



April 2020

Learning Life from Jesus

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
From the Gospel of Matthew 4
1 & 2 Thessalonians**

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Monday, March 30: Matthew 22:34-46

Could Premiers Jason Kenney (UPC, Alberta) and John Horgan (NDP, BC) cooperate on anything? Not likely. Just as unlikely, the Pharisees (pro-rabbis'-rules-and-regulations, pro-resurrection) conspire with the Sadducees (anti-rabbi's-rules-and-regulations, anti-resurrection) to do something about Jesus. Unthinkable.

They try to trap him: "*Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?*" (22:35-36). The Pharisees and Sadducees could agree on this. But they aren't sure Jesus would. They are trying to expose Him as a heretic. However, Jesus answers directly from the first five books of the Old Testament: "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind*" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Leviticus 19:18). "*The law (which the Sadducees love) and the prophets (which the Pharisees love) are based on these two commandments*" (22:37-40).

Jesus, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees all agree. But Jesus highlights we can SAY all the right things but not LIVE them. As we shall see in Matthew 23, Jesus is challenging the assumption that just knowing right doctrine is enough. He is inviting us to LIVE a new kind of life and create a new kind of society, a world where people really do love God and their neighbour in DEED as well as in WORD.

Jesus turns the tables and asks **them** a question: "*What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?*" The Pharisees' answer is safe: he is David's son. Jesus' reply is not safe at all: "*Then why does David, speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, call the Messiah 'my Lord'? For David said, 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies beneath your feet' (quoting Psalm 110:1). Since David called the Messiah 'my Lord,' how can the Messiah be his son?*"

Jesus has already been *unofficially* called "the son of David" (Matthew 1:23, 9:27, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30, 21:9). Now He is deliberately *officially* claiming He is the son of David. In fact, He claims He is greater than David, the greatest king in Israel's history. He is not going to come as a second David – and, for a few short years, be the warlord of a small country in the Middle East. He is coming as something much bigger, much more wonderful, and much more universal. He is the Messiah. He is God.

The real enemies, Jesus will say, are not the Romans. The real enemies are evil, sin, and death. Therefore, the real task of Messiah is not to re-establish the nation of Israel. The Messiah's real goal is to establish the Kingdom of God: here on earth we aim to live by the great commands to love God and love our neighbour, AND we look forward to His return when the Kingdom will come in all its fullness, when evil is swept away. The real task of the Messiah is to destroy the root of all evil: sin and death.

- How can I practically love God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my mind – today?
- How can I practically love my neighbor as myself – today?

*God of mercy and compassion, weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives.
Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts,
so that we may see your vision –
a new reign of justice and compassion that will transform the earth.
Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose.
Anoint us with your Spirit that we might bring good news to the oppressed,
bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive.
Give us a new urgency and a new commitment
to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and visit those who live in isolation.
Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch,
to accept the unacceptable, and to embrace the enemy.
Surround us with your love, fill us with your grace, and strengthen us for your service.
Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus –
to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow.
Make us your disciples. Amen*

followingjesus.org

Tuesday, March 31: Matthew 23

German theologian, Karl Barth, was asked, *"In all your decades of study, what is the most profound theological truth you have come across?"* His answer? *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* This is the heart of the good news. This is Jesus' heart: *"How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings ..."* (23:37). He loves His people. He dearly wants them to know that.

His heartbreak is that while the teachers of religious law and Pharisees teach good theology, they don't – or can't – live up to it themselves. They don't really love God or love their neighbour in practical ways.

- *"Everything they do is for show"* (23:5) – they look "good" but their hearts are unloving.
- *"You shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces"* (23:13) – by insisting on keeping un-keep-able rules, no one ever gets into the Kingdom.
- *"You cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are."* (23:15) – they are converting people to a bitter, brutal, unloving religion.
- *"You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law – justice, mercy, and faith"* (23:23) – they don't care about people.
- *"You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy – full of greed and self-indulgence."* (23:25) – their lives and their words are out of sync.
- *"Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness"* (23:28) – they talk the talk but don't walk the walk of being godly people.
- *"You build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed, and you decorate the monuments of the godly people your ancestors destroyed"* (23:29) – the people repeatedly reject God's messengers.

Paul, a former Pharisee, reflects on all of this:

"The trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it."

"And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it."

"I have discovered this principle of life – that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am. Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?" (Romans 7:14-24)

But Paul doesn't end there. He goes on: *"Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin. But now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature."*

"So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins" (Romans 7:25-8:3). That's great news.

None of us is perfect. But, with God's help, we can work on loving Him with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strengths. And, through the inspiration and empowerment of His Spirit, we can love our neighbour as ourselves. What is Jesus saying to me, today?

*God of love, out of love you created the world, us, me.
 You put everything together in detailed, delicate ways, knowing our every need.
 Sustaining God, you provide:
 food that nourishes, water that refreshes, rest that renews.
 You give: emotions that express, art that uplifts, history that reminds.
 You prompt: community that supports, experiences that teach, relationships that inspire.
 God, in all these things, you sustain our being and well-being, together.
 Your love, a resource for our relationships with others, with creation, with ourselves, and with you.
 Love, informing friendships, joining sister with brother, and parent with child.
 Love, the wellspring of tender, pleasure-sharing, intimate relationships.
 Love, unconditional, forgiving and inspirational,
 a love embodied in Jesus, which we seek to share.
 God, thank you for your gift of love, which encircles us,
 sustains us and from which nothing can separate us.
 Amen*

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Wednesday, April 1: Matthew 24:1-36

Some of us get SOOO excited about passages like Matthew 24. We are certain we can see these words being fulfilled in our own time, right? This is all coming true in 2020, right? Jesus is just about to return, right? Maybe ... maybe not ... In almost every generation people have seen these signs coming to pass and have been positive that Jesus' return was imminent. And, so far, every generation has been wrong.

We need to remember:

- Jesus spoke these words to **specific people** (His disciples) at a **specific point in time** (just before His arrest and crucifixion) in a **specific place** (on a hill overlooking the Temple and city of Jerusalem). Jesus' words were intended, first of all, for these people. Many of His disciples would experience all of these horrors in their lifetimes: wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, persecution, false prophets, even the "abomination of desolation" when the Romans destroyed the Temple and desecrated it by making an offering to their pagan gods on the holy altar (70 AD). Jesus is preparing His own followers for challenging days ahead. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. But amid a confusing, crazy world, God will get His people through. One day, someday, Jesus will return. Until then we are called to remain faithful.
- We can appreciate that we still live in difficult times, just as Christians have throughout the centuries. Following Jesus is still not easy. It can be very challenging. We can face ridicule and abuse for our faith. Some believers face brutal persecution. But in the midst of this crazy world, God will get us through. We are called to remain faithful.
- Our challenge – like Christians in all generations – is to live as if we will live forever – keep learning, keep trying to bless the world, keep investing in the lives of people around us, keep caring for those in need, keep praying that God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth – **and** also to live as if we will die tomorrow – to make every moment of every day count for the Lord. It sounds like a paradox. But when we do that, we make our lives count both for the long-term and the short-term. And the Kingdom of God does come a little bit more each day as it is in heaven.
- Don't get seduced by people who claim to have figured out the exact date, time, or place of Jesus' return. If Jesus says, "*no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows*" (24:36), we would be pretty arrogant to think we know better than the angels or Jesus, Himself. If someone is trying to tell you they've got it all figured out, you can be sure they fall into the "false prophet" category.

In the prayer Jesus taught us, He tells us to pray, "*Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:9-10). Rather than speculating on all sorts of "end times" scenarios, we are called to do our best to be people of the Kingdom of God, to do His will, each and every day of our lives.

Who can I encourage today? Who can I bless today? Who can I help today? Who can I share the love of Jesus with, today?

*It is only right, with all the powers of our heart and mind,
to praise You Father and Your Only-Begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Dear Father, by Your wondrous condescension of Loving-Kindness
toward us, Your servants, You gave up Your Son.*

*Dear Jesus, You paid the debt of Adam for us to the Eternal Father
by Your Blood poured forth in Loving-Kindness.
You cleared away the darkness of sin by Your magnificent and radiant Resurrection.
You broke the bonds of death and rose from the grave as Conqueror.
You reconciled Heaven and earth.
Our life had no hope of Eternal Joy before You redeemed us.
Your Resurrection has washed away our sins, restored our innocence and brought us joy.
How inestimable is the tenderness of Your Love.*

*We pray You, Lord,
to preserve Your servants in the peaceful enjoyment of this Easter happiness.
We ask this through Jesus Christ Our Lord,
Who lives and reigns with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
forever and ever. Amen.*

Gregory (540-604)

Thursday, April 2: Matthew 24:36-51

Way back in my (all too brief) UBC rowing career, we were expected to spend several hours a day training and working out at the gym. The coach would do surprise inspections to see if we were actually spending time on the weights or not. If you were serious about being on the rowing team, you would make sure you spent your hours training so that, if the coach dropped by, he would find you hard at work.

What are the qualities of faithful servants of God? They are the ones hard at work. We may think the "work" they ought to be doing is reading the Bible, praying, meditating, journaling, reading, worshipping. These are all good things. But Jesus says the faithful servants are the ones looking after the people whom God has put into their lives – caring for them spiritually, physically, and emotionally. *"A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them"* (24:45). Does that surprise you? (see also James 1:27)

The Pharisees and teachers of the law knew lots of good doctrine, but they wouldn't – or couldn't – live it out. Jesus is looking for people who will take the basic, foundational truths of faith – loving God with all your heart, mind, and soul, **and** loving your neighbour as yourself – and actually put them into practice.

Paul, our former Pharisee, writes, *"Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.*

"But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you ... And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

"Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do.

For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.' For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children"(Romans 8:5-16). That's great news.

May the Spirit help us live as God's faithful children. And love ALL of God's children (everyone!).

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
In the presence of my loving Creator,
I look honestly at my feelings over the last day,
the highs, the lows and the level ground.
Can I see where the Lord has been present?

Lord you became human to communicate with me.
You walked and worked on this earth.
You endured the heat and struggled with the cold.
All your time on this earth was spent in caring for humanity.
You healed the sick, you raised the dead.
Most important of all, you saved me from death.
May the Holy Spirit enlighten my mind and my heart
to respond to God's teachings through the Scriptures.
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.

I picture the gentleness in His eyes and the smile full of love as he gazes on me.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me place myself fully in His care,
abandon myself to Him, knowing He always wants what is best for me.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.
Amen.*

Friday, April 3: Matthew 25:1-13

Apparently, the average wedding these days costs U.S. \$27,000. Yikes. Weddings can be major events. If we think weddings can get out of control today, in the ancient world, weddings were even more seismic undertakings. There were several stages: from visits to respective family homes, to days of parties. On the final day, celebrations would go late into the evening, ending with a torchlight parade to the wedding feast. Because there were lots of chances for delays along the road, it was impossible to be precise about times. The guests at the wedding feast might be kept waiting a long time. So, if you were wise, you would be prepared. In Jesus' parable, some people are prepared with oil for their lamps – and some aren't.

