



**April 2017**

**Prayer:  
Talking  
with the  
Saviour!**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
Prayers**

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As we move through the season of Lent, Easter, and beyond, we continue to think about prayer – talking with God about everything. We praise God. We thank God. We listen to God. We confess to God. We talk about others issues with God. We listen to God. We pray for our country. We bring our own sorrows and joys, problems, and possibilities to God. We listen to God. We pray for people we love. We pray for our community. We listen to God. Which part of this list do we forget most often? We listen to God.

The prayers (mostly) are adapted from James S. Bell Jr & Tracy Macon Sumner, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Christian Prayers & Devotions* (don't let the title fool you – it actually is a very good anthology of prayers!).

### **Monday, April 3: John 14:1-14**

*"John quotes a curious remark of Philip to Jesus: 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.' It reminds me of what I have often heard on the lips of exasperated parents to their children: 'You're never satisfied.' Am I ever? Augustine said our hearts are restless till they rest in God. When I see Jesus, I see a human vision of the Infinite God who is beyond my imagination." (Frank Doyle)*

We all have difficulty understanding God. Our finite minds struggle to make sense of a spiritual being who created and sustains the universe. We cannot comprehend anyone who is not "physical" flesh and blood like us. Jesus invites us to know God, not by theological speculation or religious activity, but by observing His life of loving, healing, rebuking, challenging, forgiving, washing feet, encouraging, exemplary holiness, stilling storms, challenging evil, and raising the dead. This is who God is! Reading the stories of Jesus and listening to the teaching of Jesus we discover who God – Father, Son, and Spirit – really is!

How can we know God? How can flesh and blood beings, like us, relate to a Spirit, like God? How can sinful people have a relationship with a holy God? At face value it seems impossible. Many people give up: "God" if He exists, is unknowable. Or they resort to religious rituals to appease Him. Or they have strange ideas of an angry God who needs to be placated by offerings. Or if they do enough good things, God will like them.

None of this is necessary! Jesus, coming among us as God in human form, relates to us as God in flesh and blood. When some people read, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me"* they are offended by the exclusivity of Jesus' comment. But think of it positively: through Jesus there actually IS a way to know God; through Jesus there actually IS objective truth about who we are and how we can relate to our loving Father; through Jesus there really IS a rich and meaningful life in fellowship with God's Spirit. Without Jesus there are none of these.

Other than Jesus, there simply is no way to authentic relationship with the living God. Other than Jesus, there is no source of absolute truth about life, the universe, and everything. Other than Jesus, there is no way to a full and complete life here and hereafter.

In the long term we know that our lives are secure in His hands. But this moment, this day we are invited to come to God by believing what Jesus says, and by trusting our lives to him. There may be tough times. We may encounter struggles most of our earthly lives. But we know our lives are safe and complete in Him. And we know we can make a difference to the world around us as we live in His grace and mercy.

*"God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed. Once you were like sheep who wandered away. But now you have turned to your Shepherd, the Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:21-25).*

Lord, help me to live the life you have called me to, in and through Jesus ... in and through your Spirit ... in and through the Father.

*Our heavenly Father,  
we pray that your blessing may rest on each one of us who profess to be Christians.  
Lord, help us to love Christ more than we love ourselves.  
Help us to be more like him in our way of life.  
Help us, Lord, to walk humbly, prayerfully,  
consistently on, in the dust of our pilgrimage  
so that others may not stumble over us and say,  
"They profess only, but they never do anything."  
God, help us to live up to what we profess,  
through you, in Christ Jesus.  
May your love be shown in each one of us.  
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

## **Tuesday, April 4: John 14:15-31**

Bilbo Baggins, one of the main characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, is a Hobbit. Hobbits are gentle, peace-loving, simple folk. Much to the consternation of Bilbo's quiet, peaceful, home-loving, non-adventurous neighbours, Bilbo has travelled far beyond the borders of the Shire and has had some wild experiences with trolls, goblins, and dragons. Bilbo tells his young nephew, Frodo, *"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."*

We live in a crazy world where, if we don't keep our wits about us, there's no knowing where we might be swept off to, too! Jesus promises us His Holy Spirit – His personal presence in our lives – to help us keep our heads, hearts, and souls, and bodies in fellowship with God on the unpredictable journey of life: *"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you ... When the Father sends the Advocate as my representative – that is, the Holy Spirit – he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid"* (John 14:16-17, 26-27).

Jesus is not preparing His disciples to live in a holy huddle in some Christian fortress. He is preparing them to live their faith in the real knock-about world of work and family, of school and friendships, of health and sickness, of stress and strife, of success and defeat, of non-belief and "other" beliefs. When we step out the front door every morning we are in a rough and tumble world where we need Jesus' wisdom, His guidance, and His strength. His Spirit provides that.

Gandalf, a wise wizard, says of Bilbo: *"There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself."* When we are put in stressful situations we almost always find there is a lot more strength and resilience within ourselves than we imagine, too. Especially as people who love Jesus, we find it is when we have to rely on God, and God alone, our faith can actually grow the most. When we are stretched beyond what we can handle in our own human strength, we discover He can get us through!

But *"God won't give me more than I am able to bear,"* right? Stop! That is NOT a verse in the Bible!<sup>1</sup> Look it up! In fact, God may well allow us to face more than we can handle on our own and in our own strength. Because when we face more than **we** can bear we turn to **God**. Faith – genuine faith – happens when we do deal with more than we can bear.

One of the messages of Scripture we often choose to ignore is that suffering is not as abnormal as we think it is. Actually it is a relatively common experience for God's people. Peter writes, *"Dear friends, don't be*

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<sup>1</sup> The closest verse is 1 Corinthians 10:13: *"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure."* Notice this is specifically about **temptation**, not difficulties, hard times, or obstacles!

*surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. If you are insulted because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people’s affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name! ... So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you” (1 Peter 4:12-19).*

When life is difficult, turn to God. God’s Spirit is in you. There is a lot more in you than you guess – God is there! There is much more to you than you can imagine: His Spirit is in you. How can you live bravely, boldly, and missionally this week?

*God, give me patience through tough times.  
How impatient and angry I am when I think myself unjustly slandered, maligned, or hurt.  
Christ suffers the indignity of the cross, the innocent for the guilty,  
yet I will not stand up under one negative word for His sake.  
Lord, grant me character and patience, power and strength,  
that I may take all adversity with a Christ-like character,  
and with faith in Him overcome it.  
And if necessity and your honour require me to speak,  
grant that I may do so with gentleness and patience, confidence and inspiration,  
that the truth and your glory may be seen by all.  
For yours is the power and the glory, forever and ever.  
Amen*

Adapted from Miles Coverdale (1488-1568)

### **Wednesday, April 5: John 15:1-8**

John 14 ends with Jesus saying, *"I don't have much more time to talk to you, because the ruler of this world approaches ..."* (14:30). It's an ominous sentence. On the one hand, it is quite literally true – Imperial Roman soldiers, guided by Judas, are on their way to arrest Him. On the other hand, He is also referring to the dark spiritual forces at work, driving Judas, motivating Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders, influencing Pontius Pilate. All the powers of evil are coming together to try to destroy Him ...

Jesus has just shared His final meal with His disciples (the "last supper"), symbolically washed their feet, begun to talk about His death and resurrection, and promised His Holy Spirit. He concludes, *"Come, let's be going"* (14:31). They are leaving the upper room where they shared their last supper together and are heading toward the Garden of Gethsemane, through the streets of Jerusalem. It's dark, literally as it is now night, but also dark, spiritually, as the forces of evil move through the streets, searching to destroy Jesus.

As they make their way into the garden, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, they walk through vineyards. Jesus, master teacher that He is, uses the vines growing around them as an object lesson. Vines are not like trees with a large trunk out of which branches grow, one branching off the other, branches on branches on branches. Vines have one central stem out of which *each* branch grows. *Each* branch is connected directly to the stem. *Each* branch draws nourishment directly from the central vine.

As we walk through the dark streets and shadowy places of our world, Jesus teaches us we need to be directly connected to Him. We need to have a personal relationship with Him. We cannot base our faith on a pastor, author, blogger, relative, YouTube personality, musician, or friend. We need to know **Jesus**.

Any good relationship takes time and work. We need to prune away the busy-ness of our lives and really spend time – quality time – with those that matter most, including God. It's not easy to do. But just as a gardener is always cultivating the vine to ensure it is healthy and thriving, just as we need to make sure we spend high quality time with our close friends and family, we need to keep ensuring we are working on our

relationship with Jesus. Personal prayer, Bible study, corporate worship, small group time, and good friends are a few ways we could keep connected with the vine, Jesus. What can I do to keep connected to Him?

When we do stay connected with Him, we bear fruit! He does not specify what the fruit is, but the context suggests it is what glorifies God in our character, attitudes, actions, and speech. Paul is more explicit: *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

I wonder if a vine likes to be pruned? In plant terms, it must hurt. But pruning is a process that directs the plant's energy so the fruit is bigger and more plentiful. Jesus does not say what "pruning" looks like for us. But the results are that which is dead is removed and a person's life/fruit is enriched. While we may not like the idea of being "pruned," we can trust He wants to remove the "dead" parts of our lives so we become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled – more fruit-full. That's good! What is "dead" in my life? What might He need to prune from my life? Will I let Him?

*Lord, because you have made me, I owe you all of my love.  
Because you have redeemed me, I owe you all of myself.  
Because you have promised so much, I owe you all of my being.  
Lord, please make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge.  
Let me know by love what I know by understanding.  
I owe you more than my whole self, but all I can give you is all that I am.  
Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love.  
I am wholly yours by creation.  
Make me all yours, too, in love.  
Amen.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

#### **Thursday, April 6: John 15:9-17**

When I was an undergraduate at university (working on my bachelor's degree) we called our professors Dr. Ley, Dr. McRae, Dr. Parsons. When I began working on my graduate degrees (master's and doctorate), it was on a first name basis: David, Andrew, and Jim. In that transition from undergrad to grad school, we transitioned from a professor-student to a friend-friend relationship. Of course, David, Andrew, and Jim were much, much more knowledgeable and wiser than I was – I was still their student and they my mentors – but we also spent time "hanging out" and doing things together. I got to know them as people – their joys and sorrows, successes and struggles. I still have a great relationship with the two of them still living.

Jesus is describing a transition in His relationship with His disciples. They are going from knowing Him as a Rabbi and Teacher, to knowing Him as a friend. He is sharing with them His knowledge and wisdom, but also His joy and His sorrow, His success and His struggle. Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine: He struggles through these final days/hours with the overwhelming burden He carries. He needs friends.

Of course Jesus is still much, much more knowledgeable and wise than His disciples then – or us today! He still teaches them (and us). But the tone of His teaching has become much more intimate and much more personal: *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends ... I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me."*

Friendship is characterized by love – sacrificial, unconditional, unwavering love:

- *"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love."*
- *"When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love."*
- *"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."*
- *"This is my command: Love each other."*

Friendship is also characterized by obedience – obedience, informed and formed by honour and respect for a wise mentor. Knowing your wise mentor knows best, you choose to listen, to learn, and to obey:

- *"When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love."*
- *"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you."*
- *"This is my command: Love each other."*

How do you feel knowing Jesus calls you His friend? How do friends relate? What do they do together? How can that describe your relationship with Jesus? How can that knowing Jesus is your friend change how you pray/talk/relate to Him? Ask Him to help you get to know Him more and more ...

*"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!"*

*God of love, we pray that you give us love:  
love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing,  
and love in the hidden places of our souls;  
love of our neighbours, near and far;  
love of our friends, old and new;  
love of those who we find it hard to bear,  
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;  
love of those with whom we work,  
and love of those with whom we take our ease;  
love in joy, love in sorrow;  
love in life and love in death.  
In the end, may we be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love –  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – forever and ever.  
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

### **Friday, April 7: John 15:18-27**

Living for Jesus is not always easy! Not only do we stumble and fail now and then, but people do not always like us! Why not? After all, we are people who teach about God's love and who try to live by maxims like, *"Love your neighbour as yourself"*? Are we not loveable people?

Jesus reminds us that He came teaching those same truths – and His own people killed Him for it! The reality is that in our world, "love," in the biblical sense of unconditional grace and mercy, is not a popular theme. Certain aspects of "love" are very popular – sex, for instance. But self-giving love that seeks to bring justice, peace, and equality is not well-received by many people. Why not? Because many people have a lot to lose if they were act in a selfless and self-giving way. Frankly many people do better (financially, power, prestige) in a world that builds walls not bridges, sows hate not love, creates suspicion not compassion, and nurtures lies rather than truth. What happens to a person's wealth, power, control, and clout if they care for others first? The kingdom of God introduces a radical reordering of society where we choose to live counter-culturally. We choose to live Jesus-like values of unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, grace, truth, patience, honesty, and self-control.

