



Monday 11 January to Sunday 17 January



Monday 11 January 2021

The place of honour in our lives

by Tom Brennen

‘Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life’ (Isaiah 43:4).

Read Isaiah 43:1–7

Have you ever been given a place of honour?

The most uncomfortable I have ever been with honour was when I was working as a missionary in the Middle East. As a ‘white-faced westerner’, wherever I went, I received unearned honour. I would be served first, and at government offices, a path would be cleared. Even at the airport, some people assumed that I was a first-class passenger and should receive special treatment.

As Australians and New Zealanders, we find this very hard. We are pretty flat societies. We are people who find it hard to ride in the back seat of the taxi or the Uber. We acknowledge the work of politicians and leaders, but our depreciative humour ensures they never think too highly of themselves.

So how do you react when God says to you, ‘You are precious, you are honoured, and I love you. I give people in exchange for you?’

Do you, like most of us, defer and deflect? ‘Thanks, God, but I know that you love everyone, and they are more important than me.’ But God continues, ‘No. I love you. I will give my Son in exchange for you. You are precious to me. You have honour. You are worth the death of my own child’.

To follow our thoughts of baptism from our devotion yesterday, Martin Luther reminds us to remember our baptism daily. Why? So that we recall our preciousness to God. We are washed clean and made new through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. It is from this basis we can live our lives abundantly and without fear. While we make mistakes and feel worthless, God gives us a place of honour again and again and again. He relentlessly lifts us up to him when we fail.

As verse 7 reminds us, we were created for God's glory, formed and made for his purposes. Let us live in this reality.

Father, we give thanks for our redemption through the blood of your Son. Let us live in the reality of our preciousness to you and seek to share your good news with our sisters and brothers across the world. Amen.

Tuesday 12 January 2021

We will be your people

by Tom Brennan

'You shall be my people, and I will be your God' (Ezekiel 36:28).

Read Ezekiel 36:24-28

357: Does that number mean anything to you? I know it does to a friend of mine named Jon.

Jon and I used to play in a church band together. One consequence of growing up in the church was that Jon knew the *All Together* songbooks so well that you could give him a number and he would know the name of the song and which book it came from. That was a surprisingly handy skill.

357 in *All Together Now* is the song 'Give us hearts to know you'. It came to mind when I reflected on this passage from Ezekiel. The chorus is, 'We will be your people and you our God'. The verses of the song beseech our Lord to give us hearts to love, bless, serve, praise and worship him.

The Christian life is full of mysteries and concepts that we have to hold in tension. The devotion yesterday reminded us of how precious we are individually to God. Today, the reading from Ezekiel reminds us that God equally views us as a collective body. We are all his people. And he is God to all of us.

I am either a member of Generation Y or a Millennial, depending on who you ask, and I hear that these generations are the most selfish ever. Yet the Bible shows us that selfishness is something that has plagued humanity from the very beginning. Why else did God need to give ten commandments to the nation of Israel, many of which are about looking out for others and discouraging human selfishness?

Our role, as members of God's family, is to seek to have a heart like our Heavenly Father. Furthermore, we have a role to play in helping sisters and brothers in our community to be God's people. To help them be people that bring glory to God. We need our sisters and brothers, too, to allow us to better love, bless, serve, praise and worship God.

Thank God that he called us to be in community and that he chose us all. We are better together than we are apart.

Lord, thank you for calling us out of the darkness as a community. Please help us to be your people as a community. Help us to love you and serve our sisters and brothers. Amen.

Wednesday 13 January 2021

Full attention

by Tom Brennen

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42).

Read Acts 2:36–42

A note in my study Bible on this passage reminds us that to 'be devoted' is to give 'rapt attention' to that particular thing. So the early Christians gave rapt attention to teaching, being a community and sharing the sacrament of communion and prayer.

When was the last time that you could honestly say that your church had your rapt attention? More importantly, when was the last time that God had your rapt attention?

Yesterday, I spoke briefly about younger generations being tagged as selfish. These younger generations are also generalised as always being on their phones and technology. As a teacher, I see that my students struggle to manage technology use.

But they are not alone. Just last week, outside my school, I saw two of my students on their phones, joined by their parents and one of their grandparents. All five of them were sitting there on a glorious late spring day, heads down, consuming whatever was on their screen. The screen had their rapt attention.