One of the Old Testament images of the coming of the Messiah is that of a bridegroom coming for His bride (His faithful people – us). Jesus has already said, "*The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son ...*" and went on to tell a story about how the invited guests were all too busy, too distracted, too preoccupied to be bothered to come, so the king invited beggars and riff raff from the highways and byways (Matthew 22:1-14).

Jesus is now telling another parable about the Kingdom of heaven being like a wedding (isn't it exciting that Jesus sees the coming of the Messiah as a party). He is speaking, initially, to the Jewish people in His day. They were the ones invited to the wedding feast: many of whom make excuses, are too busy, or just don't care (Matthew 22:1-14). In today's reading, they are the bridesmaids: some of whom are ready to welcome Jesus, and some of whom cannot – or will not – read the signs of the times.

It's easy to forget God is at work in our world. It's easy to ignore the signs of God's activity all around us. It's easy to ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can be so busy. We find excuses. We don't care. Jesus is encouraging us to be alert. He is challenging us to see opportunities to make a difference in the world around us. We never know when the next opportunity to serve Him might be. We never know who we might be able to help or encourage someone, in the name of Jesus, today.

How do we do that? Paul's says: *"The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory"* (Romans 8:26-30).

We simply need to be available. We need to be willing. And when God brings opportunity our way, we simply step forward, in faith ...

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
who died for us, forgive us all that is past
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.*

Church of England General Confession

Saturday, April 4: Matthew 25:14-30

Canadians have a reputation for "playing it safe" about most things. We worry. We buy lots of insurance. However, when we do actually take a risk, things almost always turn out fine. And if we are risking in the name of the Lord, filled with His Spirit, using the gifts He has given us, shouldn't we expect things to be OK? What do we think is going to happen? If God is with us, who can be against us? Consider this parable ...

The "talents" in this parable are not abilities, but a unit of money (a unit weight of gold or silver). But this parable *is* the origin of the sense of the word "talent" meaning "gift or skill." Because these characters received a rare, personal gift (in their specific case, money), the word "talent" has come to be used more generally referring to an innate, personal gift, possessed by relatively few people.

This parable was spoken first to the Jewish people. What were their "talents"? Their gifts were (1) God's special calling as His people, (2) His blessing of the Old Testament Scripture, (3) His calling on the Jewish nation to be a blessing and help the entire world know God (Genesis 12).

Which of the three servants was the nation of Israel most like? The third servant – God had given them a

blessing and a purpose but they hoarded it. They kept it hidden. They had done nothing about blessing the nations. They missed their calling. What is the Master's response?

What are our "talents"? Everything we have is, of course, a gift from God. Here are some of God's gifts:

- The gift of being human. In Genesis we learn that God's imprint is upon us. The term "image of God" means that you are a divine imprint. Each of us is a divinely designed gift in this world.
- Each of us is unique, unlike any other. And each of us has something wonderful to contribute to the world. Each of us is unique – but equally – immeasurably – valuable.
- We have unique personalities, talents, abilities, experiences, skills, and resources. Whatever we have going for us – our innate abilities, education, finances, or experiences – these are all gifts from God. We need to use them in His kingdom.
- Time is a gift God has given us. How do we use it?
- With our personalities, gifts, and journeys-through-life, there are opportunities that come to us and no one else. What do we do with these?
- Paul describes other gifts God blesses us with, special gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1 Corinthians 12:7–11.
- **Most importantly, we know Jesus.** We have experienced His love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We know something of what new life in Him is like. What a great gift to share.

Are we at all like the third person? This person does nothing with all he has been given. God has invested His love in us; He has saved us; He has blessed us; He has given us these gifts, experiences, skills, talents ... His passion is that we actually use them for His glory.

Jesus is challenging us to think about how we live life. Do we always play it safe? Are we focussed on ourselves and protecting our own stuff? Are we afraid to "put ourselves out there"? Are we afraid to actually live? Or are we willing to risk for God, like the first two people?

What would happen if I talked with that family member about my relationship with Jesus? Is that scary? Will I take the risk? What would happen if I volunteered to work with children, youth, or seniors? Is that scary? Will I take the risk? What if I make a commitment to actually tithe or give a regular special offering to a ministry? Am I afraid? Or will I take the risk? What if I have a dream to do something new and wonderful for the Lord? Is it frightening? Or will I take the risk? What is Jesus saying to me? Am I afraid? Or will I take the risk?

Almost inevitably when people take risks for God, using the gifts God has given them, good things happen. And if not, so what? Notice that no one in the parable is punished because they risked, and failed. The only person who suffers is the one who would not risk at all.

Talk with the Lord about this parable. Identify one or two gifts – abilities, opportunities, experiences, talents, time, financial resources, skills– and begin to think about ways that they might be used. Don't allow past failures to determine how much you're willing to risk. Remember your gifts are gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to you by God. He will empower you, inspire you, and guide you as you use them for his kingdom. As God calls, he also equips. As He equips, He also calls.

*O Christ our God,
ceaselessly we bow before your cross that gives us life;
And glorify your Resurrection.
Most powerful Lord, on that third day
You made anew the failing nature of mankind,
Showing us revealed the path to heaven above;
For you alone are good, the Lover of the Human Race.
Praise You, O Lord. Praise your Name.
Praise the Name of Jesus.
Amen.*

John of Damascus (8th Century)

Palm Sunday, April 5: Matthew 6:5-15 and Matthew 21:1-11

On Palm Sunday we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-12) – complete with celebrations, crowds, and palm branches (see March 24 reading if you still have it). In a very public way many, many people in Jerusalem recognize Jesus as the Messiah. These folks are beginning to comprehend that Jesus is the promised Saviour who has come to give life, here and hereafter. As we read about His entrance into Jerusalem today, we are reminded that He is still our King, our Lord, and our Saviour today. Jesus still is Lord and King. No other power in heaven or on earth is equal to Him.

The celebrations of Palm Sunday are fantastic. But how do we relate to God on April 5, 2020? Joining in a parade or public worship is all well and good, but it won't sustain us when we're facing challenges. How do we know Jesus' presence this moment? How can we have a personal relationship with this Jesus right now?

In Matthew 6:5-15, Jesus is giving us some principles for how we can relate to God. We can talk with Him. We can share what's on our hearts and minds with Him. We can listen to Him. We can pray ...

In this passage Jesus is referring to the ways in which many people prayed in His culture. Some people loved to pray in public. They liked to use words that sounded lofty, profound, and super-spiritual. And as they did so, they would look down their noses at people around them whom they considered less religious.

In contrast, Jesus says the true measure of our spiritual lives is not so much what happens in public as what happens in private. Prayer is relationship – it is a personal thing where we share our honest praises, thanks, concerns and needs with our heavenly Father, *and* we genuinely listen to hear His voice speaking to us. The fine public pray-ers in Jesus' example never listen the God. They recite speeches to look and sound spiritual. But prayer is not something we do to impress God or people. It is not an attempt to cajole or convince God to do our will. It's not a rote exercise where we repeat a "magic formula." It's a personal conversation – speaking and listening – with God. It is a continual practice of the presence of God.

Prayer is opening our lives to God. It is inviting Him to shape and guide our lives. Prayer is not a matter of convincing God to do our will, but us, opening up ourselves, to do His will. Prayer is matter of asking God – and giving Him the freedom – to do in our lives what He has been wanting to do all along. God does not impose His will on us. He never forces us. As we pray we invite Him to change us ... and then to change the world through us. Prayer may be private, but its impact is very public.

Prayer is inviting God to be King in our lives all the time. To welcome Him every day with same passion with which people welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday. It is about honest, humble, open communication. Prayer is about God changing us, then changing the world through us.

*We praise you, our Father:
When we turned away you did not reject us, but came to meet us in your Son.
You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you.
In Christ you shared our life that we might live in him and he in us.
He opened his arms of love upon the cross
and made for all the perfect sacrifice for sin.
Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen*

Monday, April 6: Matthew 25:31-46

I'm one of those people who, whenever he sees a police car, feels guilty. I must have done something wrong. Surely they are coming to arrest me. I'm always surprised when the officer does not turn on the lights and pull me over. I just have an innate guilty conscience, I guess.

Jesus has spoken some hard words to the Jewish-powers-that-be about recognizing He is the Messiah (parable of the ten virgins). He has challenged the Jewish people to see they had God-given blessings and a God-given purpose to help all nations know His love (parable of the talents). Now all the nations are gathered before Him (25:32), and Jesus is passing judgement. From what Jesus has said about being ready/unready (25:1-13) and using their blessings to bless others (25:14-30), where do you think the Jewish leaders are in this parable? This parable is a blunt indictment of the religious folks in Jesus' time.

Of course, there are some obvious applications to our situation, today, too. We need to see the needs of people around us – and meet them. It's not an option.

Some Christians shy away from caring for people's physical needs – the most important thing people need is to repent and come to Jesus, right? These folks are partly correct: yes, the most important thing any of us need is a life-transforming encounter with Jesus. But that doesn't mean we don't also care for people's physical, social, and emotional needs. It's impossible to get any other message from this parable other than we are to love people both in DEED (caring for their physical needs) as well as in WORD (spiritual needs). It's a both/and not an either/or. To ignore people's physical needs has serious consequences.

Jesus identifies six basic human needs in this parable: food, drink, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and companionship. Globally, the first five are huge issues in much of the world. We partner, as a church and individually, with many missions and agencies to help alleviate poverty and suffering. Locally in Lethbridge, we have people who need the first five, too. We support our Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Family Services, immigrant services, reading help, coaching, tutoring, visiting, and much more. Regionally and Globally we do a lot through Bill Creek Camp, CBM, Days for Girls, and missionaries from our own church.

The sixth basic need is time. Time to be a friend. Time to build relationships. Time to encourage. Time can be harder to give. One theory about the growing demand for psychologists, counsellors (and in the church, pastors' time) is an increasing need for "professional friends" because fewer and fewer people genuinely have time to be "regular" friends. In our city the greatest need may be this sixth basic need – companionship. True friendship. Someone who will listen. Someone who gives time. Someone who really cares. Someone to laugh with. Someone to cry with. There are a LOT of lonely people in Lethbridge.

Jesus is not trying to make us feel guilty. Jesus' point is, in the course of our daily lives, as we meet people with needs, care for them along the way. God has given us all gifts of time, energy, relationships, opportunity, talents and abilities, and money. We all have these gifts. The challenge is not that we need more time, energy, relationships, opportunities, talents, abilities, or money. The question is rather how we use the time, energy, opportunities, talents, abilities, and money we have already.

Begin – as we always should – with prayer. Mother Teresa comments, *"Everything starts from prayer. Without asking God for love, we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to others. Just as people today are speaking so much about the poor but they do not know or talk to the poor, we too cannot talk so much about prayer and yet not know how to pray."* It's not about having a guilty conscience. Simply ask God to show you the opportunities to share his love through those daily gifts you already have.