What if it costs us (money, time) to help provide services for those who are homeless, have disabilities, are immigrants, or are poor? Our human "default" is selfish: we want to keep it all for ourselves ...

But historically Christians, inspired and empowered by the Spirit, have been in the frontlines to end slavery, provide public education and healthcare, fight for minority rights, care for the poor, champion gender equality, sponsor refugees, care for the environment, and much more – all of which are/were unpopular with many people! And all of which cost us time, money, effort, and popularity. Today as we care for the poor (soup kitchen, food banks, homeless shelter), advocate for peace in our world, seek to ensure justice for all,

care for God's creation, and sponsor refugees we can still be unpopular! But we still do it – because it's the right thing to do! We are called to give as generously as Jesus: He gave His life for us! What do I give?

The good news is that "*the Spirit of truth will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me*" – Jesus will be with us through His Holy Spirit. Praise God!

How are we called to "*love our neighbor*" in our own community? How can we do that courageously?

*Lord, holy Father,  
show us what kind of man it is, who is hanging for our sakes on the cross,  
whose suffering causes the rocks themselves to crack and crumble with compassion,  
whose death brings the dead back to life.  
Let my heart crack and crumble at the sight of Him.  
Let my soul break apart with compassion for His suffering.  
Let it be shattered with grief at my sins for which He dies.  
And finally, let it be softened with devoted love for Him and His world.  
Amen*

Bonaventure (1221-1274)

### **Saturday, April 8: John 16:1-15**

Can hard times and suffering happen the life of someone who loves Jesus? Read John 16:1-2. Following Jesus in the real world can be tough! Yes, God may allow us to face more than we can handle, BUT His Spirit is with us always. What will the Holy Spirit do in our world? He will ...

- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in relation to **sin**.* The world THINKS it is all right in how it operates – the law of the jungle (the wily survive) is the way to go; financial wealth is what is ultimately most important; if other people are in your way, run them over; we can exploit the earth's resources; morality is a matter of personal choice, the poor have only themselves to blame; it's all about money, etc. (of course we may not SAY it that way, but that's how we act). BUT, the Holy Spirit helps us see these values are wrong. They are sinful. The real guiding principle should be: "*Love each other as I have loved you*" (John 15:12). God's way calls us to love.
- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in terms of **righteousness**.* Jesus has shown us how to live wisely and rightly – a life characterized by obedience to God's laws and self-giving love. The proof that He was right is His resurrection; He has proven that love wins! Our culture will tell us we can pick and choose our own moral standards; no one should tell us how we should live our lives; personal self-actualization (whatever that might look like) is the highest value; money and power are everything. Jesus warns pursuing those ends ultimately leads to self-destruction. God's way calls us to holiness.
- *Demonstrate the world is wrong in terms of **judgment** or **condemnation**.* The world has judged Jesus, His teachings and us – His followers – as wrong about the fundamentals of life. His teachings about love, compassion, justice, mercy, and servanthood are mistaken; they do not shape the political or economic agenda. We need to build bigger walls and more nuclear arsenals – not bridges, hospitals, and schools. Those of us who live by God's values may be teased or persecuted. In the end, God's judgment will vindicate Jesus and His people. God calls us to faithfulness.

We may live "at odds" with much of our culture, but that's OK! The Spirit will help us along the way ... and God will honour our perseverance and commitment in the end.

*"With eyes wide open to the mercies of God," Paul writes, "I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity"* (Romans 12:1-2). May the Spirit inspire us to live faithfully ...

*God of our life,  
 there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down,  
 when the road seems dreary and endless,  
 when the skies are grey and threatening,  
 when our lives have no music in them,  
 when our hearts are lonely and our souls have lost their courage.  
 Flood the path with light.  
 Run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise.  
 Tune our hearts to brave music.  
 Give us a sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age.  
 Quicken our spirits so that we may be able to encourage the souls of all  
 who journey with us on the road of life ...  
 Lord, who though you were rich yet for our sakes you became poor,  
 and you promise in your holy Gospel  
 that whatever is done for the least of your brothers you will receive as done to you:  
 Give us grace, we humbly ask you, to be always ready and willing to minister,  
 as you enable us, to the needs of others,  
 and to extend the blessings of your kingdom over all the world.  
 Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

**Sunday, April 9: Luke 19:28-46 and Luke 23:35-49 (especially 23:46)**

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we traditionally read one of the stories of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We celebrate with palm branches, and "Hosannas," and generally have a great party!

However, we rarely link Palm Sunday with Good Friday, only five days later. It's a tragic comment on human nature that within a couple of days such jubilant celebration, with Jesus as the toast of the town, can turn to vile shouts of "Crucify Him!" and an angry mob demanding His execution. The same people who throw a party for Jesus throw Him to the wolves (the Jewish/Roman authorities) five days on. People are willing to welcome Jesus at a superficial level, but when he threatens to overturn their entrepreneurial money-changing ways, they are quick to get rid of Him.

Jesus is a fantastic judge of human character. As He approaches the city, He comments, *"How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace ..."* (Luke 19:42). What is the way to peace? Peace comes through genuinely welcoming Jesus ... deeply, not just superficially. That may mean a change of priorities. It may mean a shift in values. It may mean living differently. Following Jesus in the real world may lead to living counter culturally to the world around us ... And it can lead us into tough places.

Hard places are not as uncommon as we might like to think they are. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed, *"Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine"* (Luke 22:42). But Jesus walked a hard, hard road after that. C.S. Lewis comments, *"There are, no doubt, passages in the New Testament which may seem at first sight to promise an invariable granting of our prayers. But in the very heart of the story we meet a glaring instance to the contrary. In Gethsemane the holiest of all petitioners prayed three times that a certain cup might pass from Him. It did not. After that the idea that prayer is recommended to us as a sort of infallible gimmick may be dismissed."* There is a hard mystery to prayer that we cannot reduce to a simple formula. Some things God always grants ... other things are much more mysterious. We live in that tension.

One prayer that is always answered is Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:46: *"Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!"* When we place our lives in God's hands, His promise is that He never leaves us and never forsakes us. That is a promise that runs throughout Scripture. God may not protect us from walking through some dark valleys, but He does assure us that we are in His hands, even in those tough, tough places.

What parts of my life do I doggedly hold on to? If Jesus were to overturn some of the "tables" in my life

that I don't want Him to touch, what things might He want to deal with? How will I handle that? Can I genuinely entrust my life into His hands? Will I do that?

*Holy Jesus, you came down from heaven  
and were pleased to pay the ransom on the cross for us,  
so that you might redeem us from all sin,  
and purify to yourself a precious people, zealous for good works.  
We ask that you write your law on our hearts that we may understand it,  
that we may know you, and the power of your resurrection,  
and express it in turning from our sinful ways,  
that you may rule our hearts by faith,  
and that we, being dead to sin and living rightly,  
we may bear fruit leading to holiness,  
we may grow in grace,  
and we may grow in the practical knowledge of you.  
Amen*

Henry Hammond (1605-1660)

### **Monday, April 10: John 16:16-33**

It would be nice to meet the Queen. Or Prince Philip. Or Prince William. Or someone royal. I did see the Queen and Prince Philip once in Vancouver many years ago, but never got even remotely close to meeting them. If I could have made it through the throngs of other "ordinary people" like myself on the sidewalk, the security was so tight I could never have got near them. Let's face it – I was just not important enough.

Whether it's the Queen or the President of Air Canada, there are some people that we just cannot make personal contact with. They have echelons of public relations people, reception people, administrators, and security to keep us at a distance. We regular people just don't have the "pull" to see the head person.

The incredible truth Jesus is teaching His disciples is that, in prayer, all of us are welcome into the personal presence of the King of Kings, the Creator of the Universe, God Himself, the Father. We won't be passed on to some answering service, robotic call centre, or junior angel. When we pray to our Father, we are invited into His presence. Just as every branch of the vine connects with the main stalk, each of us is directly connected to God. We can share our joys and fears, celebrations and concerns, hopes and heartaches with complete honesty and trust, knowing He hears us, love us, and has compassion on us.

How is this possible? Because the Father Himself loves **us!** Tom Wright comments, "*Time to throw out of the junk-room of our minds all those medieval images of a distant, remote, uncaring 'father' who has to be pleaded with and, as it were, bribed with the blood of his own son before he can be made even to think of doing something good for us. Time to throw out, too, any idea that Jesus is a bit remote, so that we have to come to him through a succession of others – saints, martyrs, any of them.*"

When Jesus says, in the safety and wonder of this kind of intimate relationship, "*I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name ... Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy*" (16:23-24), He is not playing into the hands of the prosperity-gospel teachers and healers who read this as carte blanche for getting filthy rich and a guarantee of perfect health. Jesus' point is about our direct access to God the Father, not what we are asking about.

The more we get to know God, the more we pray wisely in accordance with His character and His will. As we pray, "*Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...*" of course God will answer that prayer! This is not about praying, "*Lord, give me a nicer house, a fancier car, a warmer vacation, a new set of lungs, and help me lose a few pounds, too.*"

As you pray, continue to ask God how you can know Him more completely, pray more wisely, and serve Him more intentionally ...

*Father Almighty, Creator of everything  
 and the Source of all that is good and satisfying,  
 help us to be more devoted to you  
 with all that we are and with all that we have.  
 Forgive my wandering, lustful heart  
 that is always looking for something else to quench its insatiable thirst.  
 What I really desire is the grace to be more devoted to you and your Word.  
 I have a "God-shaped" hole that can only be filled  
 as I consecrate myself to your service.  
 Let me be wholly set apart from all that distracts and desecrates,  
 and consecrate both my inner and outer life,  
 my possessions, relationships, and career,  
 to the cause of Christ and his Kingdom.  
 I pray that the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, meditation,  
 fasting, good works, solitude, and corporate worship  
 will be pleasing in your sight as I go deeper in your love.  
 Amen.*

James Bell Jr.

**Tuesday, April 11: Matthew 24:1-28**

Some of us may get excited about passages like Matthew 24. We are 110%, positively certain it's all about us, in Canada, in 2017 ... right? Jesus is just about to return, right? Maybe ... maybe not ... In almost every generation people have been positive these signs are coming to pass in their lifetimes. Every generation has been positive Jesus' return was imminent. And so far, every generation has been wrong ...

To keep perspective, 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 particular place (on a hill overlooking the Temple and city of Jerusalem). Jesus' words were intended for these people! We are eavesdropping on Jesus' specific words to a specific people at a specific time in a specific place. 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 offerings to their pagan gods on the holy altar (70 A.D.). Jesus is preparing His people for challenging days ahead, within their own lifetimes – trials unlike any we have experienced in ours. These words are a stark reminder that following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. They also remind us God will get His people through crazy, dangerous, and evil times. And, 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 through the centuries. Following Jesus is still not an "easy" thing. It can be very challenging. We can face ridicule and abuse for our faith. We could even face brutal persecution (believers in some parts of the world, today, do). But in this challenging world, God gets us through! We need to remain faithful.
- Our challenge – like Christians in all generations – is to live as if we will live forever: we keep learning, keep trying to change 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 we also live as if this is the last of the last days: we 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- and the short-term. And the Kingdom of God does come a little bit more here 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 Himself 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 have to be pretty arrogant to think we know better than the angels or Jesus, Himself! If someone tells you they've got it all figured out, they likely fall into the "false prophet" category.

How do we pray in such tumultuous times? The earliest Christians, for whom Matthew was writing His gospel, prayed all the time (in Book of Acts, the story of the early church, the followers of Jesus are recorded as praying 34 times!). For instance, after Peter and John are arrested, then released, *"all the believers lifted their voices together in prayer to God: 'O Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – you spoke long ago by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, saying, "Why were the nations so angry? Why did they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah."'" In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will. And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus."* (Acts 4:24-30).

Do they pray for personal protection? For a comfortable life? For safety? No ... They pray for boldness in sharing their faith. They pray for the power to show people God's power through the name of Jesus. They pray, *"Your Kingdom and your will be done"* – in and through us. Can I pray that prayer?

Luke adds, *"After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness"* (Acts 4:31). Lord, fill us with your Spirit. Give us courage. Give us boldness. Give us faith. Shake us up! Shake up the world through your Spirit in us ...

*Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon us.  
May your peace and power rule in our hearts.  
May your Spirit be our strength and our song, throughout our pilgrimage.  
We commit ourselves to your care and keeping this day.  
Let your grace be mighty in us,  
and sufficient for us,  
and let it work in us  
both to will and to do of your own good pleasure,  
and grant us strength for all the duties of the day.  
Keep us from sin.  
May your Spirit rule over our own spirits,  
and keep us from speaking unadvisedly with our words.  
May we live together in peace and holy love,  
and grant us your blessing, which is eternal life.  
Prepare us for all the events of the day,  
for we do not know what a day may bring forth.  
Give us grace to deny ourselves;  
to take up our cross daily,  
to walk boldly,  
and to follow in the steps of our Lord and Master,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714)

### **Wednesday, April 12: Matthew 24:26-44**

C.S. Lewis comments, *"We must never speak to simple, excitable people about 'the Day' (of Jesus' return) without emphasizing again and again the utter impossibility of prediction. We must try to show them that that impossibility is an essential part of the doctrine. If you do not believe our Lord's words (that no one knows the time), why do you believe in his return at all? And if you do believe them must you not put away from you, utterly and forever, any hope of dating that return? His teaching on the subject quite clearly consisted of three presuppositions. (1) That he will certainly return. (2) That we cannot possibly find out when. (3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him ... Precisely because we cannot predict the*

*moment, we must be ready at all moments."*

If we do look at how the first followers of Jesus lived in this reality, we notice they prayed – a lot. But it wasn't prayer to be released from the world, to go to heaven, or even to be protected from physical harm. Instead, they prayed for courage, for boldness, for their teachers, for those called to serve widows and others in need, for new believers, for God's mercy and power to be poured out, for those suffering and in prison for their faith, for those sharing God's Word in other places, for people to come to faith in Jesus, and for the name of Jesus to be glorified. (Skim the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul, Peter, and John)

Then the first believers just got on with it! They put boots to their prayers. They shared their faith with boldness, despite the risks. They cared for those in need, despite the cost. They sent out (and went out as) "missionaries" who planted churches everywhere. They lived their faith moment by moment, day by day consistently and compassionately. The church mostly grew as "ordinary" people simply lived and shared their faith. They were "ready" at all moments for Jesus' return, but they also lived as if He wouldn't return for centuries so they set about building His church that would – and has – lasted for thousands of years.

We can pray for courage and boldness, for those who serve God in more formal ways, for those suffering for their faith, and for people to come to faith. Then we can just get on with it, too! How can God's Kingdom come and His will be done in and through me?

*Lord, I make you a present of myself.  
I do not know what to do with myself.  
So let me make this exchange:  
I will place myself entirely in your hands,  
if you will cover my ugliness with your beauty,  
tame my unruliness with your love,  
and forgive all my sins by your grace.  
Lord, I make you a present of myself.  
Put out the flames of false passion in my heart,  
since these flames destroy all that is true within me.  
Make me always busy in your service.  
Lord, I make you a present of myself.  
I want no special signs,  
nor am I looking for intense emotions in response to your love.  
I would rather be free of all emotion  
than to run the danger of falling victim once again to false passion.  
Lord, I make you a present of myself.  
Let my love for you be pure, complete, and without reserve.  
All I am, I give to you.  
Amen.*

Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510)

#### **Thursday, April 13: 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"* (Matthew 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, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me" (Matthew 26:39). Ultimately, of course, Jesus prays: "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."

Before that heart-wrenching prayer in the garden, Jesus had shared the Passover meal with His disciples. Passover celebrated how God had 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 took the familiar words and personalized them: "This is **my** body ... This is **my** blood ..." This is not the same. This is not normal.

"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. This is NOT normal.

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 knows what will 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? This is NOT normal.

We can appreciate the torture in Jesus' soul: He knows what's coming. We can understand His disciples' trepidation, fear, and complete confusion. Jesus is doing and saying strange things ... This is NOT normal.

From our vantage point – centuries later – we know how the story will all 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, yet.

There are times in our lives when we sit as the disciples do. It all 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 looks grim. Dark. Hopeless. And, like the disciples, we don't know what the next hour, day, or week will hold ... As Jesus warned in Matthew 24 (the past two days), following Jesus is often difficult, even intensely painful.

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 be with Jesus? Yes, absolutely. But the disciples are not dead yet! And they won't be dead 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 here, right now, with you. He always meets you – here! Jesus – the risen King – 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.

*Lord, I am an empty vessel needing to be filled;  
my Lord, fill it.  
At times I doubt, and am unable to trust You;  
I am weak in faith;  
strengthen me.  
I am cold in love;  
warm me and make me passionate,  
so my love may go out to my neighbour.  
Amen.*

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

**Friday, April 14: Matthew 27:11-66 (Good Friday Service @ First Baptist, 10:30 a.m.)**

"Good Friday" was not good! The name comes either

- from a corruption of Old English for "God's Friday": the day on which we tried to destroy God ... or
- from the reality that the accomplishments of these dreadful events IS good: our sins are paid for; we have forgiveness; our relationship with God is restored, the Kingdom of God has come.

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." <sup>2</sup>*

In the midst of the drama of the crucifixion – in the midst of the drama of our lives – let's stop. Let's spend a bit of time. At the foot of the cross. Give thanks. Listen. Listen especially for His words of love. Listen especially for His words of healing. Listen for His word.

On the one hand, His love for you is finished. Accomplished. Completed. You are completely loved, completely forgiven, completely welcomed into His presence – now – and forever. Pray that we ALL might know His finished, accomplished, completed supremely powerful work of love on the cross.

On the other hand, His love for you is never finished. His love and healing are with you today and every day. He is with you always. Pray that we ALL might know His love every moment of every day, now and forever ... Nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of Jesus (Romans 8:28-39).

*Christ Jesus, when all is darkness  
and I feel my weakness and helplessness,  
Give me the sense of your presence,  
your love,  
and your strength.  
Help me to have perfect trust in your protecting love.  
Help me to experience your strengthening power,  
so that nothing may frighten or worry me,  
For, living close to You, I shall see your hand,  
your purpose, and your will through all things –  
even your cross, even my cross.  
Amen.*

Irenaeus (130-200)

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<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Christians at the Cross: Finding Hope in the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus*, pp.57-58.

**Saturday, April 15: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62**

Peter. I love Peter. Peter is so human. He is all boastful and blusterful about his determination to stick with Jesus through thin or thick. But when the time comes for him to stand up for Jesus, what does he do? He behaves just like I might if I were in similar circumstances. How about you?

On this Saturday between Good Friday (when we remember Jesus' crucifixion) and Easter Sunday (when – spoilers – we will celebrate Jesus' triumphant resurrection), it is good to spend some time with Peter.

Henri Nouwen writes: *"The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered what the Lord had said to him' (Luke 22:61). Like Peter, we need to be reminded of our self-confident promises, our failure to keep them, our lack of faithfulness and our powerlessness when we are on our own. But like Peter, we are also reminded of a love that does not leave us, a compassion that has no limits and a forgiveness which is always offered to us again. When Peter felt the eyes of Jesus penetrating his innermost being and saw at once his own weakness and Jesus' love, 'he went outside and wept bitterly.' (Luke 22:62). We can understand Peter's tears. We feel them in ourselves. They are tears of both repentance and gratitude for so much love."* (*Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, pp.54-56)

*"Jesus' eyes,"* muses Nouwen, *"are neither sentimental nor judgmental, neither pious nor harsh, neither sweet nor severe. They are the eyes of God, who sees us in our most hidden places and loves us with divine mercy ..."*

*"The eyes of Christ which see the splendour of God's light are the same eyes which have seen the lowliness of God's people. The same eyes that penetrate God's eternal mystery have also seen into the innermost being of men and women, who were created in God's image. They saw Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, Philip, Nathaniel and Levi and called them to discipleship. They saw Mary of Magdala, the widow of Naim, the lame, the lepers and the hungry crowd and offered them healing and new life. They saw the sadness of the rich young ruler, the fear of the disciples on the lake, the loneliness of his own mother under the cross, and the sorrow of the women at the tomb. They saw the fruitless fig tree, the desecrated temple and the faithless city of Jerusalem. They also saw faith: the faith of the men who lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof, the faith of the Canaanite woman who asked for the scraps that fell from the master's table, the faith of the centurion whose servant was paralyzed and in great pain, the faith of the blind Bartimaeus shouting for pity, and the faith of the woman with a hemorrhage who touched the fringe of his cloak."*

*"The one who sees unceasingly the limitless goodness of God, came to world, saw it broken to pieces by human sin and was moved to compassion. The same eyes which see into the heart of God saw the suffering hearts of God's people and wept (John 11:36). These eyes, which burn like flames of fire penetrating God's own interiority, also hold oceans of tears for the human sorrow of all times and all places ..."*

The Lord looks at us. But not with judgement. He looks at you and I with love and compassion and forgiveness. He looks at us with mercy. He looks at us with grace. Spend some time with Jesus today ...

*My God, I don't ask You to take me out of this life,  
but to prove Your power within it.  
I don't ask for tasks more suited to my strength,  
but for strength more suited to my tasks.  
I pray for a vision that moves me,  
strength that endures,  
and the grace of Jesus Christ,  
Who walked our earthly life with love and mercy,  
with compassion and forgiveness  
In your strength, I pray, O God. Amen.*

William Edwin Orchard (1877-1955)

## **Easter Sunday, April 16: Matthew 28:1-10**

The weather forecast for Digby, Nova Scotia, August 20, 1988 (our wedding day) was fog and rainy. Every other day in Nova Scotia that summer had been dull, dreary, foggy, and rainy. So when the day dawned with bright blue skies and brilliant sunshine, it was a wonderful surprise! We were unexpectedly blessed!

At an even more profound level, these women are expecting a horrible, dark day. They expect to find the tomb sealed. They expect to find Roman guards. If they are not arrested on sight, if they are even allowed to go near the tomb, if by some miracle if they could even move the stone, and if they are allowed to go in, (all BIG "ifs") they expect to find Jesus' brutally beaten, thorn-impaled, spear-pierced dead body. They expect to anoint his brutalized corpse. They hope to say one final tearful farewell to the dearest of loved ones. At best, they hope for a shred of peace and quiet on the darkest 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! It is so far beyond their wildest hopes; they do not know how to react!

The story of Easter may be the greatest surprise of all time! We have heard the story of Jesus' resurrection so many times we glibly take it for granted. But allow yourself, today of all days, to be there on that first Easter Sunday morning, when the day dawns – with an earthquake, an angel, a rolling boulder, quavering legionaries, and the risen Jesus. And be in awe. And wonder. And worship. This is something no one has ever experienced before. This is something to get excited about!

God is the master of surprises! He still meets us – no, not in a physical way like he met Mary and Mary. But He does meet us, in Spirit. He walks with each one of us, personally, if we choose to notice. And when life is dull and dreary, God can bring some new opportunity, challenge or joy into our lives. When things seem hopeless and dark, God can bring bright sunbeams of hope and light into our lives. When there seem to be few options or possibilities, 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 still full of surprises. His Kingdom has come. His will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven! The challenge this poses for us, of course, is that God may not do what we want Him to do! He may, in fact, do things completely opposite to what we want to – to what we think should – be done. But the risen Lord is with us. He never leaves us. He comforts us. He says to us, "*Do not be afraid ...*"

Fears and struggles will always come at us. But when we live in the light of the resurrection, these powers and challenges have no final power over us. Jesus says unambiguously: "*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). Do not be afraid ...

*God, whose I am, have mercy on me.  
Have mercy on me so that, in love and faith,  
in righteousness and humility,  
I may believe in you.  
Help me to follow You with self-denial,  
steadfastness, and courage.  
May I meet with You in the silence.  
Please give me a pure heart that I may see You,  
a humble heart that I may hear You,  
A heart of love so I may serve You,  
and a heart of faith so I may live in You.  
Amen.*

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961)

## Monday, April 17: John 21

I'm a morning person. I was up before 6. I've done some exercise. I've gone to work. It's 8:17 a.m. but I haven't had breakfast yet ... I'm meeting a colleague at 8:45 for a breakfast meeting. I'm getting hungry.

Peter and his buddies have been up fishing all night. And they have caught nothing. They are tired, grumpy, and very, very hungry. The last thing they want to do is cast their nets again. But they do. And now their nets are bursting!

