

Monday

29 June

**Genesis 24:34–38,
42–49, 58–67***

Introduction to prayer: *Enlarge my vision, my faith, my hope, O God.*

These verses from Genesis 24 are extracts from the longer story of Isaac and Rebekah's betrothal—and it's best to read the whole narrative. Sarah has died and Abraham is very old, so a range of questions hang in the air about the family's (and so the people's) future. Not the least of these concerns how God's promises to Abraham will be fulfilled in future generations (a question regularly asked by church congregations today). Will God's faithfulness endure, and how? The narrative is full of fascinating, humorous details. We're invited, for instance, to picture Rebekah faithfully bringing water to the ten thirsty camels (vv.15–20), one pitcher at a time (do you know how much camels drink?). And Laban waking up the next morning having promised Rebekah for Isaac the night before and wondering whether this was such a good idea (24:54–55). As a whole, however, the story reinforces God's providential blessing on Abraham's line. Modern readers will (understandably) want to ask questions around gender roles, arranged marriages, and narrative bias. Yet, nonetheless, the story has a compelling feel, as it tells us of a God whose "love endures forever" (Psalm 136:1). *Question 1; TiS 79/AHB 23 Now Israel may say, and that in truth; Psalm 103; Peter and Paul—apostles.*

Response to Scripture: *O Living Word, move me through your written word.*

Lord of all, as I seek your truth make me faithful in little things and large.

Tuesday

30 June

Romans 7:7–14

When I was a boy, my parents told me not to climb on our house. I could easily fall, they said. This was a responsible thing for a parent to tell a child . . . right? I still have the photo my father took of my brother and I sitting smugly on the peak of the roof, aged 6 and 7, with knowing, satisfied grins on our faces. Maybe we've all been on one side or other of such a dilemma! In this passage, Paul, speaking with the Hebrew people as a whole in mind, writes of a similar kind of effect. For Israel, the Law was God's holy blueprint for faith, community, and relationship. It was "intended to bring life" (v.10), marking the limits of right living and encouraging faithfulness. Like my parents' rule, though, coupled with the mysterious malign force that Paul calls "sin", which invades human disposition, what was "holy, righteous, and good" (the Law) became a gateway for rebellion. The passage is not actually about the Law *per se* (which is "spiritual", v.14), but about the corruptibility of the human heart and sin's pervasive reach. Here, Paul begs a question: is there a remedy? *Question 2; TiS 77 Lifting my eyes to the hills; AHB 120; Psalm 64.*

O Lord, may I be mindful of the forces that drag me from your way.

Wednesday

1 July

Romans 7:15–25a*

At first blush it's hard to find a lot of "good news" in this passage. If anything, it feels like the opposite! Everything, and everyone, Paul seems to say, is corrupted by sin (some resist that short, powerful word these days, but its reality doesn't disappear). Even God's chosen people, Israel, who had God's law, couldn't escape its clutches. Every good intention, good desire, good attitude, is tainted by the great faultline of our existence. Viewed from one angle this can be a depressing thought, but from another it can be liberating. We cannot save ourselves, just as Israel couldn't. We can't arrest the corruption of our actions and intentions under our own steam, so we need an external force to provide our release. "Who will rescue me?" (v.24), Paul wonders rhetorically—perhaps a question we've all asked for ourselves, our world, or our church at different points. Who will rescue us from the mess we've created, even when our intent has been good? Paul answers his own question not with an ethical instruction manual, but with a name: Jesus Christ, the "anointed one who saves"—our Lord. Now, perhaps, this sounds a little more like good news. *Question 3; TiS 224/AHB 159 All hail the power of Jesus' name; Psalm 45.*

Save me, O God, for I am in great need; renew me and grant me hope.

Thursday

2 July

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30*

"Wisdom" is a key theme in the whole of the Bible. In the Old Testament, especially in places like Proverbs 8–9, Wisdom is personified: that is, spoken of as having the qualities of a person. In the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus is intentionally pictured as God's wisdom in the flesh—come to earth. God's wisdom is fully present in a flesh-and-blood person, but of course not just any person. Rather, the "Son of God", Jesus Christ, is wisdom incarnate, the instrument through whom God's purposes are revealed. Jesus lives a divinely illumined, yet fully human, life of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and sacrifice that reveals wisdom's ways. In today's text, God's enfleshed wisdom is contrasted with the wisdom of the world. Unlike worldly notions of wise ways, which embrace "power over" in various forms, Jesus is "humble of heart" and "gentle". Moreover, his "yoke is easy, and burden is light" (v.30). Matthew reports that the current generation was unwise in the ways of God: John the Baptist and Jesus, both bearers of the kingdom of heaven, are rejected. To be "wise" in faith, then, is to follow after Jesus, the crucified and risen one, and to embody that same pattern of dying and rising. This is an easy yoke, but a demanding vocation. *Question 4; TiS 585/AHB 500 I heard the voice of Jesus say; Psalm = Jonah 2:1–9.*

Lord Jesus, I wish to follow you with all my heart. Give to me that easy yoke, that light burden of faith, that I may be wise in your ways.