In the early 13th century, Francis, the son of a wealthy businessman, was moved with compassion for the poor and suffering people he met in the streets and countryside around his hometown of Assisi, Italy. Moved by God, he and his companions chose to dedicate their lives to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, sharing the good news of God's love in deed and word. Francis counseled his brothers: *"Preach the Gospel – if necessary, use words."* Francis also said, *"Start by doing what's necessary. Then do what's possible. Suddenly you are doing the impossible."* We can all share the good news of God's love by deed and word.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;
 and where there is sadness, joy.
 O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen*

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Tuesday, April 7: Matthew 26:1-16

After Jesus' harsh words (Matthew 23-25), it's hardly surprising that *"the leading priests and elders were meeting at the residence of Caiaphas, the high priest, plotting how to capture Jesus secretly and kill him"* (26:3-4). Jesus is quite aware that the tide of official opinion is turning against Him, too: *"As you know, Passover begins in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified"* (26:2).

In hindsight we read this almost casually. But for Jesus' disciples it was shocking. Crucifixion was the way the Romans executed violent thieves, revolutionaries, and murderers – not rabbis. It was a humiliating, horrid, brutal way to die. For Jesus to suggest this was His own future would have been devastating, shocking, and confusing. We take Jesus' death for granted, rushing on to the glory of the resurrection. But pause for a moment to think about the horror of it for the disciples. For Jesus, knowing what is to come. Think about how much God loves us that He was willing to go through this, for us.

As a woman comes and pours expensive perfume on His head, Jesus speaks of His imminent death again (26:12). Jesus' disciples are disgruntled, because, after Jesus told his parable of the sheep and the goats, the cost of this perfume could have been used to help the poor. Jesus responds, *"You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me"* (26:12). Mark records Jesus' words in more detail: *"You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them whenever you want to. But you will not always have me"* (Mark 14:7). We need to help the poor. We also need to worship Jesus.

Michael Hidalgo comments, *"Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 15 where God told his people, 'There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you, he will richly bless you' (Deut 15:4). God told his people there is no good reason for poverty to exist. But God seemed to know how we operate, so he said, 'If anyone is poor among your people in any of the towns be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need ...' And 'There will always be poor people in the land ... be openhanded toward those of your people who are poor and needy in your land' (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). If anything, Jesus' quote about the poor is a challenge to be more generous, lending freely and being openhanded toward them."* Jesus is not accepting poverty; He is challenging it. We always ought to help the poor.

"There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you, he will richly bless you" ... that could be/should be true of us, too. What can we do, practically, to make this happen?

The final snippet of today's reading is a sad commentary on human nature. Who knows what motivated Judas: Greed? A desire to force Jesus' hand to reveal Himself as a military leader? Frustration over the wasted perfume? Anger? We have no idea. It's simply tragic that one of Jesus' closest friends betrays Him.

Do I ever make stupid decisions? Do I ever hurt those I love? Do I ever fail myself – and others? Of course I do. The good news – on our side of the resurrection – is that Jesus has already paid the price for our sins. We do not have to face punishment. Spend some time in reflection, confession, and repentance. It is great to deal with our issues and enjoy His forgiveness ...

*Distracted by the world around us we fail to hear your voice,
or hide when faith is challenged as we wander off the path.
We are often not the Easter People that we should be,
living in the certain knowledge of your great mercy and love.
Forgive us, we pray;
restore the love that we first had,
a faith that can endure.
We will keep our eyes fixed on you, Lord,
and with you at our right hand
we shall not be shaken.
Amen*

www.faithandworship.com

Wednesday, April 8: Matthew 26:17-46

Jesus knows what is coming:

- *"The Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, flogged with a whip, and crucified"* (20:19).
- *"The Passover begins in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified"* (26:2).

Crucifixion was what happened to murderers, revolutionaries, assassins, and thugs. It was a publicly humiliating, physically excruciating, long-drawn-out way to die. You faced ridicule and abuse from the mob for hours. You endured inconceivable pain. We cannot conceive the suffering – physically or emotionally.

No wonder, then, Jesus says, *"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death"* (26:38). No wonder He prays to His Father, *"My Father. If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me"* (26:39).

Ultimately, what does Jesus say? *"Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."*

Jesus has just shared the Passover meal with His disciples. Passover celebrated how God miraculously delivered the Israelites from Egypt. It was a ritual meal each of them had celebrated every year of their lives. The same preparations were made, year after year. The same food was eaten, year after year. The same words were said, year after year. The only things that ever changed were the faces around the table. Until this year. Jesus takes the familiar words and personalizes them: *"This is my body ... This is my blood ..."* In hindsight we understand, but for the disciples it was all very confusing and disturbing.

"Tonight all of you will desert me," Jesus says. But Peter pipes up: *"Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you."* Jesus looks at him and says, *"I tell you the truth, Peter – this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me."* "No." Peter insists. *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you."* And all the other disciples nod in agreement ...

Earlier still, Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me"* (26:21). Judas is there at the time (26:20, 25). He knew what was about to happen. But the other eleven didn't. What is going on in Peter's mind? Thomas' soul? John's heart? They don't know it is going to be Judas ... Would it be me?

We can appreciate the torture in Jesus' soul – He knows what's coming. We can also understand His disciples experiencing trepidation, fear, and complete confusion. Jesus is doing and saying strange things.

From our vantage point – centuries later – we know how the story will turn out. We know that, although there will be brutal pain, there is a happy – a fantastic – ending. But the disciples don't know that.

There are times when we sit as the disciples do. Life seems bleak. Confusing. We may even be aware of Jesus' presence with us, but there doesn't seem to be much good news. The future appears grim. Dark. Painful. Hopeless. And, like the disciples, we don't know what the next hour, day, or week will hold.

The words the disciples probably missed amongst all the talk of betrayal, desertion and crowing roosters was Jesus' promise: "After I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there" (26:32). "After I have been **raised from the dead** ..." Something new, radical, unheard of is about to happen. Jesus will rise from the dead. And He will meet us there ...

Is this a promise that when we die we will see Jesus? Yes, absolutely. But the disciples are not dead yet. And they won't be when they meet Jesus in Galilee either. God is the God of the living, not just the dead. Jesus, the One who has been raised from the dead, is right here, right now, with you. Jesus is walking with you every step of the way. Unlike the disciples, you are not about to lose our Friend (even for a few days). He is with you, always. Everywhere. Through everything. "Go ahead and sleep," Jesus says, "Have your rest" (26:45). You are safe in His care. You are safe in His love. That's good news.

*How often when weary do we sigh,
'The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'
How often when in prayer are thoughts distracted
by sounds or circumstance?
Or prayers diverted by trivial concerns?
Baggage carried with us rather than left at your feet.
How often do we find ourselves apologising to you
for our abbreviated prayer life.
And yet you draw us still to be in your presence
as you did the disciples at Gethsemane.
You want us to share in your life to play our part.
You told your disciples to watch and pray
so they might not fall into temptation
Do you ask the same of us and do we also fail you each time we whisper,
'The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.'
Grant us the strength, Lord of body and of spirit
to offer you the sacrifice of our lives.
Amen.*

www.faithandworship.com

Thursday, April 9: Matthew 26:47-75

It's no wonder movie makers have made dozens of movies about Jesus: there is so much pathos, so much drama, so much of the worst and best in humanity that comes out in the final hours of Jesus' life.

- What is it about human beings that gives us the capacity to betray a friend – with a kiss?
- What is it about human beings that makes us think violence is going to solve our problems?
- What is it about human beings that causes us to torture another human being?
- What is it about human beings that allows us to lie, to hurt another person?
- What is it about human beings that thirsts for blood?
- What is it about human beings that will not stand up for what is right?
- What is it about human beings that permits us to turn our back on a friend?

I can see part of myself in Judas. In the mob. In the swordsman. In the leaders. In the High Priest. In the liars. In Peter. I can see the evil, or at least the potential for evil, in my own soul. So, before I am quick to judge Judas, or the crowds, or the powers-that-be, the sword-wielding disciple, or even Peter, I need to be honest and confess I would have failed on that horrible night, too. How? I have no idea. But I'm sure I would have blown it, too.

If I were faced with torture, pain, suffering, and abuse, would I stand up for Jesus?

Can I see myself in Jesus? The wonderful news of the gospel is that when I am "in Christ," I am a "new creation" (Galatians 6:15).

On my own I cannot make it. I fail. I fall. I disappoint. But when I put my life in Jesus' hands, I have life – new life – real life. Though His love and grace, I am forgiven. And I can face the challenges of life with Him as my guide, with Him by side, and with Him as my strength.

*Forgive those things we have done
which have caused you sadness,
and those things we should have done
that would have brought you joy.
In both we have failed ourselves,
and you.
Bring us back to that place where our journey began,
when we said that we would follow
the way that you first trod.
Lead us to the Cross
and meet us there.
Amen*

Friday, April 10: Matthew 27:1-61

"Good Friday" was not so good. Or was it? The name comes either

- from a corruption of Old English for "God's Friday": the day on which we tried to kill God ... or
- from the truth that the consequences of these dreadful events was good: our sins are paid for; we have forgiveness; our relationship with God is restored.

Tom Wright reflects on this latter aspect of the "goodness" about this day:

"Finished.' 'Accomplished.' 'Completed.' Jesus' last word, which sums it all up. Part of its meaning is that everything that had gone before has now come together. This is where it was all going; this is what it was all about.

"Part of its meaning is that in Jesus' world that word 'finished' was what you wrote on a bill when it had been settled: 'Paid in full.' But underneath these is the meaning John intends, I believe, most deeply. When God the Creator made his wonderful world, at the end of the sixth day he finished it. He completed his work. Now, on the Friday, the sixth day of the week, Jesus has completed the work of redeeming the world. With his shameful, chaotic, horrible death he has gone to the very bottom, to the darkest and deepest place of the ruin, and has planted there the sign that says 'Rescued.' It is the sign of love, the love of the creator for his ruined creation, the love of the Saviour for his ruined people. Yes, of course, it all has to be worked out. The victory has to be implemented. But it's done; it's completed; it's finished ...

"Now here in this community, and in this church, there are plenty of Marys and Johns, plenty of people for whom life isn't going to be the same again. Our job is to stand and wait at the foot of the cross, and to see what fresh word may come to us concerning the way forward, the way of becoming a community again ...

"Good Friday is the point at which God comes into our chaos, to be there with us in the middle of it and to bring us his new creation. Let us pause and give thanks and listen for his words of love and healing." ¹

Amid drama of the crucifixion – amid the drama of our lives – let us pause. At the foot of the cross. And give thanks. And listen. Listen especially for His words of love. Listen especially for His words of healing. It is finished. Accomplished. Completed.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Christians at the Cross: Finding Hope in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus* (Ijamsville, Md.: The Word Among Us Press, 2007), 57–58.

*Lamb of God, you shed for me
Your life upon a blood stained tree,
Your life for mine, love re-defined,
An offering, a ransom, release.
You gave so much, O Lamb of God –
Just as I am, I come.*

*The doubts I have, the pain I feel
When at your feet I humbly kneel.
You take it all, both great and small,
Give freedom, forgiveness and peace.
I have the choice, O Lamb of God –
Just as I am, I come.*

*Lamb of God, I hear your voice,
And hearing, know I have a choice,
To make a start, within my heart,
A willingness, to journey by faith.
You ask no more, O Lamb of God –
Just as I am, I come.*

*By waters still, through fire and storm,
Your love continues to transform,
And with that call, you welcome all.
No barriers now, no limits, just grace.
No more excuses, Lamb of God –
Just as I am, I come.*

www.faithandworship.com

Saturday, April 11: Matthew 27:62-66 (read Psalm 22, too, if you wish)

After all the drama of the past couple of days, Saturday is a day of silence. It is finished.