When they get ashore, what do they find? *"When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them – fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread"* (21:9). Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Jesus says, *"Bring some of the fish you've just caught"* – He doesn't need them. Somehow, some way Jesus already has fish! Breakfast is ready and waiting for them!

Once before Jesus had fed people on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with loaves of bread and fish (John 6). Jesus is purposely reminding them of what has happened before. After that miraculous meal, these tough fishermen were caught in a storm: *"A gale swept down upon them, and the sea grew very rough. They had rowed three or four miles when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, but he called out to them, 'Don't be afraid. I am here!' Then they were eager to let him in the boat, and immediately they arrived at their destination!"* (John 6:18-21). All those memories would be rushing back into their minds as Jesus serves them bread and fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Simon Peter, John, James and the others had gone back to their old home and their old livelihood. But Jesus is not content to let them forget everything they had learned. He had called them to follow Him. He had changed Simon's name from "Simon" to "Peter" – literally meaning "the Rock" ("petros" is Greek for "rock") in Matthew 16:13-19. He is no longer a fisherman (he couldn't catch anything on his own anyway). Jesus had given him a new vocation – to be "the rock," the foundation stone on which the new temple would be built. Peter needed to step up and be who Jesus called him to be.

In Jewish theology, the Temple was where God was actually present on earth. But since Jesus has given us His Spirit – God's real and personal presence – God is present in each one of us, not in one stone building. Peter will go on to write, *"... Christ is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And **you** are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple"* (1 Peter 2:4-5). Together with Peter, the Rock, we are God's Temple, we are God's presence on earth. God is no longer just in one small place in one small city in one small country. Wherever God's people are – wherever you and I are – God is there. God is present in us, here, now. We are His Temple.

If you believe in Jesus, God's Holy Spirit is in you. Whether you "feel" Him or not, that is objective truth. As you encourage other people, as you care for someone in need, as you give to help those suffering, as you smile at a checkout clerk, as you talk about your faith with your neighbour, as you call an old friend, as you volunteer in the community, and so much more, you are sharing God's love. You are building His Kingdom. And if you come across challenges that seem overwhelming, remember God's Spirit – His presence and power – is within you and will get you through. *"Don't be afraid. I am here!"* You are His Temple.

Thanks to the resurrection of Jesus and blessing of His Holy Spirit, we not only experience a God-for-us and a God-with-us, but also a God-within-us. The time of confusion, misunderstanding, unbelief and fear is over. Yes, we do face challenges every day, but the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, lives within us, giving us new hope, new courage, and new confidence.

You are not a "mere mortal" simply going through the motions of life. You are God's child, you are His unique creation, you are His chosen one, you are the one in whom He chooses to reside. You are a living stone. Live confidently. Live boldly. Live for Jesus ... *"for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). What does mean in your life today?

*Who can tell what today may bring forth?  
 So, by the power of your Spirit of grace, help me  
 to live every day as if it were going to be my last,  
 because for all I know it might be.  
 Cause me to live now as I will wish I had lived when it is time for me to die.  
 Grant that I may not die with any guilt on my conscience  
 or any known sin I haven't repented of,  
 so that I may be found in Christ, who is my only Saviour and Redeemer.  
 Enlighten me, good Jesus, with the brightness of internal light  
 and cast out all darkness from the home of my heart.  
 Grant me, Lord, to know what is worth knowing,  
 to love what is worth loving,  
 to praise what is worth praising,  
 to hate what is unworthy in your sight,  
 to prize what to you is precious,  
 and, above all, to search out and do your holy will.  
 Write your blessed name, Lord, upon my heart,  
 there to remain so indelibly engraved,  
 that no prosperity or adversity shall ever move me from your love.  
 Holy Spirit, be to me a strong tower of defense,  
 a comforter in tribulation,  
 a deliverer in distress,  
 a very present help in trouble,  
 and a guide to heaven through the many temptations and dangers in this life.  
 Amen.*

Thomas a Kempis (1480-1471)

## **Tuesday, April 18: Ephesians 1:1-14**

In the light of Easter, C.S. Lewis writes, "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell." For the next few days we'll be reading through Paul's letter to the believers in Ephesus. While Ephesians is not specifically about prayer, it contains some of Paul's reflections on God's glory and what it means to know and be known by Jesus (the essence of prayer). He prays some astounding prayers for followers of Jesus – people like us!

Paul wants us to know and truly believe that:

- we are saved by faith in Jesus – for a relationship of openness and love with God;
- we are saved by faith in Jesus to make a difference in the world – called to love our neighbours;
- we are saved by faith in Jesus to make a difference in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit – God gives us the wisdom, inspiration, and power we need as His Spirit is in us.

In this letter, Paul emphasizes how blessed we are as people whom God loves, for whom Jesus died and rose again, and in whom Spirit lives. Paul begins with a prayer of praise to God (sometimes it is good just to praise and thank Him). Read this passage personally, thinking about what God's grace means to you:

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because you are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved you and chose you in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt you into his own family by bringing you to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on you – you belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased your freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave your sins. He has showered his kindness on you, along with all wisdom and understanding ... And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give you the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased you to be his own child. He did this so you would praise and glorify him ...*

It is good to read this passage in such personal terms. But look at the original text. It's not actually written to "you." It's written to "us." In our modern western world we tend to (subconsciously) personalize our faith into "my" faith and "my" relationship with Jesus. But throughout Scripture community is critical. We do have a personal relationship with Jesus, but it's always lived out in the context of the church and community. Read what Paul ACTUALLY prays, reflecting on what it means for our lives, together ...

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed US with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved US and chose US in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt US into his own family by bringing US to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on US – WE belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased OUR freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave OUR sins. He has showered his kindness on US, along with all wisdom and understanding ... And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give US the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased US to be his own people. He did this so WE would praise and glorify him ...*

Praise God for the amazing hope, life, love, forgiveness, mercy, calling, joy, peace, and so much more we have in and through Jesus ... And praise God for the community of friends, encouragers, helpers, family, accountability-people, and so much more we have in and through His church ...

*My soul's desire is to see the face of God,  
and to rest in his house.  
My soul's desire is to study the Scriptures,  
and to learn the ways of God.  
My soul's desire is to be freed from all fear and sadness,  
and to share Christ's risen life.  
My soul's desire is to imitate my king,  
and to sing his praise always.  
My soul's desire is to enter the gates of heaven,  
and to gaze upon the light that shines forever.  
Dear Lord, you alone know what my soul truly desires;  
and you alone can satisfy those desires.  
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

### **Wednesday, April 19: Ephesians 1:15-23**

In English, the word "you" is "you" – it could mean you (singular – just you as an individual person) or you (plural – all of us together, including you as an individual). In most other languages, including Greek (the language of the New Testament) and Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament), there is a different word for you-singular and you-plural (French does the same: "tu" (singular) and "vous" (plural)). As a result, when we read passages like this in English we typically singular-ize it – Paul is praying this for ME. This has contributed to a hyper-individualization of Christian faith: it is MY relationship with Jesus that matters.

All of this prayer is plural-you, however! This is Paul's prayer for all of us together. Yes, you as an individual are part of this prayer. But this is a prayer for all of us as a community, too.

- Think about this prayer in your own personal terms: pray that God would help you know Jesus in this way.
- AND, pray through it on behalf of our entire church community: pray that God would help US know Jesus in this way.
- AND pray this prayer for someone you know, who needs to know the presence of Jesus.

*God, I thank you for my life/our church/some person. I pray for \_\_\_\_\_ constantly, asking you, God, the*

glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give \_\_\_\_\_ spiritual wisdom and insight so that they might grow in their knowledge of God. I pray that \_\_\_\_\_'s heart will be flooded with light so that they can understand the confident hope You give to those You call – Your holy people who are Your rich and glorious inheritance.

I also pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for them, as they believe in You. I pray \_\_\_\_\_ may know this the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at Your right hand in the heavenly realms. I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ might know You, the One who is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else – not only in this world but also in the world to come. I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will know You, the One who has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will know You in the context of the church, Christ's body, made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself. Amen.

F.B. Meyer comments, "*The greatest tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer, but unoffered prayer.*"

- Pray that you may know God's presence, peace, and power in your life.
- Pray that our church community might know and experience Jesus and His power in new ways.
- Pray for the people closest to you, that they may know His transforming reality.

*Lord our God, teach us, we pray,  
to ask you in the right way for the right blessings.  
Please steer the ship of our lives towards yourself,  
the tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls.  
Show us the course in which we should go.  
Renew a willing spirit within us.  
Let your Spirit curb our wayward senses,  
and guide and enable us toward that which is our true good:  
to keep your laws,  
and in all we do to rejoice always in your glorious and gladdening presence.  
For yours is the glory and praise from all your saints, forever and ever.  
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

#### **Thursday, April 20: Ephesians 2:1-10**

For what purpose did God create us? How would you answer that? Or do you even understand the question? In our culture, we might paraphrase it like this, "*What would life look like if I were self-fulfilled, happy, and content?*" How would you answer that? According to commercials on TV, a full life would be lying in a hammock on a tropical beach, with a drink or two (or more), a beautiful/handsome companion, the right body wash, the right burger and fries ... and nothing to do but watch the latest superhero movie ...

Is that really what life is all about? I don't know about you, but a couple of days of carefree Tropicana might be nice, but then I'd want to **do** something ... something meaningful ... something that made a difference for the less-fortunate people around me ... something that mattered to the Lord ... something that made live worth living ... I'd want to actually be a living person, not a "dead" person baking in the sun ...

Sociologists might blame John Calvin and his so-called "Protestant work ethic" for my desire to serve God. But it goes much deeper than Reformation theology. In Genesis 2:15 we read that, "*The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.*" From the very beginning, people were created to tend and care for God's creation – the natural world and other people. Care for God's creation (including people) is inextricably woven into who we are as people created "*in the image of God*" (Genesis 1:27).

We are only fulfilled, content, and joyful when we are sharing in God's purpose: making a difference in the lives of other people, the created world around us, and the Kingdom of God. Those of us who have volunteered with children, in a hospital, with youth, or in cleaning up a park know the sense of peace, joy, and satisfaction that comes from being busy about the Lord's work.

The self-indulgence TV commercials advertise (let's call it what it is) may be fine for a couple of days, but it doesn't bring the deep contentment and meaningful joy it promises – or that we need. Even in retirement, the Bible encourages us to keep busy (in fact there is no retirement plan in the Kingdom of God). There are always meaningful things we can do to care for others, for creation, and God's Kingdom.

In Ephesians 2, Paul emphasizes that: *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (2:8-9). That is great news! The teachers in Ephesus and in Peter's world wanted people to believe that you earn your salvation by following rules or impressing God with what a "good person" you are. Paul is blunt: forget it! You will never be good enough! But thank God – He chose to save us in spite of ourselves. We are saved by His gift of gracious forgiveness, mercy, and love.

But Paul goes on: *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago"* (notice this is all plural – us together). We are saved to do good works. We – individually and as a community – are saved for a purpose: to serve God by blessing other people and His creation. We – individually and as a community – have a job to do: to encourage, bless, care for, build up, empower, help, mentor, and love God's world and God's people. Isn't that wonderful!

There is a bigger purpose to life ... to be part of answering the prayer, *"Your Kingdom come, your will be done"* as we live in His grace.

*Father, I don't understand why you choose to trust me to share your love with my neighbours.  
Too often I mess it up. I make stupid choices.  
I say the wrong thing or put my foot in it.  
But you **have** chosen me,  
with my weaknesses, faults and confusion.  
I guess if I was perfect or could do it all by myself,  
people would focus on me, not you.  
I don't want them to focus on me.  
You're the best thing that ever happened in my life.  
I want them to move from hearing about my God  
to them knowing you for themselves.  
So, I put myself in your hands.  
I want to be more available to you, and to the people around me.  
I know that I'm nothing impressive or special,  
but in my weakness let your strength be revealed.  
As you and I work on making me more like you,  
let people notice the changes in my behaviour.  
I want to explain to them – **that's God, that is!**  
Father, being vulnerable and sharing weakness can hurt.  
Please give me the courage to follow your path  
and accept pain, ridicule or rejection.  
But let me know the power of your presence  
both now and when those times come.  
Amen*

Sarah Bingham

### **Friday, April 21: Ephesians 2:8-22**

Paul wants EVERYONE to know that they are part of this new Kingdom/Temple God is building. It is not a Jewish-only enterprise anymore: Jews/non-Jews (Gentiles), men/women, wealthy/poor, slave/free, able/challenged, young/old – everyone is welcome in God's new order of things. Actually this is nothing new; it is something very, very old. It's the way God intended things to be in the very beginning!