END

OF

PAGE

Friday

3 July

Song of Solomon 2:8–17

The beautiful love poetry of the Song of Solomon has elicited a wide range of interpretations. Imagining that it can be pinned down to any one understanding is therefore probably a mistake. Poetry tends to open up the landscape of meaning, rather than fence it in. Perhaps this is a good way to approach this sonorous (and sensuous!) text. Anyone who thinks religion is the refuge of prudish moralists, suspicious of the physicality of human love, might be a little scandalized by this ancient love song. It is a dialogue between two lovers that illumines the intimate relational, spiritual, and physical dynamic between them. Often read at weddings, in this extract there's a longing for companionship coupled with a searching invitation to take the way of life together. The lovers see in each other a glorious wholeness of being, that exceeds their individual selves without cancelling them out. They are made more beautiful together, as their personhood is augmented in partnership. No doubt there are relational truths to be gleaned here, not least for the church. Yet as they are conveyed with a hymn-like quality—hence “song” of Solomon—maybe this is the most fruitful way of “hearing” (even singing!) these wonderful words from scripture. *Question 5; TiS 217/AHB 148 Love divine, all loves excelling; Psalm 69; Thomas—apostle.*

Lord Jesus, may I take the way of faith with you, and arm in arm go on.

Saturday

4 July

Psalms 45:1–9

The history of the monarchy in the Old Testament is complex, not least theologically. After the time of the judges there are centralizing forces at play and the people desire a king to lead them, “to be like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). Samuel seeks to dissuade them from this desire, which amounts to a rebuff of God’s authority. Why would they want an earthly king when the LORD of heaven and earth watches over them? Psalm 45 enters into these tricky waters with a glowing affirmation of a king. Probably inspired by a royal wedding, the king is cast as a great warrior who leads the people in honour and glory. The picture is complicated, however, by the difficulties of verses 6–7, which seem to be addressed to God, not the monarch. This apparent shift brings into sharp relief the whole dilemma. Whilst God’s throne will “endure forever and ever” (v.6), in reality we know that, as the hymn eloquently puts it, “earth’s proud empires pass away” (J. Ellerton: *TiS 458*)—as of course did Israel’s monarchy in time. Any earthly power is indeed provisional, temporary. In this “royal psalm,” amid the cavalcade of praises heaped on the king, there is a caution about investing our eternal hope in earthly understandings and structures of power and prestige. *Question 6; TiS 84/AHB 43 Give to our God immortal praise; Psalm 68.*

Gracious God, I confess my misuse of authority. I trust you to make me new.

END

OF

PAGE

Weddings are greatly anticipated times and, as we know from recent high profile examples, when there's a royal wedding the expectations are heightened even further. We might recall the fanfare around the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018 to remember the kind of interest such events can garner (we might also ask ourselves why many are so interested, but that's another question). Psalm 45 is set within the context of a royal wedding, probably that of the king, and the psalmist writes a kind of ode for the royal couple. One can well imagine this psalm (or parts thereof) being spoken or sung as part of the wedding liturgy. The verses offer a triumphalist account of the royal couple's splendour and God's providential purposes in bringing them together. A royal wedding of this kind was seen as a blessing from God and an assurance of God's ongoing provision for the people. Indeed, the joy of the union is portrayed as being indicative of the people's joy under the care of God's guiding and protecting hand. In one sense this is a difficult psalm with which to engage as its context is so narrow and its imagery so grandiose. In another, perhaps it shows that such events can be signs of hope in God's enduring love. *TiS 153/AHB 93 God is love, let heav'n adore him; Psalm = Song of Songs 2:8–13; W.A. Visser 't Hooft—reformer of the Church.*

In your prayers remember the lands and people of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Questions:

1. When have you experienced God's faithfulness unexpectedly, or in an unusual situation? *Monday*
2. What do you think of the suggestion that covetousness is the underlying cause of many (even most) expressions/forms of sin? Is this why Paul highlights the problem? *Tuesday*
3. What is the good news in this passage? What traction does the notion of sin have in your dealings with people from day to day? *Wednesday*
4. Does faith feel like an "easy yoke" for you? Is this a helpful image? *Thursday*
5. What do you think of the suggestion that all relationships characterized by love point us to God? *Friday*
6. How might common understandings of authority (like monarchy) complicate our understanding of faith and God? *Saturday*

Suggested hymns: *TiS 100, 111, 210, 224, 235, 342, 455, 456, 599, 701.*

Today Catholics will hear Zechariah 9:9–10; Psalm 144:1–2, 8–11, 13–14; Romans 8:9, 11–13; Matthew 11:25–30. Anglicans will hear Romans 7:14–25; Matthew 11:15–19, (20–24), 25–30, 42–49, 58–67.

