





Interfaith  
September

# *Welcome to the Worship Resource*

Interfaith September is an opportunity to become more aware of our faith in Christ in the company of others who belong to another faith. It is a month-long journey of reflection to focus on what makes for peace and what place our faith can take in that journey.

This Worship Resource is designed to guide congregations and church members on that journey. It consists of a week-by-week guide to the Lectionary based on four different interfaith themes.

Each week includes:

- An outline of the theme
- A reflection on the gospel
- An interfaith perspective
- Suggested hymns and sermon starters

Accompanying this resource is a video clip for each week featuring interfaith partners sharing from their faith perspective: <http://ow.ly/R7LdY>

Congregations can use and adapt these resources to suit their own needs. You may choose to participate in one week, or all four. Consider organising an interfaith reflection/bible study during the month or use the resource at another time of the year.

## **Reading the scriptures in an interfaith context**

The first Sunday of the series is 'Interfaith September Sunday', beginning the conversation on what it means for us to live faithfully in an increasingly religiously diverse Australia.

Congregations are invited to consider the biblical readings which the Lectionary has set in light of this changing Australian context.

This year we are following the gospel of Mark. In our reflection we also need to respect the way in which the author of this gospel is telling the story of Jesus' ministry and the journey to Jerusalem in the company of his disciples.

## **What might that mean?**

- Paying close attention to the texts which will inform the sermon and theme for worship as normal
- How this reading might be engaged with by the local congregation
- Considering a wider 'audience' for the text:
- How might our engagement with this text contribute to the 'common good' or 'the civil society' in Australia
- How might our reading of this text resonate with our neighbour who belongs to another faith.

You might like to consider the principles of what is called 'Scriptural Reasoning'. This is a practice by which people from different religious backgrounds gather together in small groups to discuss with one another their Scriptural texts. There is no attempt to avoid difficult texts. The focus is on reflecting on the text in the presence of the one whose faith is different.

For this equivalent exercise in Scriptural Reasoning we will have to use our imagination: How might the other hear us?

# *Week 1: Breaking Down of Barriers*

The ancient world in which Jesus lived was one of seemingly solid barriers. The divisions were between Roman and barbarian, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. It was sometimes said of the early Christians that the followers of the risen Christ were creating a “new race”.

Our increasingly globalised world possesses its own boundaries. North and south, developed and developing, citizens and asylum seekers, us and them, insiders and outsiders. Sometimes the barriers are those which faith creates. Believers and infidels, Christian and non-Christian, and all manner of variations of the same. It is indeed not uncommon to find letters to the editor and newspaper columnists sometimes asserting that religion is the root cause of division and war.

Faiths provide followers with world views. They can provide meaning and what is called a “sacred canopy” under which cultures and various groups within a society validate their history, experience and desired future. Those faiths often legitimise barriers and boundaries – and there is indeed much benefit in knowing what it means to belong to one faith and not another. One of the things which those in interfaith encounters often say is that they would like the person who belongs to the “other” faith to say what they really believe. In those kind of exchanges there can be an opportunity for an enhanced understanding of the “other” as well as a deepening insight into what you yourself believe and value.

There are nevertheless numerous instances where boundaries and divisions are jealously guarded. There are those who feel threatened by the ‘other’ and their level of difference. There are those who feel the need to protect borders and exclusions

in order to “reclaim” what they believe is being lost. It is also possible to draw from the sacred scriptures of various faiths many occasions where war and violence is given a divine sanction or approval.

It is evident that the process of globalisation is breaking down many barriers through travels, migration and digital connectivity. And yet those same processes can, at the same time, render some of the barriers between peoples more intense. Back in the mid-1990s Samuel P. Huntington argued that the future would be one of cultural and religious conflict. It would be a “clash of civilisations”. His theory has been significantly criticised on a number of grounds – for instance by Amartya Sen and Edward Said – but his turn of phrase, “the clash of civilisations”, retains much power and currency.

The Christian faith has often favoured a more exclusivist demeanour towards other faiths. It has been committed to an evangelical and missionary enterprise which is liable to favour conversion of the “other”. Writing in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, Douglas John Hall argued that the Christian faith has historically been inclined towards a form of triumphalism. In this season of the church’s calendar we can catch a different glimpse of the peacemaking sides of faith. It is an opportunity for us to reflect on how the gospel is “good news”. Jesus himself is repeatedly at the point where those tight constricting boundaries are broken down. In this reading he himself is set a challenge to overcome any barrier he might have otherwise himself placed on the Syrophenician woman.

