



Daily Devotionals February 18-23, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Judy Aronow, Janice Bachardy, Pat Gillory, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T. Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT EPIPHANY 6:

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

The Last Act

Monday, February 18, 2019

Mark 11:1-11

*Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting.
"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

The last act in the great drama begins. The stage is set. Enters Jesus, triumphant leader of the Jews, riding an ass and welcomed by the throngs who line the roadside, cheering him, throwing their cloaks and branches of greenery on his pathway. He has come to save them from tyranny.

The irony of the expectations of the crowd compared to what actually is to take place is painful to imagine because, unlike those cheering followers, we know what lies ahead. The Truth of that procession is that Jesus was making his statement of belief on that ride. He is saying, "I am not a King who looms above the common man in artificial glory. Look at what is really important in life. Riches and finery are temporary things that hold no true value. The humble ass serves as well as the finest steed. What really matters is not what is amassed by the ego's attempt to claim a power beyond its reach. The true power belongs to your Creator, and those who try to be God on this earth have as much permanence as that shiny fabric that speaks of a false authority and will fade and rot in time."

More than 2,000 years have passed since that tragic entry into Jerusalem, and we still can feel the pain of it for we know what lies ahead. We know the final act has begun. Yet, if we look at the whole picture, we realize that it is not an ending at all. It is eternal Truth. Realizing this gives us the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

Housekeeping

Tuesday, February 19, 2019

Mark 11:12-26

He was preaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a home of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

As a small child first hearing the verses that describe Jesus' cleansing the

temple, I was shocked. I had been taught that anger was bad, and in my family problems were often hidden and anger denied. I remember my mother's anxiety rising when she sensed that anyone was angry. Anger was simply a no-no, and I had a hard time accepting that Jesus was behaving in such a riotous way. I didn't understand that anger occurs at times, and how it is expressed is the important factor. Anger denied tends to become projected onto others through blame and criticism or can solidify into a hate that is poisonous. I was an adult before I realized that anger is a natural emotion when one feels mistreated or experiences injustice. It can also provide the energy for self-protection or to put things right when they go awry.

The temples in cities during Jesus' time served much like banks. They handled commercial enterprises, loans, and moneychangers operated there. That atmosphere was anything but holy. Jesus was furious that his father's house was being used in such a way. His actions can be considered an appropriate, even necessary, act to cleanse the way for a Holy Week to begin.

If we apply this story to our own lives, we realize that we need to assess our way of being and see if our body temple is in need of cleansing. We want our awareness to be acute rather than blanketed by distortion. Our minds and hearts need to be open to receive God's guidance with clarity. We can then ask for and receive God's blessings. We can then serve as a clear channel for God's love to flow out to others. Cleansing can prevent our becoming robbers of our own good.

To Whom Does it Belong?

Wednesday, February 20, 2019

Mark 11:27-12:12

But those tenants said to one another, "This is the heir; come let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours."

This cruel incident occurs as the culmination of a series of events wherein the owner of the vineyard sent his servants to collect his rightful share of the profit from his renters only to be murdered. He finally sends his son thinking that the renters would surely honor him, but he too is killed.

Jesus is telling a story that calls to mind the history of the Hebrews. For generations they accepted the gifts of God and then repeatedly slid downhill into selfish lack of appreciation of his benevolence, and they disregarded God's laws. These verses also speak prophetically of how Jesus himself will be treated.

We can recognize this arrogant pattern in ourselves if we have the courage and honesty to look at it. Too often we forget to give thanks for what we receive. Too often we take credit for what we have been given without acknowledging the source. We too ignore God's commandments. We live in a culture that honors individuality. We strive for goals and credit our ingenuity, hard work, and perseverance for our success. We amass "things" as evidence of our worth. We cling to and fight for "rights" we judge to be God-given without taking into consideration whether we impinge on the rights of others. We let our ego dominate instead of valuing our Higher Self.

It isn't that the ego is a bad thing--our ego's job is to help us function in the day-to-day world--but it can easily become inflated and believe it is God. When this happens, the result is disastrous. God has far more to give than our own puny egos. If we give in to hubris, we invite God's disfavor, and that is a sure way to lose the benefits of that beautiful, productive vineyard.

In humility, let us thank God for our bountiful blessings. In discouraging times, let us not lose sight of our gifts. Let us have faith and open our minds and hearts to God's love rather than inviting his disapproval.