For the disciples, who hadn't understood the message of resurrection, it really is finished.

As the Romans tightened the guard on the tomb, it seemed the disciples' hope was dead. Sealed in the tomb. It was over. They certainly weren't about to steal the body. Luke records that *"they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment"* (Luke 23:56). It is totally finished.

A day of sitting. Waiting. Thinking. Fretting. Crying. Fearing. Stressing. Disappointment. Anger. Frustration. Disillusionment. What other emotions might the disciples be feeling? It is finished.

On the cross, Jesus cried out with the words of Psalm 22: *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief"* (Psalm 22:1-2). That probably summarized how the disciples are feeling, too. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt, "It is finished!"

When we do feel this way, we can be honest with God about it. Sometimes we think we have to "put on a happy face" for God. We don't need to pretend with God. We cannot pretend with God. He asks us to be honest. With our joys. Our sorrows. Our hopes. Our fears. Our dreams. Our disillusionment. Our successes. Our disappointments. Our faith. Our questions. God can handle it. He knows it all.

Spend some time being honest with God. The good news – as **WE** know – is He is NOT in the tomb. He is with you. He loves you. He meets you exactly where you are.

*You were a man of suffering acquainted with grief,
loved and despised in equal measure.
You understand humanity,
know our failings,
love us despite the people that we are.
When we, like Peter, deny you,
by word or action,
forgive us.
When we, like Judas, are tempted
to follow a different path,
forgive us.
When we, like those in the crowd
allow you to be crucified,
forgive us.
Bring us to the foot of the Cross,
to stand next to the one who,
looking into your eyes declared, 'Surely this is the Son of God.'
Amen*

Easter Sunday, April 12: Matthew 28:1-10

The weather forecast said August 20, 1988, was supposed to be a dull, dreary, foggy, rainy day. Every other day of that summer had been a dull, dreary, foggy, rainy day in Nova Scotia. So when our wedding day dawned, with bright blue skies and sunshine, it was a wonderful surprise. We were excited about it.

These women are expecting a horrible, dark day. They expect to find the tomb sealed. They expect to find Roman guards. If they are even allowed to go near the tomb, if they could even move the stone, if they are allowed to go in (all big "ifs"), they expect to find Jesus' brutally beaten, thorn-impaled, spear-pierced body. Dead. They simply hope to anoint his corpse. They hope to say a final tearful farewell. At best, they hope for peace and quiet on the dreariest day they could possibly imagine ...

So when Sunday dawns, they do not expect an earthquake. They do not expect an angel of the Lord. They do not expect battle-hardened Roman legionaries to be shaking in terror. They do not expect to hear an angel speak (what would that sound like, I wonder?). They do not expect the stone to be moved. They do not expect to hear Jesus has risen from the dead. They do not expect to **meet** Jesus, risen and alive. This is **NOT AT ALL** what they expect. They don't know how to react.

The story of Easter tells the story of the greatest surprise of all time. We may have heard the story of the resurrection so many times we take it for granted. But imagine yourself, today, there on that first Easter Sunday morning – expecting darkness, gloom and death. The day dawns – with an earthquake, an angel, a rolling boulder, quavering legionaries, and the risen Jesus. This is something no one expected. This is something no one has ever experienced. This is something to get incredibly excited about.

Jesus still meets us – no, not in a physical way like he met Mary and Mary. But He does meet us, in Spirit. Sometimes we are very aware of His presence. Other times, not so much. The truth is, He is always walking with each one of us. This is His promise. When things seem hopeless and dark, God can bring hope and light into our lives. When life is dull and dreary, God can bring new joy, opportunity, and challenge. When there seem to be few options, God can open brand new doors we never knew existed.

The wonder of Easter is that the old order of things has changed forever. God is alive and well and at work in our world. And He is still full of surprises. His Kingdom has come. His will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. He invites us to be part of His work in the world.

He is in the business of bringing new life, here, there, and everywhere. But the risen Lord is with us. He never leaves us. He comforts us. He says to us, "*Do not be afraid ...*"

*Circle us Lord, with the arms of your presence.
Keep peace within and all fear without,
Your light to cheer and illumine the darkness.
Circle us Lord, in the arms of your love.*

*Circle us Lord, with the arms of your presence.
Keep love within and all evil without,
Your voice bring calm in all places of violence.
Circle us Lord, in the arms of your love.*

*Circle us Lord, with the arms of your presence.
Keep joy within and all worries without,
Your word inspire us and make us courageous.
Circle us Lord, in the arms of your love.*

*Circle us Lord, with the arms of your presence.
Keep hope within and all suffering without,
Your touch to heal us and bring us to wholeness.
Circle us Lord, in the arms of your love.*

John Birch (www.faithandworship.com)

Monday, April 13: Matthew 28:11-15

Dead people don't come back to life. We know that. People in the first century certainly knew that, too. The Jews knew that. The Romans knew that. The disciples knew that. Everyone knew that. That's the way the physics, biology, and chemistry of the universe work.

But Jesus DID rise from the dead. The Jews knew that – they couldn't disprove it. The Roman guards knew it – they couldn't disprove it. The disciples knew it – they lived it. If the Jews, the guards, or the Roman authorities could have disproved Jesus' resurrection, they would have done so in an instant. They wanted to. They tried to. But they couldn't.

The disciples weren't expecting it. They didn't WANT to believe it (read the other gospel accounts as well). The truth of the resurrection would make their lives much harder, much more dangerous, and put them on a collision course with Jewish, Roman, and every other authority and culture in their world. All of the disciples (except John) would be cruelly tortured and executed for their conviction that Jesus really did rise from the dead. No one would suffer and die like that for something they knew was a myth. But the disciples couldn't deny Jesus' resurrection. So they had to come to terms with it.

The whole point of resurrection is that it IS completely out of the realm of how the universe normally works. Jesus is not "just a person." He is God. As God, He is not subject to the rules of physics and biochemistry. He exists outside of them: He created those rules in the first place. If the God who created the universe is going to fundamentally change the course of the universe, we would expect Him to do something unusual.

With Jesus' resurrection, a brand new reality is beginning. A new order of things is coming into being. And it is challenging some of the basic principles we take for granted. The rules of physics still apply (gravity is still very real). The rules of chemistry and mathematics are still valid (2+2 still equals 4). But when it comes to the purpose of life ...

- It's not all about me: it's about God and His Kingdom
- It's not about me getting what I want: it's about loving my neighbour
- It's not about money: it's about love
- It's not about beating other people: it's about peace
- It's not about getting ahead at all costs: it's about integrity and character
- It's not all about profit for shareholders: it's about quality of community and relationships
- It's not about ethnic "purity": it's about all peoples and nations being welcome

Jesus is establishing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. What does that mean for our world? What does that mean for me?

*You are my Father with outstretched arm;
You are the place to hide from harm;
You are the light that shines in dark;
You are the heart's eternal spark;
You are the door that's open wide;
You are the guest who waits inside;
You are the stranger at the door;
You are the calling of the poor;
You are my Lord and with me from ill;
You are the light, the truth, the way;
You are my Saviour this very day.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Tuesday, April 14: Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus says, *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth"* (28:16). Jesus IS the King. That doesn't mean the world is how Jesus intends it to be, yet. It's a work in progress. He is in the process of moving the world from being under the rule of sin and death (and greed, corruption, violence, and other forms of evil) to being under the rule of His love and grace. Are we there yet? Not even close. Why not?

Here's the challenge: Jesus is using **us** to bring this transition about. In the Lord's prayer we are taught to pray, *"Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven"* (Matthew 6:9-10). The point of the prayer, *"your kingdom come, your will be done"* – is that **we** are to be the fulfillment of that prayer. His Kingdom comes, in and through us. His will is done, in and through us. When we live this way, the world is changed – one moment, one day, one life, one action, at a time. We are potentially in the process of fulfilling this prayer each moment ...

- We are **to be** disciples – people who follow Jesus and try to live His way of life.
- We are and **to make** disciples – to help other people meet and follow Jesus.
- We are to be baptized and to baptize others. Baptism isn't an optional extra. Part of the meaning of baptism is to commit us, through going under the water and coming up again, to dying with Jesus and rising to new life with Him (see Romans 6). Baptism is a public, visible, physical way of affirming our love and loyalty to Jesus and the new life we have through Jesus. It is a sign of citizenship in this new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.
- We are to be taught and to teach about Jesus and what it means to follow Him. We are all life-long learners in terms of what it means to follow Him. As we face new and different challenges in life ... as we enter new stages in life ... as we discover new things in Scripture, we are always learning. And whatever we have learned, Jesus says, we have a responsibly to pass on to others.

Can we do this? Throughout the centuries people have criticized the church and criticized Christians. Often with justification. The church has failed: but God keeps refining, purifying, and restoring it. Individual Christians have failed: but God keeps refining, purifying, and restoring us. *"I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth ..."* Jesus says. We cannot do it. But He can. *"... And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* We are not in this alone. He is always with us.

"What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one – for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one – for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us."

"Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:31-39). That's good news.

*Grant us a vision, Lord,
To see what we can achieve;
To reach out beyond ourselves;
To share our lives with others;
To stretch our capabilities;
To increase our sense of purpose;
To be aware of where we can help;
To be sensitive to Your Presence;
To give heed to Your constant call.
Amen*

Welsh prayer

Wednesday, April 15: Acts 1:1-8

I took a course at one theological college titled "Evangelism" – *"the proclamation of God's saving action in Christ."* The professor had very organized lectures, each with several points, each point beginning with same letter. The three organizing themes of the course were "The **m**eaning of evangelism"; "the **m**essage of evangelism"; and "the **m**ethods of evangelism." The assignments were two academic book reviews and a final written exam. The course was precise and succinct. It didn't help me share my faith a whole lot.

I took a course at another college called "Sharing the Good News" (the registrar changed the title, to sound more academic, to "Evangelism in the Church"). The Professor shared a lot of practical wisdom and personal stories. The major assignment was to go across the road to the UBC Campus and have an actual conversation with someone about Jesus. He encouraged us to share our story of what Jesus has meant to us. Then we reflected on the experience. I learned a LOT more. And I gained a lot more confidence.

As in Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus invites His people to share the good news with people

- Locally (in Jerusalem)
- Regionally (in all Judea and Samaria)
- Globally (to the ends of the earth)

Notice two key things:

1. ***The presence of the Holy Spirit.*** We don't do this on our own. God's Spirit – His personal presence – is within us, inspiring us, guiding us, empowering us, comforting us, teaching us, speaking through us.
2. ***We are called to be "witnesses."*** We are not called to be theology professors giving neat lectures with alliterative points. We are called to simply share what God has done and is doing in our lives. We are invited to talk about the experiences we have had with Jesus.