I don't believe that technology is more evil than good. Having a myriad of resources at my fingertips helped me write this series of devotions! But we must be careful.

We must be careful not just with technology but with all of our endeavours. Perhaps our work has more attention than our relationship with God? Maybe our hobbies have more attention than our involvement with our church community? As Matthew 6:21 reminds us, 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.

The early church grew off the back of rapt attention to worshipping in word and sacrament, in being a Christian community and prayer. What might your life look like if this area of your life had your full attention? What changes do you need to make so that it is?

Start small. Maybe you've fallen out of the habit of weekly worship or daily prayer? Perhaps you've not connected with a fellow congregation member for some time? Perhaps your Bible has gathered a bit of dust? Pick one area and work on that.

You, and your community, will be blessed, I'm sure.

Lord, forgive us when we give you and your church less than our full attention. Guide us as we seek to live lives that are full and bless others. Amen.

Thursday 14 January 2021

Powered by the resurrection

by Tom Brennen

‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?’ (Romans 6:3).

Read Romans 6:3–11

Paul Kelly's song 'From little things, big things grow' is often used to inspire us to make small changes to achieve great things. It was in that Spirit that yesterday we considered what small adjustments we could make to give God more of our attention. But we also know that those big things that grow are not always good, helpful, or pleasing to God.

I am passionate that in Christian schools, there is great power in the staff gathering each day for devotion in the morning. I feel blessed that my current school has a fantastic culture of morning worship together. It is valued, vibrant and meaningful. But sadly, there are many schools that no longer have this.

Each story of the loss of morning devotion is unique. Unions demanded compulsory devotion be considered as part of workloads, increasing the costs for a struggling school. Well-meaning principals didn't want non-Christian staff to feel uncomfortable. Some felt that forcing people to attend worship was contrary to free will and the gospel. While I suspect no school principal ever said 'this isn't an important part of our school', the many small choices and decisions along the way led us to where we are today. From little things, big things grow.

Likewise, I've noticed in myself a leaning toward giving devotions that call us towards positives and avoid calling out negatives. It is more comfortable to be encouraged to be a good person and to love others than it is to dwell on the meaning of the very Son of God suffering and dying on the cross for our sins. The first side of the gospel is more agreeable, cleaner and palatable. Few are likely to be offended by it.

When we gloss over the saving work of Christ on the cross, we miss the power that spurs us onward to a sincere commitment to service. We should not be rude or proud or deliberately offensive, but our churches, schools and organisations must never lose sight of our baptism into Christ's death. We should speak this message clearly. The Bible verse 1 Corinthians 1:23 calls us to preach 'Christ crucified'.

That is the good news: through Christ's death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven, and we have new life. May we ground ourselves in this reality every morning.

Lord, through your death, we are saved from our sin. Let us diligently commit to living and sharing this reality. Amen.

Friday 15 January 2021

The fullness of life in the Son

by Tom Brennen

'And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son' (1 John 5:11).

1 John 5:6–12

'Mr Tom, did I translate correctly that you say that our salvation has nothing to do with how much we do for our church?'

When I served as a missionary in the Middle East, I taught at a Bible college. It was a great privilege to stand before many people who were hungry to know more about God's word so that they could share the teachings with their people in their language.

While I learnt enough Arabic to get by on the streets, I needed a translator when I gave lectures and workshops to ensure people understood me. I had a couple of great translators, but Solomon was my favourite.

Solomon was not one to smile much. He was earnest and took his job of translating me correctly with great care and diligence. He would translate for me hour after hour, very calmly, very consistently and with patience when I would get excited and forget to pause for the translation from English to Arabic.

The vast majority of my students felt that Jesus' sacrifice was not valid if they did not tithe enough, if their children did not behave well enough, if they didn't wear the right clothes to church, or if they weren't a pastor, deacon or leader.

One evening, I was teaching a subject of the gospel according to John and John's letters, a theme of which is new life, living abundantly and not being bound to rules based on righteousness.

Solomon must have finally had enough that night when he asked me the question I opened this devotion with. I had told the class on many occasions about the freedom of the gospel and that it is by faith we are saved. We are to rejoice and live our lives in this freedom. We do engage in the church community and do good works in serving our neighbour as an outworking of this but not to get salvation.

