He was the promised Messiah who came to save God’s people. But even more than that, when Jesus said, “It is finished” (v30), we can have absolute confidence that his mission had been fully accomplished. Through his sinless life and sacrificial death, the righteous requirement of the law had been perfectly fulfilled, thus securing our eternal salvation once and for all:

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53v5).

To the watching world, Jesus’ humiliation and eventual death on the cross all seems like a bit of a plan gone wrong. However, the story is full of little clues that this is exactly what God had in mind all along. Far from being an exposure of weakness, this narrative clearly displays God’s sovereign power over all things, right down to the smallest detail. Just as He had planned, Jesus “gave up His Spirit” willingly (v30) – no one took it from Him (John 10v17); herein lies the ultimate display of love.

Reflections - How do these examples of God’s faithfulness to His Word encourage you as you look to the future? The more we delve into Scripture, the more prophecies made and fulfilled we will uncover, and the more confidence we will have in God’s faithfulness and sovereign authority – is it time for us to get to know the Old Testament better?

Prayer - Lord, thank you for your faithfulness to Your Word. Thank you that we can have complete and utter confidence in your promises. Though we simply cannot comprehend it, we praise you for *choosing* to follow the path to death on the cross for our sake. Please help us to live today with the *assurance* that our sins have been forever dealt with by your finished work.

Wednesday, 1st April

Persecuted and Substituted Lynn McLaren

Read - John 18:28-40

Commentary - In today’s reading, the Jewish leaders hand Jesus over to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be charged. John informs us that the Jews didn’t enter the palace for fear of contamination by uncircumcised gentiles that would prevent them from eating the Passover, and therefore Pilate had to come out to them. Their obsession for outward cleanliness is in complete opposition to their hearts that are full of murder. Do our outward appearances truly reflect our hearts? Are we going through acts of worship with hearts as cold as stone?

The Jewish leaders are not able to specify any crime that Jesus has supposedly committed so Pilate interviews Jesus privately. Jesus answers the questions profoundly but Pilate fails to recognise who Jesus really is. He shows his disinterest in knowing truth as he asks, “What is truth?” and then leaves before Jesus could answer him. Pilate sees Jesus as an innocent man but is unable to recognise him as the King, the One who is truth.

Pilate speaks to the crowd of Jews and advises them that he can’t find Jesus guilty of any crime. He reminds them of the custom of releasing a prisoner at the time of the Passover, and suggests releasing “the king of the Jews”. The Jewish leaders have such a hatred for Jesus and are determined that he must die, that they have gone through the crowd manipulating them to choose Barabbas over Jesus. So a violent murderer is pardoned while Jesus takes the punishment. A perfect picture of what Jesus has done for us through substitution. He has taken the punishment for all our sins, so we can be free.

Reflections - Who do you most identify with from the passage - the Jewish leaders whose outward appearance belied their cold hearts, or perhaps Pilate who was unable to recognise Jesus as the truth, or Barabbas, who deserved his punishment but was pardoned while Jesus took his place?

Prayer - O Lord, thank you for taking my place on the cross. Thank you that you are truth in a world of lies and deception. Help me to listen to you today.

Thursday, 2nd April

Mocked and Berated Peter & Terri Unwin

Read – John 19:1-16a

Commentary - In many places, at home and abroad, those who appear not to conform to the world's idea of 'normal' are often ridiculed or otherwise persecuted and in the worst cases injured or even killed. We have seen it in Syria and Iraq today; N. Ireland in the recent past, and Germany and its occupied countries during WW2. Many of us cannot understand the mentality of people who would harm another just because they are different.

Jesus also suffered because of the community around him - he was either seen as different, a non-conformist or maybe even as a threat. Often it is the minority who lead the aggressors with potentially disastrous results. If we were with the crowd that day would we be brave enough to defy them? It seems Pilate had the opportunity to release Jesus but he was weak and perhaps didn't want to deal with the anger of the community, so history was made.