Monday

6 July

Isaiah 55:6–13

Introduction to prayer: *Align my thoughts, my ways, with yours, O God.*

God does the most unexpected things! When God arrives in the world to bring deliverance it's not by predictable, conventional means. Rather than as a military leader or a political ruler, it's in the form of a vulnerable child who is set down among us. Indeed, Jesus fashions salvation by submitting to crucifixion, the most shameful, humiliating punishment humanity could devise, and his victory over death retains the marks of God's cruciform, self-giving love, scarred into his resurrected body. We could never have imagined any of this, and yet in it we find hope for new life. Likewise, at a time of great peril and crisis it is difficult for the people of Israel to picture what God is up to and how (even whether) they would be delivered from exile. Their world had been turned upside down and their future was unknown. Into this situation the prophet conveys an oracle of God, reminding them that "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways" (v.8). Indeed, the word that goes out from the mouth of God will not return empty (v.11). There is hope, the prophet declares, but the arc of God's providence may well surprise. *Question 1; TiS 272 Come, thou long-expected Jesus; Psalms 113 & 117.*

Response to Scripture: *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet.*

Loving God, may your word, spoken by the prophets and in Jesus, fill and renew me.

Tuesday

7 July

Genesis 25:19–34*

Sibling relationships can be bumpy. Somehow the proximity of family and the confined quarters of the formative years can create all manner of dynamics that may go on into adulthood. Paradoxically, those closest to us and with whom we share familial bonds can be the ones with whom we most struggle. Today, we read the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau. What will become of these siblings? The story begins with a childless woman, a prayerful beseeching of God, and consequent divine provision—all familiar themes in the Hebrew Bible. Soon, though (even in the womb!), the brothers (representatives of "two nations", v.23) are scrapping. The story sets Esau in a bad light—he sells his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew! —but nor is Jacob pictured as a paragon of nobility. If the text is written to show how God's blessing/calling of Israel continued to extend through Abraham's line, it also complicates that picture by casting the "chosen one" (Jacob) in a not-so-flattering light. Perhaps this narrative of brotherly beginnings may also allude to a wider point about the faithfulness of God amid all human frailty. *Question 2; TiS 102/AHB 7 Praise to the living God; Psalm 70.*

O God, be my provision, and through it may I be a blessing to others.

END

OF

PAGE

Wednesday

8 July

Genesis 26:1–11

The similarity of this strange story with others in Genesis (see especially chapters 12 & 20) has led scholars to ask whether they are reflections on the same event, or whether a single tradition has been developed and enhanced to suit further purposes. The corresponding details between the different accounts are striking, so such speculations are reasonable. But the intention of recounting them in some detail seems straightforward enough, and Genesis 26 carries on familiar themes in this regard. Of the patriarchs, Isaac is the one we hear least about and this text gives an extended account of a difficult time in his life, providing some insight into his character. As for other surrounding narratives, though, the greater purpose is to underscore God's provision amid scarcity, protection amid threat (the rather curious ploy is a typical kind of plot technique in the Hebrew Bible), and covenant faithfulness to Abraham's line amid apparent disruption. Isaac is protected, even as he resides among a foreign people, and so the story can go on. The future of the people of Israel remains secure according to God's providential oversight. The inevitability of Isaac's scheme becoming unravelled is matched by the inevitability of God's seeing him and Rebekah through to safety. *Question 3; TiS 452 God of mercy; Psalm 101; Priscilla and Aquila—faithful servants.*

God of grace, be with me and see me through whatever I face this day.

Thursday

9 July

Romans 8:1–11*

Of all the chapters in the New Testament, we would be hard pressed to find a richer, more hopeful, or more searching one than Romans 8. It is the hinge of the argument between what has come before (Paul's discourse about law, sin, and human inability to procure its own salvation), and what will come after: the glorious consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection for all the world. Here, Paul describes the assurance of life given for those indwelt by the "Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead" (v.11). What couldn't be achieved by human efforts to keep the law (however "good" and "spiritual" the law was—see Romans 7) was achieved through Jesus' selfless death, and confirmed in his resurrection. Sin, evil, and death itself were permitted to do their worst. Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross to die, becoming the very picture of shame and disgrace, a public condemnation. Yet even the greatest strength evil could marshal was not enough for the power of love. Jesus burst back into the world on the third day, alive, resurrected, transformed beyond death. So in faith, and by God's Spirit, this same power resides within us. We share in Jesus' victory over sin, death, and evil, so that such things can never condemn us again. And we are called to embody this life as faithful followers of the Lord. *Question 4; TiS 209 And can it be; Psalm 30.*

Lord Jesus, may I never lose sight of the power of your love to redeem.