God is not expecting us to be professional theologians articulating the deepest biblical truths. He is encouraging us to tell our story. Through the encouragement, empowerment, and blessing of His Spirit, we can genuinely share how God is impacting our lives.

You know Jesus! How can you share your story with someone?

*In the beginning, Lord, I was alone.
Like the earth before Your Spirit moved over the waters,
I was formless and empty and darkness filled the depths of my heart.
Then, it was as if You declared, 'Let there be light'.
And out of the darkness I began to see hope like a shimmering ray of love
breaking through the parting clouds at the conclusion of the night.
In the beginning, Lord, I was alone.
But when I saw You in the light I was no longer afraid.
You held out Your hand and though I had a choice, I had no choice
Because to refuse was to embrace, again, the darkness.
In the beginning, Lord, I was alone.
Now I feel again a part of Your creation – loved, wanted, needed, family.
In the light of Your presence I hold out my heart
that others might glimpse through it Your reflection
And be drawn from the darkness into Your sunrise.
Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Thursday, April 16: Acts 2:1-13

We were staying in a cottage on a farm in very rural Tuscany, Italy. When I awoke one morning, I was so dizzy I couldn't even stand up to make it to the bathroom. I had to crawl. All day I was nauseous. At supper time, Marianne went over to the farmhouse and spoke with Giovanni, our landlord, who spoke a little English. Giovanni called the on-call GP. Within an hour, a doctor was there. I was stressed. How would we communicate? I speak no Italian. But the doctor did speak some English. He thought it was vertigo.

The next morning, Giovanni announced his own GP would do a house call (he didn't really like the on-call doctor). He spoke even better English. Later that day, Giovanni's GP organized a house call from an Ear-Nose-Throat specialist from Sienna, a 45-minute drive away. She spoke even better English. She gave me the good news that I was not dying, but I did have vertigo. It would pass in a few days. When you are ill in a foreign country, it sure is nice to speak with someone in your own language (especially a doctor).

All sorts of people from all sorts of places are gathered in Jerusalem for the annual feast of Pentecost. Pentecost (literally "fiftieth") is the fiftieth day after Passover. It was a time when, each year, farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from their crop, offering it to God with thanksgiving and praying for a bountiful remainder of the crop. It was also a reminder of how God provided for His people when, after they had escaped from Egypt, they settled in the Promised Land.

God chooses this time to dramatically reveal Himself. He does so by inspiring His people to speak in the languages of each person. There is something wonderful about hearing good news in your own language. First, it is much less exhausting to listen in your own language (you are not trying to translate every word). Second, you know you are accurately hearing the message (you are not making a translation error).

God wants ALL people to hear the good news of new life in Jesus. So, in this instance, He blesses His followers with the ability to share His message with people from all over the known world. The disciples spoke in REAL languages, the native tongues of people from east and west, north and south.

Over the centuries, God's Word, the Bible, has been translated into hundreds and hundreds of languages, so people can hear the good news in their own language. If your first language is not English, I hope you have access to the Scriptures in your language.

It's also a reminder to us that God still WANTS to communicate His good news with everyone. The barrier is rarely language anymore. The barrier may be that people have never authentically heard about Jesus. As we noted yesterday, (1) God blesses us with His Holy Spirit – His empowering, inspiring Presence – AND (2) God simply asks us to be His witnesses – to share what He has done and is doing in our lives. Pray for the opportunity simply to share God's love with someone this week ...

*God's will would I do, my own will bridle;
God's due would I give, my own due yield;
God's path would I travel, my own path refuse;
Christ's death would I ponder, my own death remember;
Christ's agony would I meditate, my love to God make warmer;
Christ's cross would I carry, my own cross forget;
Repentance of sin would I make, early repentance choose;
A bridle to my tongue I would put, a bridle on my thoughts I would keep;
God's judgment would I heed, my own judgment guard;
Christ's redemption would I seize, my own ransom receive;
The love of Christ would I feel, my own love give freely.
Amen.*

Irish Prayer

Friday, April 17: Acts 2:14-21

When you first find out you are expecting a baby, there is tremendous excitement and tremendous apprehension. But you have a few months to prepare. So, when we were expecting our first child, we got lots of advice. We got the book: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. We (thought we) were ready. And then we waited. And waited. And waited. Finally, the due date came. And we waited. And more days passed. And still we waited. We were watching for all the telltale signs. Finally, the process began. And the labour went on. And on. And on.

Eventually all was good. We had a healthy baby boy. But the waiting seemed like it would never end.

The people of Israel were expecting a Messiah. A Saviour. And they were waiting. They (thought they) knew what to expect and they were expecting it to happen any time. In fact, they thought the time was long overdue. They were anxiously waiting. They were watching for the telltale signs.

Now, suddenly, these Galilean fishermen and friends – nobodies from a backwater province way up north – are speaking in all sorts of languages. Some people were amazed and perplexed and asked each other, "What can this mean?" Other people ridiculed them, saying, "They're just drunk, that's all!"

Imagine if people thought a bunch of us at First Baptist were behaving like drunks (at 9 a.m.)? How would we respond? I don't think I would immediately begin with a long quotation from one of the Old Testament prophets as Peter does. But Jerusalem, in the First Century, was full of people who were pouring over their Bibles (they, of course, only had what we call the Old Testament), anxiously looking for signs the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah might be coming true. And Peter wants these people to know that the long-awaited time has come. The waiting is over. Messiah has come. The prophecies are all coming true.

One of the characteristics of this new era, the age of Messiah (or, as Joel calls it, "*the last days*") is that God's will pour out His Spirit on all people. In the past, God's Spirit had come on specific people – leaders, kings, and prophets, like Joshua, David, Isaiah, and Daniel. But God's Spirit only came on specific people. However, in this new time, even fishermen (like Peter) and tax-collectors (like Matthew) receive the Holy Spirit. There is no discrimination between slaves or free, male or female, young or old. They are all fully engaged in the work of bringing in God's Kingdom reign.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," Joel (and Peter) emphasizes (Acts 2:21). "*Being saved*" is not simply about the fact we will be with the Lord when we die, though it includes that. "*Being saved*" also means knowing and experiencing the power and presence of God, through the Holy Spirit, every moment of every day. "*Being saved*" is a present reality as the Holy Spirit is within each one of us: guiding, encouraging, leading, teaching, correcting, comforting, inspiring, and blessing us.

You ARE saved – right now. Yes, one day, someday, you will be with Him face to face. But God's Holy Spirit is within you now. He is present your life this very moment. Thank Him for His blessings. Ask Him for His wisdom. Pray to Him for His guidance. Enjoy His presence.

*Every creature, every plant, every rock and every grain of sand
proclaims the glory of its Creator
Through colour, shape, scent, and form.
A multi-sensory song of praise.
Creator God, may we join with the whole of Your creation in praising You, our Creator,
Through the fragrance and melody of our lives.
May our lives proclaim the glory of our Creator.
May people see You in us.
May our work and play, hearts and voices glorify You,
O God, our Creator and Saviour.
Amen.*

Saturday, April 18: Acts 2:22-36

Have you ever tried to watch Question Period in the House of Commons? Honestly, most of the speakers are terrible. Most of the seats are empty. Those MPs who are there often look like they're bored or half asleep. But, once in a blue moon, when there is a really important topic to discuss, the seats are full, the MPs are engaged, and the debate can get pretty raucous.

Peter wants us to know that something really, really important is going on. The reason the "last days" are here (Acts 2:17-21) is that Jesus has risen from the dead! That's not just business-as-usual. That's a never-before, never-again event. Jesus' resurrection is, in fact, the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams, prophecies and expectations about the coming of the Messiah.

Peter bends over backward to show that (1) David – the greatest king in Israel's history – pointed ahead to Jesus as Messiah, and (2) that Jesus, through His resurrection, has proven that He is even greater than David. After all, David has long been dead and buried, but Jesus has risen and is alive.

The message of Easter is this: *"So let everyone know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!"* (Acts 2:36).

On the one hand, Jesus is the Messiah: the power of sin and death has been destroyed once and for all.

On the other hand, Jesus is Lord. He is God. He is King. All authority on heaven and earth belongs to Him.

Today, celebrate the truth that Jesus is both your Lord and your Messiah – this day and forever.

*May the blessing of God's light be on you - light without and light within.
May God's blessed sunlight shine on you like a great peat fire,
so that stranger and friend may come and warm himself at it.
And may God's light shine out of the two eyes of you,
like a candle set in the window of a house,
bidding the wanderer come in out of the storm.
And may the blessing of God's rain be on you,
may it beat upon your spirit and wash it fair and clean,
and leave there a shining pool where the blue of heaven shines, and sometimes a star.
And may the blessing of God's earth be on you,
soft under your feet as you pass along the roads,
soft under you as you lie out on it, tired at the end of day;
and may it rest easy over you when, at last, you lie out under it.
May it rest so lightly over you that your soul may be out from under it quickly;
up and off and on its way to Him.
And now may the Lord bless you and bless you kindly.
Amen.*

Scottish Blessing

Sunday, April 19: Acts 2:37-41

I was trying to find someone's home in one of the newer subdivisions in West Lethbridge. And I was lost. I found myself way out on some new road I didn't even know existed before. I pulled over and had to decide: do I phone, admit I'm lost, and suffer the humiliation? Or do I keep muddling on and hope, eventually, to find my destination? I have no (stubborn) pride: I made the phone call. I was VERY lost. When I followed the proper directions, I saved myself at least an hour's waste of time and a LOT of aggravation.

Sometimes our lostness is more serious. Imagine being in a boat on the ocean, out of sight of land. Which way do you row? If you row the wrong way, you'll be heading out into the open sea – and you'll die. If you row the right way, you'll make it safely back to land. Your life is on the line.

Peter is warning the residents of Jerusalem that they are lost. Very lost. Lost-at-sea lost. Their lives are on the line. Peter is blunt about the fact they are so lost they had actually killed their Messiah (Acts 2:22-23). *"Peter's words pierced their hearts. They said, "Brothers, what should we do?"* (Acts 2:37).

Peter replied, *"Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins"* (2:38). Repentance means a complete turnaround. A U-turn. Stopping rowing in one direction, and rowing in the right direction. Calling out to God, listening to His directions, and actually following them.

Each of us is challenged to look at the direction we are going in life. Are we listening to God's wisdom? Are we obeying it? Are there things in our lives that are wrong? What do we need to do about that?

"Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). The blessing from the prophet Joel that Peter had talked about is for ALL people who come to God in faith: *"In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants – men and women alike – and they will prophesy ... Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"* (Acts 2:17-21).

If you have faith in Jesus, God's Holy Spirit is within you. Pray that, through the Spirit, you might know Jesus more deeply. Pray that, through the Spirit, you might know God's wisdom. Pray that, through God's Spirit, you might know His direction. Pray that, through the Spirit, you might love others in Jesus' name.

And pray for others, that they might turn to God AND know the blessing of His Spirit in their lives.