Jesus knew what was about to happen too and knew the consequences and knew the state of the world he had been born into; yet he continued, prepared to suffer and to die because of his love for this world. As Christians this undying love for mankind is the example we should follow; not pick and choose our friends or relationships for fear of ridicule or rejection but show true love to all regardless of the consequences. I know I find this course of action very difficult, and I tend to take the easier and less confrontational option – how about you?

So, whether it is the bully at school, the autocratic leader of a country or the neighbourhood know-it-all, we need to be in prayer for these situations and seek guidance as to if and how we should react or respond.

Reflection - What would we do when witnessing acts of persecution? (It sometimes takes a great deal of courage to get involved).

We may not be able or willing to intervene. But our prayer should be for God to lead us to act in the way he wants, and the strength to do it.

Prayer points - Give thanks that we are saved and forgiven in spite of our failings; Challenge ourselves to do what is right in the circumstances such as given above; Seek the guidance we need to make a difference.

Friday, 3rd April

Led and Nailed Jon Gemmell

Read - John 19:16b-27

Commentary - As we hone in on the central event of World History, John gives us a unique portrait of the agonised scene. As the beloved disciple, John is close to the action and spoken to by Jesus from the cross (27).

This narrative starts with Jesus heavily laden with the cross beam of what will be the apparatus of execution. Jesus being led to The Skull Place, Golgotha, that cursed mound visited by only the most heinous criminals. Crucifixion, the most brutal death ever conceived by man, could go on for days as the condemned would agonisingly raise their entire body weight on nailed pierced limbs, ripping through nerves, fighting for every breath. Eventually asphyxiation would prevail but only after endless torture & fatal fatigue.

Jesus is at the centre of this brutality with 2 others condemned to similar fate. Mark tells us these men were robbers, Matthew that they were insurrectionists, Luke that one repented while the other hurled insults, John just catalogues their presence.

Above Jesus' head Pilate affixed a *titulus*, an inscription detailing the crime as a warning to others. However this charge was like none before, a seeming statement of fact that this man dying was Jesus the Nazarene, The King of the Jews. This greatly annoyed the chief priests of the Jews but Pilate was in no mood to acquiesce to their demands any further. What is interesting about the scene is Pilate's **accidental mission**. In writing the *titulus* in the 3 languages of the day, Hebrew for the Jews, Greek for the foreigners and Latin for the Romans, Pilate was inadvertently proclaiming to the World truth greater than he knew, that this man was the King of the Jews, and not just the Jews but the World forever, and everyone could read it for themselves.

The scene then zooms to the soldiers. For them it is just another day on duty during this foreign tour in occupied Israel. It is by no means the worst day they've had, at least these criminals can't fight back. There is also the added spoils of acquiring the clothes of the crucified. It was savage work but someone had to do it and always after a crucifixion there was a lull in violence as fear swept through the locals. What the soldiers don't realise is that the tunic for which they gambled rather than divide was prophesied in Psalm 22:18. John adds this as an editorial comment, to help us see that behind the apparent helplessness of the one hanging on the cross there is an **unseen providence** playing out as it was intended.

The final camera angle in our passage is a close up dialogue between Jesus, a group of women including his mother and John the author and beloved disciple. Here we see the **tender strength** of Jesus. As he hangs, struggling for every breath, bearing the sins of the world, his concern goes to his widowed mother about to be bereft of her first born son. Therefore we have a beautiful scene of Jesus entrusting his mother in her late 40's to his beloved disciple. Even in his darkest hour Jesus' thoughts are for others and for their blessing. Even in agony we see agape from Jesus. Hallelujah what a Saviour!

Reflections - How will these three themes of Mission, Providence and Tenderness effect you today? As you look over this scene what is new, what if fresh and how does it increase faith and garner love for Jesus in your life?

Prayer - The other gods were strong but you were weak. They rode but you stumbled to your throne. But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak. And no god has wounds but you alone. Thank you Jesus that you were pierced for my transgressions. Amen