Paul wants everyone to know they are saved by FAITH – a gift of God. They are not saved by following the Old Testament law, by trying to do all sorts of good things for God, by virtue of their genetics (being born “Jewish”). God saves us just because HE loves us ... because we are people whom He created, He does not save us because of who we are or anything we do for Him.

Paul also wants us to know we are saved, by faith, for a PURPOSE: *“God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago”*(Ephesians 2:8-10).

We (non-Jews) are *“citizens along with all of God’s holy people.”* We are *“members of God’s family”*(2:19). And we are invited to be part of the building process, of building the church, God’s Temple, the Kingdom of God. Every stone – every one of us – is vital. We are all important to God and His church. And each of us has unique gifts, talents, abilities, experiences, skills that we can bring to the task.

What is your passion? What do really enjoy doing? What do you want to be when you grow up? God may well have planted that desire within you ... (Sometimes we have this odd theology that God will call us to do what we LEAST want to do: maybe God created you in such a way that He is calling you to do what you MOST want to do?!?!). How can you move forward, keeping step with God’s Spirit?

Pray that God would help each one of us know we have talents, abilities, experiences, wisdom, education, resources, gifts, time, energy, creativity, and ideas that can bless others and build His kingdom.

*Lord, make me see your glory in every place:  
if mortal beauty sets my heart to glow,  
help me see your grace shining even brighter;  
if natural wonders stop me in awe,  
may your Majesty cause me to worship you even more.  
You have given me on earth this spiritual life,  
That struggles within my weak, mortal flesh.  
How can my spiritual passion break free?  
How can my spirit find its true life?  
Dear Lord, I cry to you for help.  
Your Spirit alone can save me.  
May your Spirit flow through my will and my senses,  
redeeming what is sinful, empowering and inspiring what is good.  
All goodness, Lord, must fail without your Spirit:  
for you alone have the power and glory.  
Amen.*

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

### **Saturday, April 22: Ephesians 3:1-13**

We like to think we’re special. More special than anyone else. 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews believed God could only love them, no one else. They were God’s special people – God’s ONLY special people. There were Jews and then there was everyone else – “Gentile dogs” – like us.

Do we ever think like that? We may not think in terms of Jewish-exceptionalism, but do we think God loves Caucasian North American/Northern European people most of all? Do we feel God loves us more than Arabic, African, Asian, First Nations – or Jewish – people? Do we feel we have a God-given right to “our” country but people from Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East should go “home” ...? (Recent events in the U.S. come to mind, when a man from India was shot in Kansas and a Sikh man was shot in Seattle, both were told to “go home”). First Nations people? Well, somehow this isn’t really THEIR country.

It's *ours* (Caucasians) – right? We're the exception – right? First Nations people could never tell **us** to go home or get out of their country (one political cartoon shows "President Standing Bear (a First Nations person) signing an executive order sending all Caucasians back to Europe"). We may be guilty of a "white-northern-European-exceptionalism" that is (to be blunt) not Christian in the least. Any racism is racism.

Paul wants us to know God loves everyone equally. He cares as much about First Nations people as any European-background Canadian. He cares as much about the survivor of genocide in Rwanda as He does about the wealthiest Bay Street businessperson. He cares as much about the families of Syrian refugees in Lebanon as He does about your family. He loves those suffering persecution as much as He loves you. This is not to say God loves you any less (you are His beloved child!): it is to say God loves each of these precious beloved children of His – in Egypt, India, Thailand, Syria – just as much as you and I!

God loves all people equally, regardless of their ethnicity, ability, gender, age, country of origin! Why do we tend to make God so small He must only love people like us? Isn't God "big" enough to love everyone?

Paul wants us to know He loves and welcomes all His children of every race, culture, tribe, clan, and nationality. His love, grace, and mercy are far bigger and all-encompassing than we imagine.

*"Because of Christ and our faith in him,"* Paul writes from prison in Rome, *"we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence"* (3:12). What an amazing privilege – we can all come into the presence of the King of Kings! Why is this so important? Because, among other incredible blessings, it means that when we pray – for our brothers and sisters, our family, or those who suffer – we know God hears us. Please do take time to pray for those in our local community and around the world who are victims of violence, who live in poverty, who need justice, who struggle with life, and who are "different" from us.

Of course we cannot change the world. We don't have the ear of government officials. We have little formal influence. But we may be able to encourage one discouraged person today ... We may be able to show a tiny expression of love to someone who feels unloved ... We may be able to help one person who is struggling ... We may choose to treat a homeless person with compassion rather than judgment ... We can pray for our Syrian refugee family (the Ahmads) – or even visit them ...

Together, we can make a difference, one beloved child of God at a time ...

*My God, I believe most firmly that you watch over all who hope in you,  
and that we will need nothing when we rely upon you in all things.  
Therefore, I am resolved for the future to cast all my cares upon you.  
People may deprive me of worldly goods and status.  
Sickness may take from me my strength and the means of serving you.  
I may even jeopardize our relationship by sin,  
but my trust shall never leave me.  
I will preserve my faith to the last moment of my life,  
and the powers of hell shall seek in vain to grab it from me.  
Let others seek happiness in their wealth and in their talents.  
Let them trust in the purity of their lives,  
the severity of their sacrifices,  
in the number of their good works,  
the enthusiasm of their prayers;  
as for me, my rock and my refuge,  
my confidence in you fills me with hope.  
For you, my divine protector,  
alone have given me hope.  
Amen.*

Claude de la Colombiere (1641-1682)

## Sunday, April 23: Ephesians 3:14-21

"When I think of all this ..." All what? What has Paul been thinking about? A LOT!:

- "God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ." (1:4-5)
- "God saves us. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago." (1:13)
- "Even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. It is only by God's grace that you have been saved! For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Jesus." (2:5-6)
- "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (2:8-10)
- "For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups." (2:14-15)
- "So now you Gentiles (non-Jews) are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit." (2:19-22)
- "Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence." (3:12)

"When I think of all this ... I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen" (3:14-21). Enough said. Amen.

*Almighty and merciful Father,  
we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.  
We have followed too much the plans and desires of our own hearts  
and have broken your holy laws.  
We have left undone those things we should have done,  
and we have done those things we should not have done.  
There is no health in us, but you, Lord,  
have mercy upon us miserable offenders.  
Spare us, God, who confess to you our faults.  
Restore us who are repentant,  
according to your promises declared to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
And grant, most merciful Father, for Jesus' sake,  
that from now on we may live godly, righteous, and self-controlled lives.  
Amen.*

Anglican prayer of general confession

## Monday, April 24: Ephesians 4:1-6

How we live matters. We are NOT saved by how we live – Paul emphasizes we are saved by faith (2:1-10). But BECAUSE we are saved by faith, we ought to live lives that glorify God. In fact, how we live shows what we really believe. We can say we believe all sorts of things: but if we don't live out those beliefs we may have to question how genuine our "beliefs" really are ... And life just works better when we do that.

Today we read Paul's words: *"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all"* (4:1-6)

One of Paul's points is that authentic Christian belief leads to humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, and unity (a list that complements Paul's "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 3:22-23). The implication is that if we see these qualities of character in our lives, it means we are drawing closer to Jesus. But if we are not humble, not gentle, not patient, not loving, not peaceful, and if we are causing dissension and division – we are not walking with Jesus. That is a sobering warning when we are feeling grumpy and complain-y!

Paul also wants us to know that we all have gifts, talents, abilities, experiences, and resources that God has given us. We can use these to build up the body of Christ/God's people/the church/the Kingdom of God. None of us is all-gifted (none of us is good at everything). None of us is non-gifted (none of us has nothing to offer). We can all bring our different skills, abilities, talents, resources, and backgrounds and help God's Kingdom grow. Church servants – apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers – are among those gifted by God, but not the only ones by any means. *"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"* (4:16). We are all essential to a healthy church!

God's goal for us all is that, *"we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth"* (4:14). We need to keep learning and growing. The consequence of that will be that *"we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church"* (4:15). Note the phrase: speak the truth **in love**. There are people who like to speak the truth – but do so in non-loving ways! What does that say about their spiritual maturity?

"Growing up" in our Christian faith means we learn to speak the truth – uncompromisingly – in genuine love – uncompromisingly. Humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, unity, using our gifts, speaking the truth in love ... may the Lord help us grow deeper in our walk with Him ...

*I do not know, my God, what may happen to me today.  
I only know nothing will happen to me that you haven't foreseen from all eternity,  
and that is sufficient, my God, to keep me in peace.  
I adore your eternal designs.  
I submit to them with all my heart.  
I desire them all and accept them all.  
I make a sacrifice of everything.  
I unite this sacrifice to that of your dear Son, my Savior,  
begging you by his infinite merits, for patience in troubles,  
and for the perfect submission which is due to you  
in all that you will and design for me.  
Amen.*

Madame Elizabeth of France, written in prison while awaiting the guillotine (1764-1794)

## Tuesday, April 25: Ephesians 4:17-32

When we read through this passage we wonder what the church in Ephesus was really like! If Paul has to list all these things NOT to do – telling lies, getting angry, stealing, using foul and abusive language, being bitter, raging, using harsh words, and engaging in slander (as well as other types of “evil behavior”) – were these things the Christians in Ephesians were doing?!?! That’s rather scary! Paul’s implication is that, since many of them came out of Gentile (non-Jewish) backgrounds perhaps they just didn’t know any better. However the Old Testament prophets suggest the Jews had their issues with all of these problems, too!

Paul wants us to know that believing in Jesus really is a case of starting all over again – with a totally different identity. And with a totally different set of values and ethics! *“Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception,”* Paul says. *“Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy.”*

Paul goes on to list things TO DO as well what not to do ...

- *“Stop telling lies.”* – instead – *“Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.”* We are brothers and sisters in Christ; let’s be honest with one another.
- *“Don’t sin by letting anger control you.”* – instead – *“Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.”* Don’t hold on to grudges. Let them go! When you cannot forgive, you suffer: anger, resentment, bad sleep, high blood pressure. The only one who suffers is you! Deal with your anger and resentments right now ... before they ruin another sleep!
- *“If you are a thief, quit stealing.”* – instead – *“Use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need.”* Don’t expect a free ride. Work is good for us; it’s part of God’s plan for us (in balance with rest and relaxation). Be generous with what you earn: bless others.
- *“Don’t use foul or abusive language.”* – instead – *“Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.”* Try to never say a bad word about anyone; say words that are kind, that build up one another, and encourage one another.
- *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.”* – instead – *“Be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”* When we think of how God loves us – with all our problems – we should try to be just as gracious to others ... loving them despite all their problems.

*“I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God,”* Paul has said (Ephesians 4:1). As you read all of Ephesians 4, has the Holy Spirit reminded you of something you need to deal with in your life? None of us is perfect yet: what do you need to work on? Has something from today’s reading resonated with you? Of from yesterday (humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, unity, using our gifts, speaking the truth in love ...)? Spend some time talking with God about how you can live a life more and more worthy of your calling ...

*Use me, my Saviour, for whatever purpose  
and in whatever way you may require.  
Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel;  
fill it with your grace.  
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

## Wednesday, April 26: Ephesians 5:1-20

Ephesians was a letter Paul wrote to a church he knew well. Our chapter/verse breaks are artificial – chapters were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, verses in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. So what we see as Ephesians 5 is just a continuation of Paul’s thoughts in Ephesians 4. He had no break between the two sections.

So Paul goes right from *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through*

*Christ has forgiven you”to “Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.”*

Paul lists more things that are not appropriate if we are trying to imitate God/follow the example of Christ: sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscene stories, foolish talk, coarse jokes, acting thoughtlessly, and getting drunk. (We wonder if they may have been present in the church in Ephesus, too! Scary!)

Let’s focus on the positive things Paul encourages us to become:

- *Imitate God in everything you do, because you are his dear children.*
- *Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ.*
- *Now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true.*
- *Carefully determine what pleases the Lord.*
- *Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.*
- *Understand what the Lord wants you to do.*
- *Be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.*
- *Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

As you read through this passage, what phrases or truths speak to you? Why? Spend some time in prayer, asking God to help you follow the example of Jesus in your life ...

