

Lent Week Four

REJOICE

The scripture readings for the fourth week of Lent demonstrate that there are no easy answers. Dr Bridie Stringer invites to recognise and rejoice that discernment, collaboration and mutual respect are better yardsticks for the kingdom of God than harsh rules.



SUNDAY 27 MARCH

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT

God's hug is big enough for all of us

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3. 11-32

Today's Gospel reading is no less challenging to us because it is familiar. It is the story of the wastrel son who has treated his father as if he were already dead by asking for his inheritance so that he can live what he thinks will be a life of pleasure and plenty. Faced with disaster, he again looks to home for his solution, thinking that he might be given what meets his needs. This time he aims for adequacy rather than opulence. Instead, he is embraced as if he has returned from the dead, much to the displeasure of his older sibling who cannot even call him "my brother" but complains to his father about "this son of yours". There are clearly scales of worthiness implied in the story, but the loving father does not measure out his love in that way. His embrace is wide enough for all.

Help me, Lord to become what I eat at your table – your hands and your heart in the world. Amen.

MONDAY 28 MARCH

Healing – even remotely!

Isaiah 65:17-21; John 4:43-54

Today's reading from Isaiah lists the gifts of promised glory, with the holy city of Jerusalem the ultimate example of the lavish love of God – no more death for those who are young, a flourishing old age, no more hardship and grief, but fruitful harvests and peace. However, just in case we might be lulled into thinking that there are privileged insiders and discarded outsiders, John's Gospel provides a telling answer. In today's Gospel account, having returned from Jerusalem, the city of the prophets, to his own territory in Galilee, Jesus brings his prophetic gifts to bear on the local royal official's son. He does not even make a house call, but simply pronounces words of healing and it is done remotely. The official, on seeing the evidence of Jesus' powers, becomes a believer. What evidence of Jesus' powers do we need in order to be faithful followers?

Today I pray that I will recognise the love of Jesus in the small things as well as the dramatic – perhaps in graciously returning the smile of a stranger in the supermarket or choosing not to engage in gossip about my neighbour. Amen.

TUESDAY 29 MARCH

Jesus under the spotlight

Ezekiel 47:1-9. 12; John 5:1-3. 5-16

Like yesterday's reading from Isaiah, today's account from Ezekiel describes the ultimate paradise in a holy city for a people whose history has been one of rejection, wandering, famine and war. The refreshment for the territory will come from the fresh waters flowing from the Temple, and there will be plentiful food from an everlasting harvest and plants which provide healing. The theme of healing in the Temple, however, becomes something of a challenge in the Gospel reading in which Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the festival. He heals an invalid who has lain by the healing waters but is unable to enter them because he has no one to help him. Jesus, having healed him on the Sabbath is criticised by those who regard themselves as good gatekeepers of the Law. These observers of righteousness consider what more they must now do in order to keep the troublesome Galilean preacher under control.

Lord, I pray that I will seek to minister to others without being judgmental and harsh. Help me to provide fresh water for others to drink and to omit the vinegar! Amen.

WEDNESDAY 30 MARCH

God's kingdom "right here, right now"

Isaiah 49:8-15; John 5:17-30

If Jesus was described in modern political terms, today's Gospel reading would be seen as his manifesto. The reading from Isaiah reminds us that when Jesus first announced his mission, he had used the words of Isaiah when reading from the scroll in his local synagogue. However, unlike some political figures who compile their manifestos without any real prospect of carrying them out in their entirety, Jesus is proclaiming God's kingdom "right here, right now". The final words of this reading throw us a challenge: "As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just". When we hear, do we judge? But even before we hear, do we actually listen or simply assume we will know what will be said and have our answers ready-made? Pope Francis once asked the question: "Who am I to judge?"

Lord, I pray that I will listen attentively and compassionately, and judge fairly and justly. Amen.

THURSDAY 31 MARCH

Update the lenses

Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:31-47

Today's first reading suggests that Moses bargains with God for the wandering Israelites not to be incinerated for their idolatry. Does God's mind change in this way as a result of the eloquence of one individual or of a community of believers? If Moses had not reminded God of his promise to make the descendants of Abraham numbered like the stars of heaven, would they simply have gone up in smoke in the desert? Perhaps the pragmatism requested by Moses is even more evident in John's Gospel reading when Jesus tells the pharisees that celebrating his presence among them is not disrespectful of the Law of Moses but an opportunity to have a fresh perspective. Do we sometimes need to update the lenses through which we read the Gospel message just as those who wear glasses need to have their vision checked from time to time?

Lord, I pray that I will recognise that your message of welcome invites both renovation and innovation, opportunities to honour the past and to embrace the challenges of the future with confidence and joy. Amen.

FRIDAY 1 APRIL

Jesus knows his flock

Wisdom 2:1. 12-22; John 7:1-2. 10. 25-30

Today's reading from Wisdom is a disturbing admission from those who know that what they are doing is wrong. They set out to destroy their opponent rather than listen to a message of right judgment and mercy. The challenge they pose is that if the righteous messenger is really from God, then there will be a dramatic rescue rather than shameful death. Similarly, John's Gospel reading shows that the pressure on Jesus from the Temple authorities is building to a final and fatal crescendo. Instead of engaging in debate about statutes and laws, Jesus uses the simple pastoral image of the caring shepherd who knows his flock and whose flock know him. His opposers can draw their own conclusions from his metaphor and so the tension continues to build.

Today I pray that I will provide gentle leadership to those to whom I minister, not citing harsh rules and regulations which exclude and condemn, but instead offering a message of renewal and hope. Amen.

"If someone does not smile at you, be generous and offer your own smile. Nobody needs a smile more than the one that cannot smile to others."

Dalai Lama

SATURDAY 2 APRIL

Servant leadership

Jeremiah 11:18-20; John 7:40-52

The prophet Jeremiah acknowledges that because of his challenge to the people of both Israel and Judah, he will be placed in mortal danger. They do not wish to hear his message. He uses the metaphor of the innocent lamb led to the slaughter. We are reminded that in yesterday's Gospel reading, Jesus uses the image of the Good Shepherd to highlight his mission to care for his flock. In today's encounter with the authorities, even geography is used as a tool to try and discredit Jesus. The Messiah will surely not be a Galilean! We face similar challenges. How do we judge the credibility of those who seek to lead us? Do we define them by where they live, their places of education, or their occupation? Is integrity in public life determined by influential friends? What does servant leadership look like in our time?

Lord, today I pray that I will respect the wisdom of those who demonstrate honesty and fairness rather than seeking advancement at the expense of my integrity. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINT

Do I ever notice someone's status rather than their integrity?

Who is the wisest person I know? Why?

Am I a joyful follower of Jesus? Why?

Dr Bridie Stringer is a mother, grandmother and pastoral theologian.