Solomon paused, smiled deeply, and turned back to the class. I knew that the Spirit had done his work and ensured that Solomon knew what this abundant life in Christ meant now and into eternity. The weight had been lifted.

Let us never take the profound impact of the gospel in our lives and the lives of others for granted.

Lord, we praise you for the depth and breadth of the cultures, languages and customs of our Christian sisters and brother across your world. May you protect your gospel so that others can hear it in full truth and power. Amen.

Saturday 16 January 2021

Fear isn't all bad

by Tom Brennen

'I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14).

Read Psalm 139:1–6,13–18

The father of the Lutheran Church, Martin Luther, wrote his Small Catechism in response to the low level of understanding of the faith among Christians. He had a specific concern about whether Christian parents were able to teach their children the basic tenets of the faith.

When I undertook my confirmation, I recall the pastor reading through the explanation of the Ten Commandments contained in the Small Catechism. I found it confusing, as Luther starts every explanation of each commandment with the phrase, 'What does this mean? We should fear and love God'.

I was thinking in my head: 'Fear? I thought this God welcomed sinners, and we no longer had anything to fear?' At the time, I wasn't brave enough to ask questions to clarify what Luther was saying.

We encounter a similar idea in Psalm 139, which praises God for 'fearfully and wonderfully' making us.

Pope Francis summarises this so well. He writes:

The fear of the Lord ... doesn't mean being afraid of God, since we know that God is our Father that always loves and forgives us ... It is no servile fear, but rather a joyful awareness of God's grandeur and a grateful realisation that only in him do our hearts find true peace ... the attitude of those who place all their trust in God and feel protected, like a child with his Father.

Likewise, Martin Luther called this concept 'filial fear'. It is the fear of a child who adores their parent and does not want to let them down. It is a call to love, respect, follow, worship and serve.

To the world, saying that 'you live in fear of the Lord' would sound strange, as if you were living in oppression and fear of a judgemental God. But for the Christian, living in fear is instead to know God's good news and desire to serve and love him, knowing that he loves us and empowers us to do so.

This God we worship did come in human form in Jesus, but he is also above and beyond all. We worship a God outside of space and time, who made the universe. Who, as the psalm says, literally created each of us in our mother's womb. At the end of our lives, he welcomes us to his eternal reality.

That is what Luther wanted us to teach our children. That we worship a truly amazing God to whom we should bow down and worship in all his magnificence.

Lord, we worship and adore you in all your majesty and magnificence. May our fear of you always remind us of your enduring love and commitment to us, now and in eternity. Amen.

Sunday 17 January 2021

Nathanael's epiphany

by Pauline Simonsen

'Do you believe because ... I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these' (John 1:50).

Read John 1:43-51

'Yeah, right.'

This 'slacker' saying is usually delivered in a tone dripping with scepticism and sarcasm – a sarcasm we hear in Nathanael's response to Phillip: 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?!' Phillip has told his friend that he believes he has found 'the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote' – the Messiah himself. He identifies this person as Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth. Nathanael is sceptical and dismissive of Phillip's revelation, though. 'Yeah, right!'

But Philip is not rebuffed. He simply responds with a gentle invitation for Nathanael to come and see for himself.

When Jesus greets Nathanael as 'an Israelite in whom there is no deceit' and adds that he 'saw' Nathanael before Phillip spoke with him, Nathanael is profoundly surprised. His scepticism melts in the light of Jesus' supernatural perception, and Nathanael has his epiphany. He sees Jesus for a moment in his true identity. 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus sees Nathanael, and in response, Nathanael is allowed to see the Son of God.

Nathanael's experience illustrates this season of Epiphany, which celebrates the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. The word 'epiphany' also refers to a moment of sudden insight or personal revelation. This week we will see how Jesus' epiphany causes a personal epiphany for different people in the Bible.

We may encounter many sarcastic, sceptical people in our witness to Jesus. It is not our job to convince them; our job is only to invite them. Jesus reveals himself at the right time and brings the epiphany each sceptic needs.

And in case we think we know all there is to know about Jesus, his final words in our reading today promise that we will see much more. There is always more of Jesus to see!

Give us eyes to see you truly, Lord Jesus, and courage to share what we see, and faith to trust you for the revelation needed. Amen.