*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I bless your name this day.
Let all creation praise you.
Let the daylight, and the shadows praise you.
Let the fertile earth and the swelling sea praise you.
Let the winds and the rain, the lightning and thunder praise you.
Let all that breathes, both male and female, praise you.
There is no plant in the ground that does not tell of your beauty, O Jesus.
There is no creature on the earth, there is no life in the sea,
that does not proclaim your goodness.
There is no bird on the wing, there is no star in the sky,
there is nothing beneath the sun, that is not full of your blessing.
Awaken my understanding of your presence all around me, who Jesus.
Kindle my will, to be caring for your creation.
Kindle within me, a love for you in all things.
Amen*

Philip Newell

Monday, April 20: Acts 2:42-47

Many years ago we went to the UK as a family. We ended up at a Sunday morning service at York Minster, a huge Gothic cathedral, during the Anglican Church's annual worldwide synod. Several thousand people from all over the world were there, most dressed in their ecclesiastical finery. We vacationing Canadians had on our best t-shirts and jeans. The Archbishop of York, a fiery Ugandan, John Sentamu, preached a fine sermon. They prayed. They sang. Then, in Anglican tradition, came the Eucharist (communion). How do you serve communion to several thousand people? Dozens of stations were set up throughout the building. You simply went to the one nearest you. The kids looked at Marianne and I questioningly: were shabbily-dressed Canadian Baptists welcome to take part in the Church of England Eucharist with the well-garbed Anglican elite? A nearby priest gave us a smile. So we shrugged our shoulders and took part.

In Acts 2, we get a glimpse of how the first Christian church operated. They were marked by four keys:

1. Devotion to the apostles' teaching,
2. to fellowship,
3. to the Lord's Supper,
4. and to prayer.

These four go together. You can't separate them. You can't leave one out without damaging the whole church. When people ignore biblical teaching, we adapt to the worldview and values of the non-Christian culture around us. When we ignore fellowship and Christian community, we can get isolated and lose a vibrant faith. When we ignore worship and the Lord's Supper, we lose sight of Jesus as the centre of our faith. When we forget to pray, we lose connection with our loving Father, with our Saviour, and with His Spirit within us.

What this four-fold commitment led to, was a family-life, community-life in which people genuinely cared for and loved one another in profound, practical ways.

Tom Wright (a former Anglican bishop) writes, *"When Jesus' followers behave like this, they sometimes find, to their surprise, that they have a new spring in their step. There is an attractiveness, an energy about a life in which we stop clinging on to everything we can get and start sharing it ... celebrating God's generosity by being generous ourselves. And that attractiveness is one of the things that draws other people in ..."*

"Where the church today finds itself stagnant, unattractive, humdrum, and shrinking, it's time to read Acts 2:42-47 again, get down on our knees, and ask what isn't happening that should be happening. The gospel hasn't changed. God's power hasn't diminished. People still need rescuing. What are we doing about it?"

Pray that God would help us to be His church ...

*I give you thanks, O God, that I have risen today,
to rise and serve You this new day;
may this be a day to Your glory, O God of every gift,
that Your glory might be known far and wide.
O great God, help my soul; by Your own mercy and grace, forgive my sins.
Help me to avoid every sin, and to run from every source of temptation.
As the mist scatters when the sun rises on the hills,
scatter the haze in my soul so I may see You clearly.
As Your sunshine warms me from the outside in,
may Your Son warm me from inside out.
May Your glory shine through me today:
through my thoughts, deeds, words,
desires, senses, and all my ways.
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Tuesday, April 21: Acts 17:1-15

For the next few days we'll be looking at Paul's letters to the Christians in Thessalonica. Our sermons through June will be based on 1 Thessalonians, too.

Thessalonica then (and now) is the second largest city in Greece (now over 1 million people). It is the leading city in Macedonia. This passage introduces Thessalonica in the first century. What's the city like? It's not a friendly place for followers of Jesus. Paul, Silas, and their host, Jason, are treated very badly.

Paul and Silas flee at night to Berea (modern day Veria), 75 kilometers west. Their critics in Thessalonica are so incensed by their teaching, they also travel the 75 kms to Berea, just to continue to make their lives miserable. In the ancient world, when people had to walk such distances, to walk 75 kms to abuse someone suggests these critics really harbour a lot of venom. Compare the reception Paul get in Berea. Luke's note that *"the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"* (Acts 17:11) is a wonderful comment on the Bereans, but a sad indictment of the folks in Thessalonica. May we receive God's word with eagerness ... and diligently examine it against the Scriptures.

In Thessalonica, nevertheless, some people did come to faith in Jesus: *"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks (including Jason) and not a few prominent women."* These folks became the nucleus of the church in Thessalonica. But it must have been a tough place to be Jesus' church. The same people who made Jason's, Silas' and Paul's lives unpleasant would have continued to oppose the new believers and the church.

Few of us can even begin to imagine facing opposition like this because of our faith. This is the reality today in much of the world. Pray for Christians in the Middle East, North Africa, south Asia (including India, Burma, and Indonesia), and China. Pray that God would protect them, encourage them, and bless their witness ... even in hostile, life-threatening situations. Thank God for the freedom of religion we enjoy in Canada. May we use our freedom wisely, to live and share our faith through our lives and words.

*If there is righteousness in the heart,
there will be beauty in the character.
If there is beauty in the character,
there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home,
there will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
there will be peace in the world.
Lord, so let it be. So let it be.
Amen.*

Scottish Prayer

Wednesday, April 22: 1 Thessalonians 1

An African proverb says, *"A stick in the swamp is not a crocodile"*: simply going to church or reading the Bible doesn't make us Christian. Following Jesus involves a complete turning to God and a deep commitment to following Him. Then we experience the joy, hope, and confidence we need to deal with the issues in our lives. That sounds easy. It can be very challenging.

Knowing some of the culture in Thessalonica (from Acts 17), when Paul speaks of *"endurance"* (v.3) and *"severe suffering"* (v.6) he knows what he is talking about. This is not an easy city in which to follow Jesus.

- Paul encourages us that *"God has chosen you"* – what does it mean to you that God has chosen you? Have you ever reflected on that truth? Spend some time appreciating His love for you.
- His gospel comes to us *"not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit"* – what does that mean to you? The Holy Spirit is in you; how does that change how you live?

- Our faith gives us "joy" through the Holy Spirit – is that your experience? How do you experience God's joy? If this is not your experience, how can you cultivate joy?
- The believers are known for their *"work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* – is that true of us? What *"work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ"* are you know for? How is this a challenge and an inspiration to you?
- Paul writes, *"You became imitators of us and of the Lord"* – Paul's own life is an example of faithfulness, integrity, and spiritual maturity others. Paul is not perfect, but he can hold up the trajectory of his life – toward becoming more and more like Jesus – as a model worth following. Is that true of your life? Someone does look up to you as an example of faithfulness: you do not need to be perfect. But God is encouraging you to make it your aim to be more and more like Jesus.

"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" writes Paul. An idol is something, anything – other than God – that is most important in your life. It may be a goal, a person, a possession (or something you don't have yet but badly want), a hobby, a job, an investment, a lifestyle, a retirement hope ... It is something that controls your decision making and shapes your life. Our idols are powerful forces that shape our lives, but ultimately and inevitably disappoint us.

What influences you more than God? Are there any idols you need to turn from? They will disappoint you. What do I need to change?

*In the beginning, O God, You shaped my soul and set its weave.
 You formed my body and gave it breath.
 Renew me this day in Your image, the image of Your love.
 O great God, grant me Your light.
 O great God, grant me Your grace.
 O great God, grant me Your joy this day,
 and let me be made pure through Your Spirit.
 O Healer of the wounded, hear my prayers for those who are hurting ...
 O Saviour of the broken, hear my prayers for those who have fallen ...
 O Guide to the wandering, hear my prayers for those who are lost ...
 God before me, God behind me, God above me, God beneath me,
 Keep me on Your path, O Lord.
 And be with me, on my way, O God:
 With me in the twistings of the road, with me in the currents of the river,
 With me by day, with me by night.
 Amen.*

Philip Newell

Thursday, April 23: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Sometimes we are given the impression that if we become Christians, our lives will suddenly become peaceful, safe, and blessed (financially, health-wise, etc., etc.). Sometimes we are blessed in these ways by God – thank Him; enjoy those moments. But other times life continues to be difficult. But God gets us through. Paul and his friends went through horrendous experiences, but did so keeping themselves *"holy, righteous and blameless"* (v.10). Through their own personal pain, they loved the believers in Thessalonica as if they were their own children, *"encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory"* (v. 11-12).

When life is good it is easy to forget about God. When life is tough we are forced to depend upon His Spirit every moment of every day. Paul's challenge to us is to stay close to the Lord during the good and the hard times – to stay *"holy, righteous and blameless."*

"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches (in Judea/Israel) suffered from the Jews" (v.14) – this was true in Thessalonica, wasn't it? Suffering was part of the experience of the early Christians. The Christians in Judea suffered persecution (Paul had been part of that). Paul and his

companions had suffered throughout Asia Minor (now Turkey) and Greece (Philippi). Down the road the suffering would increase, rather than decrease, under emperors like Trajan and Nero.

The Jewish wisdom book, *Ecclesiasticus*, says: *"My child, if you would fear the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Cling to him and do not leave him, so that you may be honoured at the end of your days. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainty of your humble state, be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him. You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn aside for fear you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him, and you will not be robbed of your reward. You who fear the Lord, hope for good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy. Look to the generations of old and see: whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? Or whoever, steadfastly fearing him, was forsaken? Or whoever called to him and was ignored? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful, he forgives sins and saves in time of distress"* (2:1-11).

Paul also challenges us to reach out and care for others, even when we feel needy. The best antidote to our own suffering and pain is to care for others. Encourage, comfort and urge others to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into His kingdom and glory.

*O God, listen to my prayer.
Let my earnest petition come to You,
for I know that You are hearing me as surely as though I saw You with mine eyes.
Anything that is amiss for my soul, may You, O God, sweep it from me
And may You shield me in the blood of Your love.
Let no thought come to my heart, let no sound come to my ear,
Let no temptation come to my eye, let no fragrance come to my nose,
Let no fancy come to my mind, let no ruffle come to my spirit,
That is hurtful to my body or ill for my soul.
May You yourself, O God of life, be at my breast, be at my back,
You to me as a star, You to me as a guide,
from my life's beginning to my life's closing.
Amen*

Celtic Prayer

Friday, April 24: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Life can be difficult. We need to be honest with ourselves and other people. Problems come. Difficulties happen. Sickness and death are real parts of life. In the movie, *The Princess Bride*, a rather cynical moment, a character muses, *"Life is pain: anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell you something."* That might be a bit too hardnosed. But it has some truth to it.

Sometimes we present the good news of the gospel too much the opposite way: we suggest that if you believe in Jesus life will be so good – in terms of health, wealth, and other things like that. We may present a Jesus who wants us all to be rich, well-fed, perfectly healthy, and enjoying the comforts of life.