Unassailable Wisdom

Thursday, February 21, 2019

Mark 12:13-27

Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

Jesus has given what seems to be a simple and obvious answer, but any question thrown at him was designed as a trap. His questioners consisted of the Pharisees, elite experts of Hebrew law, and the Herodians. The group was an unlikely combination of political opponents, which tells us just how dangerous they considered Jesus to be. However, he adroitly answers each question.

They had prefaced the question with flattery by saying that they "know he is sincere and shows deference to no one." The question they were planning to pose had to do with taxes, and they were hoping he would condemn the Romans who administered the poll tax, and this would anger the crowd. However, he didn't take that bait. Jesus reminds me of a football player dodging a tackle--he nonchalantly steps aside and the tackler goes flying past his target. Many times his answers were also loaded with other truths hidden in his wording.

To stand up to these men in debate required a quick mind, skill in the art of debate and extensive knowledge. No wonder his questioners and the crowd who heard him were amazed. We remember also that during his short life he also told parables that taught in an easily understandable way how to live wisely. In modern times psychologists devote whole careers to helping people untangle problems that could have been avoided if they or their parents had paid attention to what Jesus taught those many years ago. His wisdom is unassailable.

In my mind's eye, I see him standing surrounded by verbal attackers. Yet he is calmly speaking from the quiet center of his being, where the source of wisdom resides. I see an onslaught of words slung at him like stones from all sides, but they sail past him while he stands unperturbed. I think, "Jesus, you don't have to prove your holiness by crucifixion and resurrection. You are the essence of wisdom. You are without a doubt the Son of God."

Instructions

Friday, February 22, 2019

Mark 12:28-34

He answered them, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

This was the answer Jesus gave the Sadducees who had asked him which commandment was the most important. Each of us knows this verse if we were brought up as a Christian. We may have even earned a gold star for having memorized it in Sunday School.

It seems to be a simple statement of faith, but Jesus has brought together two widely separate scriptures, both of which were very familiar to Israelites.¹ He has added the phrase, "with all your mind" to his quotation from Deut. 6:4-5.² He is saying that the love of God comes first in order of importance, and he included the phrase about the mind to emphasize the presence of thought as well as feeling. This commandment about loving God should be more than an emotional expression; it should be an active principal in life. Jesus is speaking of wholeness.

It is interesting that, in moving on to the second commandment, we find, "Love your neighbor as yourself." I was taught as a child, or mistakenly understood, that loving yourself was arrogant, but I realized later that one must love oneself before being able to love anyone else. However, sometimes it isn't easy to love one's self; guilt over misdeeds or standards not met get in the way. Then a little forgiveness may be in order. Just think about the fact that life is a gift from God and God loves each of his children. That makes forgiveness much easier.

The goal in life is not to be perfect; that is left to Jesus. Our job is to keep the channel open so that God is always in touch. Being a good Christian is not a matter of memorizing verses letter perfect; God doesn't call us to be the best nitpickers, and God will forgive us if we lose a debate. He does want us to love him and be able to receive his love. And that love is not ours to keep to ourselves; we are meant to show our appreciation by passing it on to others.

Hitting too Close to Home

Saturday, February 23, 2019

Mark 12:35-44

"They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

This verse rings my bell. I'm a widow, and even the thought of losing my house scares me, especially because as I write here in the warm comfort of my home, frigid winds attempt unsuccessfully to blow it down. I am aware of the possibility of losing our electric power and the danger that implies, but reading something like this makes me realize how very fortunate I am.

Jesus is criticizing the scribes. He has already addressed their conceited attitude and the way they parade around in ostentatious robes to impress people and sanctimoniously deliver long prayers to prove how religious they are. From my own prejudiced viewpoint, mistreating a widow is a far more serious crime. The height of hypocrisy is pretending to be helpful by managing a widow's affairs and "devouring her house."

I am tempted to make a sassy remark like, "I wish them humongous indigestion," but that makes light of the situation, and there is nothing amusing about robbing the most vulnerable of people. Jesus agrees with me. He said they will receive greater condemnation.

It is hard to imagine how someone who claims to be religious could do something so opposed to what God would want. Do they not realize that to believe in God means that evil acts will be punished? One thing is certain, their god is greed.

Jesus taught compassion, love of self and others, justice, and obedience to God's will. Pretentiousness is not part of that package.

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