*My God, I believe in you, but strengthen my faith.  
All my hopes are in you, but please protect them.  
I love you, but teach me to love you more and more dearly.  
I am sorry that I've offended you;  
please increase my sorrow and my repentance.  
I adore you as my first beginning, and I aspire after you as my last end.  
I give you thanks as my constant benefactor, and I call upon you as my supreme protector.  
My God, conduct me by your wisdom,  
control me by your justice,  
comfort me by your mercy,  
and defend me by your power.  
I desire to consecrate to you all my thoughts, words, actions, and sufferings  
that from now on I may think of you, speak of you,  
offer all my actions to your greater glory,  
and suffer willingly whatever you shall bring into my life.  
Lord, I desire that in all things your will may be done –  
because it is your will, and your will is perfectly good.  
I beg you to enlighten my understanding, to inflame my will,  
to purify my body, and to sanctify my soul.  
Amen.*

Richard Challoner (1691-1781)

#### **Thursday, April 27: Ephesians 5:21-32**

Note: this passage begins "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" Submission is a two way street! It’s not about only one person submitting to another – there is always reciprocity. In those days women had no legal status: they were more possessions than persons. This concept of mutual submission would have been radical and revolutionary in the male-dominated, patriarchal First Century (it’s still radical and revolutionary in many parts of the world today, unfortunately!). Let’s be radical and read about husbands first ... because Paul has LOTS to say to husbands!

Here is Ephesians 5:25-33 in *The Message* translation: "*Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor – since they're already "one" in marriage. No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. This is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh."* This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband."

Isn't that a powerful image of how a loving husband ought to be? It's not about power .... It's about self-giving, self-sacrificing love, just as Jesus loves us, His church.

Paul says much less to wives! "*Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands"* (Ephesians 5:25-28). Isn't that a neat way to see marriage?

Marriage, in God's eyes, is not about power – it is all about sacrificial love, modelled on the love Jesus shows us in His life, death, and resurrection. Husbands are called to choose to serve their wives lovingly, putting them first. And wives are called to choose to serve their husbands lovingly, putting them first. There is a complete mutuality of love, submission, sacrifice, and service.

The same ought to be true in all our relationships. How can we follow the example of Christ and imitate God's amazing love in our relationships: whether with spouses, parents, children, friends, colleagues, fellow students, neighbours? Pray through what it means for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

*Here we are in front of you, Holy Spirit.  
We feel the weight of our differences,  
but we are united together in your name.  
Come to us, help us, enter into our hearts.  
Teach us what we should do, what path we should follow.  
Do for us what you ask us to do.  
Be the only one to offer and guide our decisions,  
because only you – with the Father and the Son – have a glorious and holy name.  
Do not allow us to miss out on doing what is right,  
O Spirit who loves order and peace.  
Don't let ignorance lead us away from you.  
Don't let human sympathy bias us.  
Don't let people or positions influence us.  
Keep us intimately close to you, using the gift of your grace,  
so that we may be as one with you  
and so that nothing can separate us from your truth and love.  
Amen.*

Isidore of Seville (560-636)

## **Friday, April 28: Ephesians 6:1-9**

Note: this passage is still part of Paul's teaching to "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (remember the chapters were added 1200 years after Paul wrote this letter!). Submission is a two way street in all relationships! It's not about only one person submitting to some overlord – there is always reciprocity. Under each topic, let's continue to be radical and reverse the order once again:

### **1. Parents and children**

*"Fathers, don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master."* In Paul's day fathers had absolute power. It was assumed you would beat your children into submission. But what is Paul saying? What does this look like? We are to "honour our parents" but parents are to be "honour-able" people – people worthy of honour. If you are a parent/grandparent/mentor/friend how can you put this into practice? How can you be "honour-able"?

*"Children, do what your parents tell you. This is only right. 'Honor your father and mother' is the first commandment that has a promise attached to it, namely, 'so you will live well and have a long life.'"* Paul is not advocating blind submission if it means abuse or neglect. He is reminding us that our elders often do have wisdom that we do well to heed. Sometimes as children we think we know best ... when in fact our elders may know better! When wise people give you counsel ... for our own good pay attention and do it!

## **2. Employers/masters and employees/servants**

*"Masters, it's the same with you. No abuse, please, and no threats. You and your servants are both under the same Master in heaven. He makes no distinction between you and them."* In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century this would have been shocking – no threats? No abuse? Really!?!? Slaves were not "real" people – far less "human" than women! Paul is challenging the accepted order of things. Even servants are real people, worthy of respect. God loves them as much as masters. Everyone is equal in God's sight. This was mind-blowing!

*"Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile on your face, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders, you're really serving God. Good work will get you good pay from the Master, regardless of whether you are slave or free."* Do you know anyone who only does the bare minimum? They work – but with a bad attitude? They resent every moment they are working? What is Paul saying to them? How can you put Paul's principle into practice?

Paul wants us to treat everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, income, ability, occupation, status – as equal in the sight of the Lord. No one is any less or more worthy than any other. We are all created in the image of God. We are to love everyone in the same way that Jesus loves His church: sacrificially, completely, and unconditionally. How does this challenge you?

*You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful.  
You are strong. You are great.  
You are the most high. You are Almighty.  
You, holy Father, are King of Heaven and Earth.  
You are three and one, Lord God.  
You are good, all good, supreme good, Lord God, living and true.  
You are love. You are wisdom.  
You are humility. You are endurance.  
You are rest. You are peace.  
You are joy and gladness. You are justice and moderation.  
You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.  
You are beauty.  
You are gentleness. You are our protector.  
You are our guardian and defender.  
You are our courage.  
You are our haven and our hope.  
You are our faith, our great consolation.  
You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord,  
God Almighty, merciful Savior. Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

## Saturday, April 29: Ephesians 6:10-24

The great principles in Ephesians sound great! But they can be very difficult to put into practice. In fact, it's a battle – a spiritual battle! Read these verses a few times. What phrases, thoughts, ideas strike you most? Why? What is God saying to you?

From 1976-2005, the Syrian army occupied Lebanon: they viciously abused the Lebanese people. As recently as 12 years ago, Syrian soldiers were brutalizing Lebanese villages. Today, thanks to ISIS, Syrian refugees are pouring into Lebanon. Some Lebanese, remembering the horrible Syrian occupation, sadistically enjoy seeing their recent oppressors, the Syrians, suffer. They are being nasty in return.

But a Lebanese Christian pastor caring for Syrian refugees writes, "*Our war is a spiritual war and we are in the midst of the battlefield now. The Jews waited for the Messiah to cast the Romans out of their country but He cast the demons out of their children - He cast out the real enemy.*"

The real enemies in Lebanon (and the world) are not the Syrians: they are the evil, sinful rebellious natures within each of us. The real enemy is our innate spirit of hatred and vengeance. And so, the pastor talks about how – through the power of the Spirit – people in His church are able to forgive and love their Syrian refugee neighbours: "*We are serving seven hundred families now. We are visiting them one by one trying to help with both hands, spiritually and physically. Many of the families are now coming to church on regular basis now. Many gave their lives to our Lord and Savior. We repeatedly hear: 'We had a wrong idea about Christianity.' Now is the time to reveal our real Christ.*"

Anyone can hate. Anyone can be racist. Anyone can be anti-whatever. Anyone can build walls. That takes no special grace from God, gift of the Spirit, or even great wisdom or intelligence. It **IS** a gift of God's grace to forgive. It **IS** a gift from God to love one's enemy. It is only God's Spirit that can help us overcome hate. It is only God's blessing that allows us to see all people as equal children of God ... and to love them.

May the Lord help us to "*Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power*" (6:10) and reveal our Christ – in word and deed – as well. May people see the real Christ revealed in our lives ...

*Lord, teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek you.  
For I cannot see you unless you first teach me,  
nor find you unless you first reveal yourself to me.  
Let me seek you in longing and long for you in seeking.  
Let me find you in love and love you in finding.  
Lord, you have mercy on all.  
Take away from me all my sins,  
and mercifully set me ablaze with the fire of your Holy Spirit.  
Take away from me the heart of stone, and give me a human heart,  
a heart to love and adore you, a heart to delight in you,  
to follow and enjoy you, for Christ's sake.  
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

## Sunday, April 30: Philippians 1:1-11

Paul prays – a lot. His letter to the Ephesians included a couple of his great prayers. So does his letter to the people in the Greek city of Philippi. When Paul writes this letter, he is in prison in Rome; the Roman emperor is Nero. The Roman historian, Tacitus, records that Nero had Christians "*clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night ...*" Paul was in a stressful situation! But stress was nothing new to Paul or to the Christians in Philippi.

Philippi was a rough mining town, populated by rebellious Greek miners and pensioned off veterans from the Roman army who were given land in order to keep the locals in line. The two people groups didn't like each

other! In Philippi, Paul and Silas had been stripped, beaten, thrown in prison (stress!), and miraculously delivered. (You can read about Paul's experiences in Philippi in Acts 16:11-40)

Stress. Do we know anything about it? Hopefully we have not been stripped, beaten, or imprisoned for our faith! But we all face stress in our lives ...

Did you know that more people die of heart attacks on Monday than any other day of the week? Why? Because for most of us it's the first day of our workweek – and work can be stressful! Life can be stressful! A psychologist friend of mine argues stress is not an outside influence ("Life" is not stressful), rather stress is *our reaction* to outside influences (we react to situations with stress). Stress is something our bodies do in response to situations: our minds race, blood pressure increases, muscles tense ... His point is that ***stress is our response*** to circumstances – not the circumstances themselves. He makes this point because we may not be able to change our circumstances, but we may be able to choose how we respond to them.

Paul couldn't change his circumstances but he could choose his response. He could control what emotion he allowed to control his life. I'm sure his heart pounded, mind raced, muscles tensed – AND he prayed.

Notice WHAT Paul prayed. *"I thank my God every time I remember you ..."* (1:3). Paul had a lot to remember about the Christians in Philippi! When you go through major events (like being stripped, beaten, severely flogged, thrown into prison – and miraculously delivered!) with other people (or sharing good things, "partnership in the gospel"), you have something to remember together! You form a special bond!

When we're in difficult circumstances and we begin to pray, it is good to remember – to remember with thanksgiving – the things God has done in the past. Paul remembered, with thanksgiving, a miraculous deliverance from prison and people becoming believers!

What is God's story in your life? What are the lessons God has taught you? What are the Scripture passages that have lit your path? What have you learned about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit? Where have you seen God's touch and heard his voice? Look, and see how God's presence has been real in your life. Treasure those remembrances. Draw strength and encouragement from them. Thank God for them!

*"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy,"* says Paul. Joy is not an emotion I normally associate with prison! To Paul joy was not the same as happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances – the absence of problems. Joy is an attitude of the heart that is independent of circumstances. We can choose joy in spite of circumstances; it cannot be taken from us.

Paul draws joy from his relationships with people. He has friends! They are his partners in sharing the Gospel. There is something wonderful about family and friends who share a common faith in Jesus Christ. People who can encourage you in your faith, and whom you can encourage in turn.

But Paul's joy really comes from God. The same God who was with Paul in prison in Philippi is present with Him in prison in Rome.

Paul does have to choose joy! He has to choose to pray, to pray with thanksgiving, and to appreciate these sources of joy! The same God who was with Paul in Philippi and Rome is with you, too. Paul is absolutely confident that the God who began a good work in your life will continue it until it is finished! God will not abandon you. There is nowhere you can go out of His presence (Psalm 139). He will go with you to your home, workplace, school ... His presence and power will be just as real to you today as He was to Paul back then. Nothing can happen to you that can separate you from the love of God (Romans 8).

So ... choose to pray! Choose to pray with thanksgiving, remembering all that God has done. And allow the flame of God's presence, the fire of the Holy Spirit, to burn within you as a source of joy. No one, no thing, no where can ever snuff out the presence of God in your life. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion. That is God's promise.

*How is it, my God, that you have given me this hectic busy life  
 so I have so little time to enjoy your presence?  
 Throughout the day people are waiting to speak with me,  
 and even at meals I have to talk with people about their needs and problems.  
 During sleep itself,  
 I am still thinking and dreaming about the multitude of concerns that surround me.  
 To me, my present pattern of life is a torment.  
 Yet I do all this not for my sake but for yours, don't I?  
 I say, "I it is a sacrifice of love,"  
 but maybe I do it more for myself than for you?  
 I know that you are constantly beside me,  
 yet I'm usually so busy that I ignore you.  
 Is that worship?  
 Stop me from being so busy!  
 Please force me to think about and love you  
 even in the midst of my hectic activity.  
 Release me from my busyness!  
 Show me how others can take over my responsibilities.*

*God of love, help me to remember that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,  
 no hand but ours,  
 no feet but ours.  
 Ours are the eyes that see the needs of the world.  
 Ours are the hands with which he blesses everyone.  
 Ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good.  
 But he does not call me to forfeit my soul to serve him.  
 Help me never to forget you in my busyness to serve you.  
 Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

### **Monday, May 1: Philippians 1:12-30**

What are the most important things in life? Some of us don't really ask ourselves that question until we are face to face with our own mortality. Some people only deal with those big questions when they receive some dread diagnosis or end up on life support. Then it is may be too late to sort out our priorities and truly value what really are the most important things of all ... It may be too late to make things right with those we love, get to know our family, or find joy in our relationship with God.