This "health and wealth" theology is an uniquely North American version of the good news. It gives us spiritual permission to enjoy the self-indulgence and hedonism of our culture. It may have an initial appeal in poorer countries, but it doesn't last – because it isn't true to people's lived experience. This teaching certainly runs contrary to Jesus' own life and lifestyle, the experience of Paul, the Thessalonians, and most early Christians. Paul and Silas were forced out of Thessalonica after being there less than a month. Their critics followed them to Berea. In Athens and Corinth, they continued to experience opposition. And it makes a mockery of Jesus' warnings about wealth and further teachings in the Old and New Testaments.

When people experience the pain of real life, health-and-wealth theology can't cope with reality. What do you do when you've been promised that being a Christian guarantees you all the comforts in this world and it doesn't happen? Paul is worried that somehow the Thessalonians Christians had got this message and might fall away from following Jesus, disillusioned.

Writing later, Paul will say, *"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ... We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* (2 Corinthians 4:8-17).

When hard times come (and they will) be encouraged that God is with you through them all. Your light and momentary troubles are achieving for you an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. As Oswald Chambers writes, *"God does not waste suffering, nor does He discipline out of caprice. If He plows, it is because He proposes a crop."* What is God saying to you?

*I arise today through a mighty strength:
God's power to guide me;
God's might to uphold me;
God's eyes to watch over me;
God's ear to hear me;
God's word to give me speech;
God's hand to guard me;
God's way to lie before me;
God's shield to shelter me,
God's host to secure me.
Amen*

Brigid of Kildare (451-525)

Saturday, April 25: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

As we live through new challenges and new experiences, we wrestle with how our faith shapes how we live in these times. We all need to keep learning. Being a disciple/follower/student of Jesus is a lifelong process of being teachable – by the word of God, by other mature Christians, and directly from the Holy Spirit.

- Are you a teachable person?
- Do you wrestle through how your faith shapes your life?
- Do you ask questions about how you could or should respond to personal, civic, and international issues as a Christian?
- Do you pray about how we can make a difference in our community?
- Are you restless, thinking you can do something more for the Lord?

This kind of "holy discontent" is good. It keeps us growing – invigorated – spiritually.

Paul is worried the Thessalonians have either given in to the pressures around them or they have become disillusioned by the fact that they are suffering, despite their faith (in fact, they are suffering because of their faith). The truth is that the Thessalonians are standing firm. They are faithful to God. Wonderful.

They are resolute in their faith, but there are still things they need to learn. Paul longs to come and *"supply what is lacking in their faith"* (v.10). They can always learn more – about Jesus, about Scripture, about God – and about how their faith relates to the challenges of daily life.

Paul wants to come alongside his friends to help them learn how to live their faith . What we desperately need are people who will step us as mentors – encouragers, teachers, and friends – who will help people younger in their faith, grow and mature.

Is there someone you can help to grow, spiritually? Do you feel like you want to encourage someone? We can help you make a connection ...

*In my journeying with You, may I never lose my sense of direction,
 never lose sight of the landmark to which I travel.
 And should cloud or rain obscure my vision,
 may I draw closer to You so that my feet may tread in Your footsteps,
 Your Word be my encouragement and Your love my protection
 against the storms that assail me.
 Your light is the only light I need as I travel through life's mystery;
 Your Word is the only voice I need to hear,
 that still small voice that leads me to the place where I should be;
 Your presence is the only company I need as I walk this narrow road;
 Your fellowship is the warmth I crave to help me on the way.
 Be with me Lord Jesus – before me, behind me, beside me, above me, and beneath me.
 Amen.*

Celtic Prayer

Sunday, April 26: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Listen to Paul's counsel:

- *"Live in a way that pleases God ..."*
- *"God's will is for you to be holy ..."*
- *"Love each other ..."*
- *"Live a quiet life, minding your own business ..."*

(Why would this have been particularly good counsel in Thessalonica [remember Acts 17:1-9])

Twice he adds words to the effect that, *"You live this way already, and we encourage you to do so even more."* Just as following Jesus is a matter of life-long learning, it is also a matter of life-long improvement. We are not perfect yet – we never will be. The challenge is never to give up and say, *"I'm good enough,"* or *"I have arrived,"* or *"I know what I need to know to live as a Christian; I can stop learning and thinking now."* We all face new challenges that push us to think through how our faith shapes our decisions and our lives. Constant and never-ending improvement is what we are called to.

"Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live ..." As we are genuine about our lives – honest about the fact we are not perfect yet – but sincere in our desire to improve and keep learning, people will see the reality of God's work in our lives. People do not expect us to be perfect. They can accept our problems ... when we admit them honestly. And they respect us when we have the integrity to recognize our weaknesses and when they see our resolve to keep on aiming for godliness, holiness, and integrity.

"God's will is for you to be holy ... You live this way already, but do so even more."

*God of love, out of love you created the world, us, me.
 You put everything together in detailed, delicate ways, knowing our every need.
 Sustaining God, you provide:
 food that nourishes, water that refreshes, rest that renews.
 You give: emotions that express, art that uplifts, history that reminds.
 You prompt: community that supports, experiences that teach, relationships that inspire.
 God, in all these things, you sustain our being and well-being, together.
 Your love, a resource for our relationships with others, with creation, with ourselves and with you.
 Love, informing friendships, joining sister with brother, and parent with child.
 Love, the wellspring of tender, pleasure-sharing, intimate relationships.
 Love, unconditional, forgiving and inspirational,
 a love embodied in Jesus, which we seek to share.
 God, thank you for your gift of love, which encircles us, sustains us
 and from which nothing can separate us.
 Amen.*

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Monday, April 27: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

One of the issues in the church in Thessalonica concerned the fate of some of their fellow believers who had died. Paul's answer is simple: Jesus died but was raised to life again (resurrection). In the same way we will die but be raised to life again (we will be resurrected, too).

In v.15-18, Paul encourages the Thessalonians that our future hope is that *"we will be with the Lord forever"* (v.17). A lot has been made of what this might look like, how this will transpire, and what our personal experience will be. Paul's point is not to deal with practical, technical questions like when or how a "rapture" might take place (the word "rapture" is NOT found in Scripture anywhere). New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, comments, *"Christian language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into a mist. Signposts don't normally provide you with advance photographs of what you'll find at the end of the road, but that doesn't mean they aren't pointing in the right direction."*

The imagery used here would have been less confusing to Paul's first readers than to us. Many of the early believers were Jewish, steeped in the Old Testament (17:4). They would have understood Paul's imagery:

- They would know the story of Moses coming down the mountain after being away a long time, to personally lead and teach his people (Exodus 32). Jesus' return is similar; He will return to lead His people: hopefully they are more faithful than Moses' folks.
- They would know Daniel 7, which describes the persecuted people of God vindicated over their pagan enemies by the coming of *"one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."* Paul says Jesus' return is similar; He will come back to, be with, save and protect His people during their times of suffering and lead them into a time of resurrection and peace.
- They also lived in a culture where, when a king or emperor came to visit your town, you went out of your city to meet him (remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem). You didn't wait in your home until he arrived; that would be rude. And it was a celebration. People would rush to meet the king and escort him into their city. Jesus, the King of kings, is returning. Since it was a familiar picture of what happened in that day when the king came to your town, Paul is using the imagery of going out (or up) to meet Him, then escorting Him back to our world. Paul is emphasizing that Jesus, the rightful King of Kings and Lord of all, is coming to visit us.

There is LOTS of imagery to think about here. The key points are the truth of Jesus' coming, our resurrection, and His presence. Regarding the specific details, times, and how-it-all-happens, we'll just have to wait and see. These verses in Thessalonians are absolutely true about what they tell us about:

- *Jesus* – He is resurrected now; He will be personally physically present with His people again one day in the future;
- *Those who have died who believe* – they will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus;
- *Christians alive when Jesus returns* – they will be *"transformed"* with bodies like those who are resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:41-54; Philippians 3:21); and
- *Our eternal reality* – we will be with the Lord forever.

Paul's concern is a pastoral one: he wants suffering people to know that there will be a resurrection of all people and that ultimately those of us who believe, and our loved ones who believe, will be with the Lord forever. That is good news. Thank God for that tremendous promise.

*Living God, who turns dry land into pools of water;
lead us to the spring of eternal life.
May we drink and be satisfied, and become channels of Your grace.
May those who still thirst find in You the water without price.
Enable me to play my part in leading them to You,
the never-failing fountain of life.
Amen*

Welsh prayer

Tuesday, April 28: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Wouldn't it be nice to know what today will bring? Or maybe not? Maybe it's good that we don't know the good things that will happen? Or the bad things that might happen?

As Paul has spoken about Jesus' return, he reminds us not to worry about when this will all take place. Paul's words echo the warnings of Jesus: *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when that time will come"* (Mark 13:32-33). Jesus uses a variety of parables to talk about this: virgins and lamps, people given talents (units of money, not abilities), sheep and goats (all in Matthew 25), watchful gatekeepers (Mark 13:34-37), etc.

Paul uses metaphors to try to speak of this mystery, too. The Lord's return will be like

- A thief coming in the night ... what does that suggest? No warning? What else (think on it)?
- A woman going into labour ... what does that suggest? A surprise? What else (think on it)?

Therefore, we should be like a wide-awake, sober person putting on his armour ... what does that suggest? Alertness? Preparation? What else (think on it)?²

Paul's main concern, again, is pastoral: how should we live knowing Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, those who are still living will be transformed, and we will be with the Lord forever?

- Live as a *"child of the light"* or a *"child of the day"* – what does this mean to you? Perhaps think about the opposite – what would a "child of darkness" or a "child of the night" be like? In contrast then, what would a "child of the light" or a "child of the day" be like?
- *Be alert and self-controlled* – in what areas of your life do you struggle with self-control?
- *Let faith and love guard your heart* – do you get overly stressed, worried, fearful ... how does this hurt you? ... how can you work on your understanding of faith and God's love to know His peace and joy?
- *Make the hope of salvation the protection for your mind* ... do you find yourself doubting? Wandering off in strange directions? Struggling with obscure issues? Hold onto Jesus as the anchor of your faith;

"Encourage one another and build each other up. Just as in fact you are doing" (5:11) – Paul encourages them that they are already doing this. But we can always do better at this sort of thing, can't we? Paul encourages us toward constant improvement in the same way in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 10.

*I ask, You, O God, to give me a more complete knowledge of Your will
and to give me spiritual wisdom and understanding.
May the way I live will always honor and please you, Lord,
and may my life produce every kind of good fruit.
All the while, may I grow as I learn to know You, my God, better and better.
I also pray that I will be strengthened with all Your glorious power
so I will have all the endurance and patience I need.
May I be filled with joy, always thanking You, my Father.
You have enabled me to share in the inheritance
that belongs to Your people, who live in the light.
For you have rescued me from the kingdom of darkness
and transferred me into the Kingdom of Your dear Son,
who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.
Thank you, my King, my Saviour, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

² For a good giggle, picture the opposite – a drunken, half-asleep person trying to put on armour – ouch. As the warnings on TV say, "Kids, don't try this at home". ☺

Wednesday, April 29: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul's final words flow out of verse 11: *"Encourage one another and build each other up ..."* His advice is pretty straightforward. Read it over several times. What is God saying to you?

To help you read this passage with fresh eyes, here it is in Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love. Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet.

"Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

"Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil.

"May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together — spirit, soul, and body — and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it.

"Friends, keep up your prayers for us. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And make sure this letter gets read to all the brothers and sisters. Don't leave anyone out. The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you." The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you, today.

*We got our money's worth that night in a garden, Lord,
when silver changed hands as quickly as a kiss condemned.
For you saved us from squandering our souls.
We got our money's worth that day on a hillside
when we gambled with your innocence and landed a bargain.
For you reclaimed our torn and shabby lives.
We got our money's worth that morning we cursed our empty nets
and the hardship they hauled home while you bought our breakfast and our freedom.
For you rescued us from a world of no rewards.
You invest so much in us, Lord, often with little return.
Our money still betrays the weak and condemned.
Our economy still hinders the prospects of the poor.
Our need to have is a shameful give-away.
And the table of the rich still groans as loudly as the stomachs of the destitute.
Real treasure, you tell us, grows not in saving, but in sharing,
not in hoarding, but in hand-outs,
not in storing, but in restoring,
not in the stockpile, but in the single sacrifice made priceless through love.
Thank you, Lord, not for what we have, but what we may give.
Not for what we have earned, but what we owe.
Not for what we might gain, but for what we have to lose.
Thank you, Lord, for what it is worth.
Amen*

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Thursday, April 30: 2 Thessalonians 1

Prayer is the most powerful force in the universe. We say that; do we really believe it? Does that show in how much time and energy we spend in prayer?

How do we pray for one another? This chapter records some of Paul's prayers for his friends.

This letter was probably written a few months or a year after 1 Thessalonians. The Thessalonian Christians are having a tough, tough time. As we know, Thessalonica was not an easy city in which to be a Christian. Paul praises them for their "*endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering*" (1:4). We don't know what their pain and suffering looked like but it must have been awful.

Good for them that their "*faith is flourishing*" and their "*love for one another is growing*" even during their struggles. When times get hard it is easy to get disillusioned with God and become bitter, angry, miserable people. The Holy Spirit is clearly at work here – and the people are listening and acting on His promptings: they are staying firm in their faith and growing in love for one another. God will help us through tough times – but we have to keep listening to His voice, AND keep on doing what He encourages us to do.

Paul's prayer is wonderful: "*We keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*"

May this be our prayer for our church: "*Lord, enable us to live lives worthy of Your call. May You give us the power to accomplish all the good things our faith prompts us to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way we live, and we will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ.*"

May this be our prayer for ourselves, too: "*Lord, enable me to live a life worthy of Your call. Give me the power to accomplish all the good things my faith prompts me to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way I live, and I will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*"

*I awake this morning and live this day in Your presence, O God.
May heaven open wide before me, above me, and around me
so that I may see You, my Saviour.
May Your Spirit be at work in all things on earth this day.
Keep Your people safe this day, O God:
enfold them, surround them, watch over them;
O God be with them in their hoping, in their working,
in their playing, and in their dreaming.
Watch now, O Jesus, over those who are weary, or wandering, or weeping.
Guide them to a house of Your peace
and lead me to be one who cares for their tears.
Amen.*

Friday, May 1: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Some people get all hung up about the end times. They think they have figured out all the dates. They have understood all the signs of the times. They have read (or written) all the prophecy books. But what happens when things don't go as they figure they should? How many "expired" prophecy books fill landfills around the world?

The Thessalonians had latched onto Paul's teaching about Jesus' return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). But they thought it had already happened. Some teachers tried to convince them Jesus had already returned (they

wrote a letter, supposedly from Paul, to that effect). As a result some folks were giving up doing anything. After all, if Jesus has returned, why bother working anymore? This is the end times, so they were just waiting for the final chapter. Paul wants to stamp out this error right away.

Paul goes on to talk about a great rebellion against God and the coming of a "man of lawlessness" or "man of sin" who will deceive many. Just as persecution and suffering are a normal, expected part of life, so are theological tricksters who will use religion to get rich. People throughout the centuries have tried to identify this "man of lawlessness": he has been identified as Nero or other evil Roman emperors. Other people have named him as the Pope, Stalin, Hitler and Osama bin Laden. We have to be careful labeling any person or group – or trying to predict Jesus' return – based on our own attempts to read history and impose our interpretation on Scripture. We have no idea when this will take place.

Downright evil people will arise as well. You can imagine early Christians were sure this reality was being fulfilled in their time – the Thessalonian Christians (and Christians in many parts of the Empire) were being brutally persecuted, Roman emperors proclaimed themselves gods, later emperors would throw Christians to the lions. These people had every right to imagine these words were coming true in their day. But Paul was warning them that it might not be yet. We need to be cautious speculating now, too. Times in the 1st century, the Black Plague, and even World War 2, were far worse than now.

Paul's big point is that Jesus is in control. We do not need to be afraid (remember the most common command in the Bible is "Don't be afraid ..." or "Fear not ..."). No matter how evil some person seems to be or how out of control our situation appears, God is still on top of things. He will be victorious.

We do live in a world where evil is still very real. Yes, the Kingdom of God has come – the Holy Spirit is alive and active – but only when Jesus finally returns will all vestiges of evil, suffering, and death be wiped away. In the meantime we live with the dual reality of the Holy Spirit among us (giving us strength, peace, joy, healing, hope, wisdom, guidance, correction, and love) AND evil among us (causing sickness, pain, greed, pride, selfishness, cruelty, and all sorts of other rotten things).

In the end, who wins? God. And God alone. But in the meantime, life can be difficult. Pray for God's comfort, peace, and strength. And pray for His courage to share His love in word and deed.

*I am bending my knee before my Father, who created me,
before the Son, who died for me;
before the Spirit, who cleanses me,
in love and worship.
Pour down upon me from heaven the rich blessing of Your forgiveness, O Lord;
You who are holy and pure, please be patient with me.
O Savior of glory, please give me a true knowledge of God,
His love and His direction,
that I may do the will of God on earth at all times
as angels and saints do in heaven;
and each day and each night please give me Your peace.
Please give me Your peace.
Amen.*

Gaelic prayer

Saturday, May 2: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Tough times come. Suffering happens. Struggles are a normal part of our Christian experience. Anyone who tells you otherwise is being dishonest to both Scripture and our lived reality.

In light of the reality of evil, pain and suffering in the world, how ought we to live?

- *Stand firm.* God can be trusted. Don't be afraid. When times get tough we can be paralyzed by fear – we can lose sleep, get stressed, panic ... Keep the faith and stand firm.
- *Hold to the truth about Jesus.* Remain firmly grounded with your hope in Jesus and in Him alone. It is easy to lose sight of what is most important in life – to trust in our investments, relationships, possessions, smarts, strength ... but all of these will eventually fail us. Only God can sustain us. It is easy to listen to fine-sounding teachers who promise us health, wealth, and all sorts of nice things. We are encouraged to be like the Bereans who "*received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what is said was true*" (Acts 17:11).

Paul has another wonderful blessing for the Thessalonians: "*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word*" (3:16-17).

Read this as your prayer to God today: "*My Lord Jesus Christ and God my Father, I know You love me and by Your grace You give me eternal encouragement and good hope; please encourage my heart and strengthen me in every good deed and word. Amen.*"

Can you pray this prayer for a friend? A neighbour? A family member? "*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loves _____ and by his grace gave _____ eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage _____'s heart and strengthen _____ in every good deed and word*" (3:16-17).

*I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13:5-6)
Help us Lord -
To live in Your light;
to act in Your might;
To think in Your wisdom;
to walk in Your kingdom;
To abide in Your love;
Your presence to prove.
Amen.*

Welsh prayer

Sunday, May 3: 2 Thessalonians 3

If the Lord is going to return, why bother working? Shouldn't we just sit back and let things unfold?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul had made a passing comment to the Christians in Thessalonica to "*warn those who are idle/lazy.*" Apparently this problem – people not working at anything – was getting worse, not better. Paul spends a considerable amount of time pointing out that in God's economy work is a good thing. An essential part of our identity, as creations in the image of God, is work (Genesis 2:15). In fact, when we are not busy, we can become busybodies (2 Thessalonians 3:11): an old folk saying goes, "*The devil finds work for idle hands.*"

The word Paul uses to describe these people (translated "*idle*" or "*lazy*") means: "*disorderly, undisciplined, without law and order.*" The word is used of a soldier who refuses to obey orders. It's not just that the soldier is lazy; he is deliberately being disobedient. It describes someone who not only doesn't work for a living, but deliberately avoids doing what he ought to do. This kind of person cheats on his taxes, leeches off society by doing the absolute minimum in order to qualify for EI, works the system to get the most from it without contributing anything himself, feels society "owes" him a living ...

Of course some people are unable to work for very legitimate reasons – we have to be very compassionate with those who cannot find work, have disabilities, miss opportunities, need further education, etc. Paul is

not chastising these people at all. He is taking to task those who are very capable of work, have the skills and the opportunity, but are choosing to be lazy or “work the system” to provide what they could work for. For instance I worked with a fellow who described himself as a member of the “EI Ski Team” – he would work the minimum number of weeks he needed to during the summer, in order to collect EI. Then he spent his winters skiing at Whistler. He never even tried to look for work during the winter months. It was his “right” to live this way. This is the kind of person Paul is speaking about here.

Paul is saying that this way of living is not acceptable for the people of God. To the best of our ability we are called to use our gifts, talents, education, resources, and abilities to serve God, to serve our community, and to support ourselves. We were never created to be sponges, sitting back “enjoying the good life” (whatever that is) at others’ expense. We are created to be God’s stewards, caring for His creation, for our neighbour, and for the world around us. Whether we are younger, middle-aged, or older, God has work we can do. Having said that, God also created a rhythm of work and rest (Sabbath). He does not call us to be obsessive-compulsive workaholics.

It is interesting that “retirement” is totally unknown in Scripture. The assumption is that even if we are no longer working at one calling (perhaps paid employment), God has something else for us to do that will benefit others, our community, and the Kingdom of God. We equate “work” with 9-5 paid employment; God sees work as a calling through which we can serve Him and bless others – paid or unpaid. Biblically, our work may be praying for others. Volunteering. Calling a shut in. Visiting a neighbour. Looking after a grandchild. Helping out in the nursery at church.

“Work is the natural exercise and function of man ... Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God” (Dorothy Sayers). What might God be calling you to, today?

*Jesus, You are the light of the world:
a light no darkness can quench.
Upon Your church,
wrestling with the darkness of evil, battling against doubt –
let Your light shine.
Upon world governments,
facing gloom and despair, battling against disaster –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who live in the shadows,
caught up in sorrow and strife, struggling against pain –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who are poor, hungry and homeless, feeling hopeless and unloved –
let Your light shine.
Upon those who feel helpless, unsure where to turn or who to turn to, confused and convicted –
let Your light shine.
Come, my Lord, my light, my way ...
Come, my lantern, night and day –
let Your light shine.
Come, my healer, make me whole ...
Come, my Saviour, protect my soul –
let Your light shine.
Come, my King, enter my heart.
Come, Prince of peace, and never depart –
let Your light shine.
Amen.*

David Adam