END

OF

PAGE

Friday

10 July

Matthew 13:1–17
(1–9, 18–23*)

Emily Dickinson’s poem “Tell All the Truth But Tell it **Slant**”¹⁰ could well describe the parables of Jesus, which tell the truth of the kingdom of God, but often do so by approaching you sideways, in unexpected jabs, with the element of surprise and even mystery. The parables “tease [the mind] into active thought”, Richard Lischer says, leaving enough space for holy imagination to go to **work**.¹¹ Consequently, one needs insight, wisdom, playfulness, and the eyes and ears of faith to hear their message(s). The Parable of the Sower, with its attached explanation, encourages reflection on how the word of God is sown and received. We might wonder why the sower would scatter seed on unproductive landscapes, as this would seem to be an avoidable waste! No doubt, though, the early Christians wondered the same thing about the reception of the gospel. Why would God plant the word in barren or rocky soils? Why would people fall away from the truth of Christ? Where do we find the “good soil” (v.8) to which the parable refers? And, from another perspective, how are we to become good soil in which the word (approaching us “slant”) will take deep roots—and what difference would this make in our lives? *Question 5; TiS 430/AHB 337 Your words to me are light and health; Psalm 71.*

Sower of the word, may my heart be fertile soil for your love.

Saturday

11 July

Matthew 13:18–23

Most of the New Testament gospel parables stand alone without interpretation, and the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 is unusual in having an attached explanation. Here, Jesus explains its meaning to the disciples. Note at this point that the change of context from the whole crowd to the disciples alone directs our understanding of its meaning more closely. We cluster with the disciples, pressing our ears closer to hear Jesus tell us that the parable is about how the word of the kingdom is received. When received faithfully in truth and grace, Jesus suggests, it bears fruit many times over. When received superficially or without understanding, the word of the kingdom withers or is stolen away. So the parable is both an encouragement and a warning. Perhaps, though, rather than imagining that the categories correspond to certain kinds of people in an exclusive way, we could see it applying to our own lives as a whole. No doubt we’ve all had times when the soil of our faith was rich and deep, and produced great fruit in service and witness. Perhaps also we’ve had dry times where we’ve felt as if the word wasn’t really taking root in us. There is much to ponder here. *Question 6; TiS 565/AHB 473 Author of faith, eternal word; Psalm 119:1–40.*

Gracious God, when my faith is dry, quench my thirst with living water.

END

OF

PAGE

Sunday

**12 July
Pentecost 6**

Psalm 119:105–112*

We have in this extract from the longest of the psalms a much beloved verse, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v.105). The connection between God’s word (or law) and (a guiding) light is one found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The law (*Torah*) was the framing source for the community’s wellbeing and identity, and to walk in the way of *Torah* was to walk in the light of God’s way. We might imagine what it’s like to walk along a path at night, struggling to find our footholds, and what a difference it makes to have a torch, street light, or even phone to guide us. We then know where to place our feet for a safe journey. In the New Testament, Jesus declares that “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). The living Word is the light, the one who illuminates God’s way before us. In Psalm 119 we might hear an anticipation, a prefiguring echo, of what is to come. The psalmist praises God for the light of the word, calling it “the joy of my heart” (v.111). In allegiance to Jesus, may we too find an incomparable joy with him as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. *TiS 447/AHB 61 Lord, your almighty word; Psalm 24; Desiderius Erasmus—reformer of the Church.*

In your prayers remember the lands and people of Djibouti and Somalia.

Questions:

1. Many of us have lived many long years, and experienced much of life. Why then does God’s grace still come as a surprise to us? *Monday*
2. What, if any, intersections are there between the dynamics of your family and Jacob and Esau’s family situation and relationships? *Tuesday*
3. How do you regard Isaac’s strategy of presenting Rebekah as his sister? *Wednesday*
4. Reflect on what it means to be “in Christ”, and how the Spirit animates your life. *Thursday*
5. How do parables “stir you up” by telling the truth “slant”? *Friday*
6. When may others have seen you as representing good, rocky, or bad soil? *Saturday*

Suggested hymns: *TiS 25, 78, 108, 442, 629, 650, 745, 779.*

Today Catholics will hear Isaiah 55:10–11; Psalm 64:10–14; Romans 8:18–23; Matthew 13:1–23. Anglicans will hear Matthew 13:1–9, (10–17), 18–23.

END OF PAGE

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WLW prepares you for Sunday worship, nurtures your faith, and strengthens you to live faithfully amidst the hopes and hurts of everyday life. It is also a valuable resource for worship and small group leaders.

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For further information about With Love to the World, contact the Editor, Dr. Peter Butler at butler@wagga.net.au