What is most important to Paul? What is his life all about?

Jesus, of course, is the most important foundation of his life. After that? His friends.

Paul is in prison from Rome. Although he doesn't know what the future will hold, it is not looking good. Nero, known for his brutal persecution of Christians, is the emperor. I'm sure Paul knows very well that Christians have been tortured and brutally murdered under Nero's vicious rule ... But he can still keep a positive attitude – even about some people who are preaching Jesus our of rivalry or jealousy and are making Paul's life more miserable.

Viktor Frankl, interred in Auschwitz Concentration Camp, wrote of his experience:

*"We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me*

*whispered suddenly: 'If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us.'*

*"That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.*

*"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which Man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of Man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when Man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position Man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.'"*

When we think about God's amazing love for us – ultimately shown to us in Jesus – how can we pray? When we reflect on the amazing relationships we have with family and friends, how can we pray? How can we find joy in our relationships with God and others no matter what our circumstances?

Frankl went on to say, *"The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance."* Pray through your attitude to the circumstances in your life ...

*Father, this day may bring some hard task to our lives  
or some hard trial to our love.  
We may grow weary, or sad, or feel hopeless.  
But, Father, our whole lives to this point has been one great proof of your ongoing care.  
Bread has come for our bodies,  
thoughts to our minds,  
love to our hearts,  
and all of these from you.  
So help us, we plead,  
while we stand this morning on this side of all that this day may bring,  
to resolve that we will trust you this day  
to shine into the gloom in our minds,  
to stand by us in any trial of our love,  
and to give us rest in your good time as we need.  
May this day be full of resurrection power  
that shall bring us near to you,  
and make us more like you.  
And God, may we so trust you this day  
that when the day is done our faith shall be firmer than ever.  
Then, when our last day comes and our work is done,  
we will trust you in death and forever,  
in the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Richard Collyer (1823-1912)

## Tuesday, May 2: Philippians 2:1-11

Who is Jesus? Really? Read through this passage a few times reflecting on that question ...

How then do we live? Read through this passage a few times reflecting on that question ...

Sometimes it's helpful to read a familiar passage in a different translation. Here is this reading in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation: *"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

*"Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.*

*"Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

Prayerfully reflect on this passage ... How then should we live?

*O Lord Jesus, who came to be poor rather than rich,  
have mercy on all who are in need and want.  
Comfort them in all sorrows,  
supply their needs,  
raise up friends for them,  
and give them grace to learn of you,  
and always to put their trust in you.  
Have mercy, blessed Saviour, on all who are living in sin,  
who do not pray for themselves,  
and who do not care for their own souls.  
Turn them to yourself,  
and teach them to see the things that really matter.  
May I be of service any way I can to see your Kingdom come.  
Amen.*

The Narrow Way

## Wednesday, May 3: Philippians 2:12-30

My parents used to have a darkroom. In a darkroom you need a special kind of light, a safe-light, a red or orange light that you can have on when you're developing films or pictures. It gives just enough light so you can see what you're doing, but because of its wavelength it doesn't affect your pictures. If you used an ordinary light, it would ruin your film or photos. A safe-light allows you to function – just (rather than pitch-blackness!). It provides a bit of guidance, but doesn't change anything. We may like that image. By our life's experience we can provide a bit of advice; we've learned a few tricks-of-the-trade. We can keep folks from stubbing their toes. But we don't really want to change much! For goodness sake, we don't want anyone looking at our lives too closely! We like to play it safe and not challenge or change much ...

In contrast, think of a lighthouse. Its role is twofold. First, like the safe-light, its function is to help you see what you're doing (to keep you from running into the rocks!). Second, the lighthouse on a cliff top is much more active in its "lighting" than a safe-light hiding in a darkroom. Safe-lights just provide enough light in a small room that one or two people can avoid stubbing their toe. Lighthouses, on the other hand, take responsibility for warning people about dangers ahead! Instead of just dimly lighting a room, lighthouses warn everyone to steer clear of cliffs! They are guides, helping sailors find their way to safety, to harbour, to home. Lighthouses take responsibility for guiding lives, for saving lives. It is an awesome task. But it is also an exciting task, and an absolutely essential one! When Jesus says, "*You are the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14) do you think He is simply asking us to be a safe-light – or a lighthouse?

Now Paul is saying, "*Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like **bright** lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people ...*" Is Paul asking us to be a safe-light – or a lighthouse?

"*Therefore, my dear friends,*" says Paul, "*continue to work out your salvation with trembling wonder, for it is God who works in you to create the desire to do things that please and glorify him*" (2:12). We may be more familiar with the translation, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*" "*Fear*" can mean terror. Or it can mean the **awe** and wonder we experience in the presence of almighty God. Paul is telling us to continue to work out what it means to be a Christian, to continue growing in our experience of life in Christ, in awe and reverence – with trembling wonder. The great and mighty God is alive and active in our lives. He entrusts His work on earth to us – that's amazing! He calls us to be lighthouses – astounding!

Seem overwhelming? "*For God is working in you,*" Paul adds, "*giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him*" (2:13). Our Christian lives did not begin with us; they began with God. We didn't find God; He found us. You didn't wake up one morning, look in the mirror and say, "*Hmmm, today, I think I had better find God ...*" God woke you up! He moved your conscience! It was His Holy Spirit who put that deep yearning, that sense of spiritual hunger, that passion for God within you in the first place. And it is God who gives you the desire and the power to continue to grow in our faith. God is working in you ...

How is God at work in you? Paul is wonderfully practical! Among his advice: "*Do everything without complaining or arguing*" (2:14). Want a practical way to start being a brighter lighthouse – do everything without complaining or arguing for a while! See what a difference it makes!

Jesus says, "*You are the light of the world – like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father*" (Matthew 5:14-16). His point is – one of the best ways we can be lights is simply by how we live our lives!

There is nothing more wonderful on a cold winter night than the lights of home. Thomas Kinkadee, the well-known "painter of light" (and a Christian), inevitably paints scenes that invite us to a lighted cottage or a warm homey-y village. He says, "*The No. 1 quote critics give me is, 'Thom, your work is irrelevant.' Now, that's a fascinating, fascinating comment. Yes, irrelevant to the little subculture, this microculture, of modern art. But here's the point: My art is relevant because it's relevant to 10 million people. That makes me the most relevant artist in this culture.*" People yearn for light – for the light of Jesus.

We do have a home where the lights always burn bright: our church, the family of God. This is home. The lights are always on. There is always family to greet you. There is always acceptance and love.

"*I am the Light of the World,*" says Jesus. As lights, shining in the darkness, we guide people to the Light of the World. In the darkness of our world, one little light, makes all the difference! But a whole host of candles, a community of light, does so much more!

May we shine as lights ("*You in your small corner and I, in mine ...*"). But may we also shine, together, as lights, as a family, with all the beauty of the night sky!

*Stay with me, Lord,  
 and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,  
 to be a light to others.  
 The light, Jesus, will be all from you.  
 None of it will be mine.  
 No merit belongs to me.  
 It will be you who shines through me upon others.  
 Let me praise you, in the way which you love best,  
 by shining on all those around me.  
 Give light to them as well as to me;  
 bring light to them through me.  
 Teach me to show forth your praise, your truth, your will.  
 Make me preach you without preaching –  
 not by words but by my example  
 and by the sympathetic influence of what I do –  
 by my visible resemblance to your saints,  
 and the evident fullness of love which my heart bears to you.  
 Fill my heart, Lord, with overwhelming love for you.  
 Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

#### **Thursday, May 4: Philippians 3:1-11**

If I were to die today I have an image (that comes from somewhere!) that I would come before the pearly gates (see Revelation 21:21) and Peter, who has the Book of Life (Revelation does suggest there is a Book of Life, but makes no mention of Peter). That imagery may or may not be literally true! I suspect it is more figurative as John tries to put into words what is actually beyond description. It doesn't really matter. What does really matter? On that day of days when one day, some day, I come into the presence of the Lord, what criteria are really important?

- I could bring along my résumé ...
- I could bring along a catalogue of good deeds ...
- I could cite my family heritage (I had some very godly ancestors back there) ...
- I could quote my favourite Scripture verses ...
- I could bring some character references ...

Paul says all these are nothing. They're rubbish. Some people may think these things earn them "brownie points" with God. Some people may use these criteria to evaluate how "good" other people are (or are not) as Christians. Some people may teach us that being a Christian is just about following a particular moral code. Paul says, "*Watch out for those dogs!*" (dogs were hated scavengers in ancient times). Harsh words! Those people who view outward religious signs like family background, ethnic heritage, education, vocation, "religious" activity as the marks of faith are viciously rebuked! All these things, Paul says (continuing the canine image) are literally "dog dung" (*The Message*, 3:8) – the Greek word *skubula* is a bit more "earthy" than English translations dare to write (more of a four-letter word).

So, what does really matter? According to Paul, what matters is "*knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (3:8). Jesus, Himself, once asked those who followed Him the most important question of all, "*Who do **people** say I am?*" His followers flustered and blustered nonsense about Elijah and John the Baptist. Jesus pressed them, "*Who do **you** say I am?*" And Simon Peter answered, "*You are the Messiah (the Christ, the anointed one), the Son of the living God.*" And Jesus praised Peter saying that upon this truth – the fact that Jesus is the Christ – He would build the church (Matthew 16:13-19). Knowing Jesus is the key.

We know Jesus. Or do we? Six years working in construction assured me that many people knew the words "Jesus Christ," but they certainly did not know Jesus! If you look in a baby-naming book you will find that the name "**Jesus**" means "*Yahweh (God) saves.*" A powerful statement, isn't it? "*You shall call His name*

'Jesus' for He will save His people from their sins ..." the angel tells Joseph (Matthew 1:21). "**Christ**" is a title (not Jesus' last name!). "**Christ**" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "**Messiah**" literally meaning "**the anointed one.**" The Messiah was the promised Saviour who would deliver His people. We can know all *about* Jesus, but do we know Him? Do we ask Him for wisdom? Do we spend time with Him in prayer?

Do you really know Him? (watch Dr. S.M. Lockridge's classic "[That's My King](#)" (click on the link) – it will move you to really think about Jesus in new ways – or google it if you need to; it's worth the effort!)

As Christians, our affirmation is that this Jesus, this Christ, is **Lord**. The first sermon ever preached ended with these words: "*God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both **Lord and Christ***" (Acts 2:36). The first creed of the church was the simple confession "*Jesus Christ is **Lord.***" Paul puts it very simply: "*If you confess with your mouth, **Jesus is Lord,** and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:9). It's not rocket science! To call Jesus "Lord" is to acknowledge His rule and reign in our lives. By acknowledging His rule and reign, we choose to follow and obey Him as our master. Our calling is to accept His gracious gift of forgiveness and new life AND align our lives with His will.

Notice the smallest word – "*Christ Jesus **my** Lord.*" It's a crucial word. Throughout the story of God's relationships with people, "*my*" has made all the difference. David's relationship with God is expressed, "*The Lord is **my** shepherd ...*" (not "*The Lord is a shepherd ...*"). When Thomas saw the risen Christ, he exclaimed, "***My** Lord and **my** God!*" (John 20:28) ... not "*A Lord and a God!*" "*My*" is the difference between theory and practice, between rumour and reality.

Consider this analogy. I can "believe" in marriage and talk about relationships between husbands and wives. I can sound very wise. But there is a world of difference between talking about marriage and spouses in general (I don't have to be married to do that) and talking about **my** marriage and **my** wife. Now it's personal and it becomes real: my eyes light up when I start talking about **my** wife. There is the same difference talking doctrine about Jesus being the Lord and the Saviour (you don't have to have made a decision or act on it) and talking about Jesus as **my** Lord and **my** Saviour. The devil believes "Jesus Christ is Lord," but cannot say, "Jesus is **my** Lord." When I talk about **my** Lord and **my** Saviour, do my eyes light up?

There is no such thing as a "theoretical Christian" – who simply believes the "right stuff" about Jesus; it has to become personal. There is no such thing as a "second-generation Christian," who is a Christian because his parents were Christians; it has to become personal.

What matters is that I say, "*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things ...*" What matters is that I know in my heart of hearts that the greatest thing in my life is my relationship with Jesus. What matters is that I know in the core of my being Jesus is my Lord. Through all the circumstances of life I try to have an attitude the same as Jesus: loving God, loving my neighbour, loving one another. What matters is that I have decided to follow Jesus. That's all that matters.

What do I need to pray about today?

*Today, I thank you for anything that happened to me  
that made me feel life is really and truly worth living.  
I thank you for all the laughter that was in today.  
I thank you for the life I have in Jesus.  
I thank you, too, for any moment when I saw the seriousness and the meaning of life.  
I thank you very specially for those I love, for those who love me,  
for all the difference it has made to me to know them,  
and for all the happiness it brings me to be with them.  
May I love them as you love me.  
Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

## Friday, May 5: Philippians 3:12-4:1

*"In the deep jungles of Africa,"* writes Lettie Cowman, *"a traveller was making a long trek. Coolies had been engaged from a tribe to carry the loads. The first day they marched rapidly and went far. The traveller had high hopes of a speedy journey. But the second morning these jungle tribesmen refused to move. For some strange reason they just sat and rested. On inquiry as to the reason for this strange behaviour, the traveller was informed that they had gone too fast the first day, and that they were now waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies."* Cowman reflects: *"The whirling rushing life which so many of us live does for us what that first march did for those poor jungle tribesmen. The difference: they knew what they needed to restore life's balance; too often we do not."*

*"Doing more and enjoying it less"* is a chapter in Gordon MacDonald's book entitled *Restoring your Spiritual Passion*. He quotes one woman who said of her life: *"I found myself chasing my tail around the proverbial barn. I was tired of being tired all the time."* *"The way we get consumed by a schedule of activities suddenly out of control is alarming,"* observes MacDonald. *"It reminds one of the Uncle Remus story of the tar baby. Hit the figure of tar with one fist, and your hand is stuck. So you hit it with the other in order to get unstuck, and you know what happens. Now you are in real trouble. Kick it with a free foot, and things get increasingly complicated. Use the last free limb and the tar baby has got you. Sometimes I think modern schedules are like tar babies"* (p.27). Does this sound familiar?

In *The Tyranny of the Urgent*, Charles Hummel discusses the tension between the urgent and the important. Sometimes urgent things keep us so busy we miss the really important ones. What is really important? It can be fun and exciting to do all sorts of neat things, but it is often the mundane, day-to-day slogging that we accomplish the really important things.

For example, if we were to ask, *"Is it important for you as a parent (or grandparent) to spend quality time with your children (grandchildren)?"* we would respond. *"of course!"* But does the urgent take precedence over the important? Or we can ask: *"Is it important to help other people? Is it important to share your faith with someone else? Is it important to give a word of encouragement to someone?"* We would answer enthusiastically these, *"Yes!"* But do we do them? Are we run ragged by the tyranny of the urgent?

If I were to ask, *"Are Bible study and prayer important?"* most of us would agree. But how often does the urgent – doing the dishes, cleaning the house, cooking the special dinner, attending the meeting, watching the game, writing the report, going to the gym, hitting Safeway right when it opens Tuesday morning, getting our hair cut, etc. – take precedence over what is really important.

Most of the time we thoroughly intend to get at those important things ... when we have time. The problem is we never get the time unless we make time now! If you don't have the time to do the important things now, it is almost guaranteed you never will ...

This is serious for our own personal health. Hold it! Wasn't Christ always busy? Didn't he live a pressurized life? I don't see Jesus taking a day off or taking vacation. And when did Paul play? But think about it. When Jesus went from town to town with his disciples, he went by foot or by boat – long hours of quietness in the countryside. Jesus didn't do breakfast in Jerusalem, lunch in Antioch, supper in Damascus. *"It is refreshing ..."* writes J.B. Phillips, *"to study the poise and quietness of Christ. His task and responsibility might well have driven a man out of his mind. But he was never in a hurry, never impressed by numbers, never a slave of the clock. He was acting, he said, as he observed God to act - never in a hurry."*

This is serious for our relationships. People know whether we really value them - if we truly love them - not so much by what we say as by what we do. The time we spend with our spouse, with our children, with our grandchildren, with our parents is significant. Whatever takes precedence over them, whatever takes time away from them carries with it the message that it is more important than they are. In *The Sound of Music*, Maria, governess of widower Captain Von Trapp's seven children, berates him for being away from the

children so often: *"You don't even know them!"* How many of us really know those closest to us? Paul's concern in Philippians is unity – unity only happens when we spend time together!

This is serious for our spiritual lives. If we wait to take time to get to know God – later – chances are we may never get around to it ... ever. That has long term consequences, of course. But it has immediate consequences, too. Paul consistently comes back to the fact that joy is not a destination you arrive at, but a way of travelling. It is not a state we attain some day, it's a way of living, today. Joy is rooted in our relationship with God. If we take the time to know God, read Scripture, and pray, we will experience God's joy. If we don't, if the urgent is our tyrant, we will always feel listless, passionless, and spiritually empty.

The problem is not that we don't know what's important! The problem is not that we don't know we have a problem balancing the urgent and the important. We know the issues. The problem is doing something about it! Being a Christian, Paul says, is like a long race. *A long obedience in the same direction*, Eugene Peterson calls it. A lot of people start the race of faith. But some find it hard to stay interested. Millions make "decisions" for Christ. But there is a dreadful "attrition rate." Many claim to have been "born again" but give little evidence of living the faith. A lot of people want religious experience and ecstasy, but there is less demand for the hard work and daily faithfulness of growing as a Christian. As Peterson puts it, there is *"little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."* Many of us are good starters, but we struggle to keep going.

If being a Christian is long race of obedience in the same direction – and it is – we have to keep at it. The race is long and hot. The track may be rocky, full of potholes, even detours. Sometimes we have to push through "the wall." But if we obey the truth we already have, we will receive power to finish the race. We will find joy - today! And in the end, we will win the prize God is waiting to give us!

*Glorious God, give me grace to change my life  
and to see, but not fear, death,  
which, for those who know you, is the gateway to an eternal life of blessing.  
Good Lord, give me a humble, lowly,  
quiet, peaceable,  
patient, charitable,  
kind, tender,  
and loving mind,  
in all my words and all my thoughts, to be filled by your Holy Spirit.  
Good Lord, give me a full faith,  
a firm hope,  
and a fervent charity,  
a love for you that cannot be compared to my love for myself.  
Good Lord, give me a longing to be with you,  
not to avoid the misfortunes of this world  
or simply to be in that joyful place called heaven,  
give me that longing to be with you today and every day,  
simply because I love you.  
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535 [executed by Henry VIII])

### **Saturday, May 6: Philippians 4:2-23**

The UK TV series *You Are What You Eat* illustrates the connection between what we eat and our physical well-being. Paul makes a similar connection between what we feed our minds with and our general well-being – you are what you think: *'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things'* (4:8). Most of us find it difficult to control our thoughts. Like a butterfly, we flit from one thing to another. Without wanting to we find ourselves thinking greedy, nasty, hateful things. Initially we are shocked: where did that come from? Soon resigned acceptance sinks in – that's just who I am. I can't do anything about it.

Paul disagrees. We are what we think. While we can't filter all the information our minds are bombarded with, we can make deliberate choices about what we focus on. We don't have to live in a Christian bubble where only Christian books, music and TV are allowed – that's not particularly helpful. Frankly, "spiritual" things can even be part of the problem. For instance, if we were to only read the biblical book of Revelation we could become so obsessed with devils and dragons, beasts and behemoths that we ignore Jesus! We could obsess so much about all the evils in the world we ignore God's good news. Or we could be so committed to finding our favourite "end-times roadmap" through the images in Revelation that we miss the good news of salvation for all who believe. In that case, we could find Revelation depressing rather than edifying. It can cause us fear rather than hope, and worry rather than calm confidence.

Paul assures us that we can be delivered from fear and worry. Not by self-mastering our emotions, but because the Lord is near (4:5). God is so near, in fact, that in any and every situation we can bring our angst to him. And we can know His peace. We need to exercise discernment, noticing what ideas and activities are positive, nurturing and wholesome to our minds, bodies, and souls. We need to concentrate on God's good news of hope and God's invitation to be His people in His wonderful – albeit sin-stained – world.

Max Lucado quips: *"How can a person deal with anxiety? You might try what one fellow did. He worried so much that he decided to hire someone to do his worrying for him. He found a man who agreed to be his hired worrier for a salary of \$200,000 per year. After the man accepted the job, his first question to his boss was, 'Where are you going to get \$200,000 per year?' To which the man responded, 'That's your worry.'" I'm not sure how helpful that advice really is. More helpful is Corrie Ten Boom's wisdom: "Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength – carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."*

Even more helpful are Jesus' words: *"Do not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today"* (Matthew 6:25-34). What are you worrying about? Hand it over to God. He is far more capable of handling it than you are ... Keep calm – and pray!

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection an example of how to endure  
and seemingly to die in the agony and conflict of daily life,  
so that we may live more fully and creatively.  
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,  
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.  
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day  
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.  
Enable us to go through them patiently and bravely,  
trusting that you will support us.  
Make us realize that it is only by frequent deaths of ourselves and our self-centered desires  
that we can come to live more fully;  
for its only by dying with you that we can rise with you.  
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

## Sunday, May 7: Colossians 1:1-14

What should we pray for, for other people?

What should we pray for, for our church?

What should we pray for, for ourselves?

Paul loves to begin his letters to his friends in various churches with prayer. Today we are reading his prayer to the people in church in Colossae. Colossae was a city in western Turkey, not far from Ephesus (to whom Paul wrote Ephesians).

Paul wrote this letter (like Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon) from prison in Rome. Paul never actually visited Colossae; the church was founded by Epaphras and other people who came to faith through Paul's ministry. The church, however, had issues. Some people were suggesting that any road to God is a valid road to God ... so if paganism worked for you – or if philosophy worked for you ... that was all good! Colossae was a pre-modern post-modern city ... whatever works for you is true for you!

Paul sees things very differently! For him, Jesus, and only Jesus, can bring us into relationship with God. As we live in a post-modern world where personal experience, personal beliefs, personal values, personal ethics, personal morality, and personal rights are celebrated as the highest good it's helpful for us to hear Paul speaking to us about absolute truth, absolute belief, absolute ethics ... and absolute freedom.

Do you remember the parable of sower (Matthew 13:1-23)? Paul uses that same metaphor. The seed, of course, is the good news about Jesus. *"This Good News that came to you,"* Paul says, *"is growing and bearing fruit ..."* (1:6). This is exactly what happens when seed falls on good soil!

What does the fruit look like? Paul says their faith leads to a *"confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven"* (1:5) and a *"love for all of God's people"* (1:4). Faith, hope, and love ... these are key indicators of growth (see also 1 Corinthians 13:13; in Galatians 5:22-23, Paul gives a more comprehensive list of indicators of spiritual growth: *"the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"*).

Paul goes on to pray for the people in the church:

- *"We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding." Why? "Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit (there's that spiritual fruit, again!). All the while, you will grow (there's 'growth' again!) as you learn to know God better and better."*
- *"We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father." Why? "He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins."*

Growth is a good thing in any healthy organism. As people loved by God, we can always be growing as we spend time with Jesus. We become more and more like Jesus (none of us is there yet, are we? I know I'm not!). Are you becoming more loving? More joyful? More at peace (in yourself? With others?) More patient? More kind? More 'good'? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled? If so ... great! Keep at it! If not ... pray that God would help you keep growing. And keep working at it!

Pray for our church, too, that, as a community, we would be strengthened by God's power and produce every kind of good fruit. What does that look like? How can we do that? How can you help?

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,  
who is and was and who is to come!  
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.  
Worthy are you, Lord, our God,  
to receive praise, glory, honour and blessing.  
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.  
Let us bless the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.  
Praise God, all you his servants,  
and you that fear him, both small and great.  
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.  
Let haven and earth praise his glory,  
and every creature that is in heaven,  
and on earth, and under the earth.  
Let us praise and exalt him, above all, forever.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be.  
Amen.*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)