# *The Gospel Reading: Mark 7:24-37.*

## **The Syrophoenician Woman's Faith**

<sup>24</sup>From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, <sup>25</sup>but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup>Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup>He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."<sup>28</sup>But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."<sup>29</sup>Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."<sup>30</sup>So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

## Jesus Restores A Man's Hearing

<sup>31</sup>Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.<sup>32</sup>They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.<sup>33</sup>He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.<sup>34</sup>Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”<sup>35</sup>And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.<sup>36</sup>Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.<sup>37</sup>They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

**Other Readings:** Proverbs 22:1, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, 14-17

## **The Gospel:**

It is always important to set a biblical text inside some sort of context. Jesus has effectively been rejected by his own people. His mother and his brothers have sought to bring him home because people have been saying he has a demon or he is out of his mind. The Gerasenes have driven him out of their countryside. Those who knew him in Nazareth have also rejected him. The gospel had begun effectively with John the Baptist preparing the way of one who will follow. Now he is dead having been beheaded.

It is hard to bear rejection. It is painful and can make you doubt who you are. Sometimes it can lead to the individual concerned giving up, because it is just too tough to continue. But this is not what Jesus does. He leaves Nazareth and continues his ministry in surrounding villages – and now he is in Tyre and Sidon. Jesus does not soften his ministry. Jesus is breaking down barriers between those who are pure in the eyes of Jewish law and those who are not. He has already touched a corpse and a leper; he has eaten with tax collectors and sinners; he has healed a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years; he has declared that it is not what goes into a person which defiles but that which comes out.

Jesus is in Gentile territory to the north of Galilee. It is now not uncommon to highlight how the Syrophoenician woman wins the argument with Jesus and extends his compassion. This action is then followed by another act of healing – a man has his hearing restored and speaks plainly. Once more we see evidence for the “messianic secret” where Jesus is seeking to conceal his identity.

What we have in these two stories are acts of boundary-breaking between Jew and Gentile. The offensive nature of Jesus’ response to the woman cannot be sanitised. The reference to

“dogs” is abusive. The woman likens herself to a scavenger seeking out the crumbs which have fallen from the table. Through her faith and actions, Jesus’ ministry has been stretched to include the Gentiles.

## **“Scriptural Reasoning” & the Common Good.**

- How might someone else from another faith or no faith hear our thinking on this text?
- How might our reflection encourage a civil society, a public good?

Our talk about the common good always needs to be handled with great care. It is very easy for one group to co-opt the language of what is good for society. It is especially easy for the dominant majority to do precisely that. There are many shorthand ways in which this kind of co-option can happen – for example, we might say the common good is what is consistent with ‘our values’, our way of doing things, our traditions. Here the co-option of the common good appears to be positive. It can sometimes be expressed much more negatively when we caricature or misrepresent ‘the other’. They can become the butt of ethnic or religious jokes. They become outsiders. We have evidence of that here in our reading. The Gentile woman is likened to a dog, a scavenger.

When we are inclusive only of those whose basic assumptions we share, then it is said that we are demonstrating thick trust. We know what to expect of each other. Our relationships are close. The comparison can be made with thin trust. Expressions of thin trust occur when the other is someone unlike us, someone whose ways and hopes we do not understand very well. It is now argued that the well-being of a society, its common good, depends

upon how extensive the lines of thin trust are. In a way the Syrophenician woman is laying claim to thin trust. She is asking Jesus to overcome clichés and popular prejudice and recognise her faith.

The well-being of our life together can be seriously threatened when one faith does not seek to understand or respect the other. There is a long history of the Christian faith resorting to demonising the beliefs of the other. We might say that our equivalent of this encounter today might go something like this - the representative of another faith has been treated badly by the church because of their beliefs. That person then comes to us and reminds us of how Jesus himself taught us that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Our own beliefs are used “against” us in order to break down our barriers of exclusion.

It can come as a surprise for Christians in contemporary Australia that some of the most basic initiatives towards social cohesion – and loving the neighbour as oneself – have come from other faiths.

We might also further reflect on the role gender plays in public and religious spaces. In our gospel reading it is a woman who breaks through cultural and religious barriers.

## Possible Sermon Starters

- What ‘barriers’, ‘boundaries’ and ‘exclusion zones’ seem to be present in your neighbourhood?
- What hidden needs and hopes might lie behind those conventions which separate us from someone who is not like “us” and our group?
- Tell a story of a woman whose Christian faith led her to break down boundaries and open up a new way of following Christ.
- Tell a story of a woman from another faith, (maybe wearing a hijab) who helped better understand our calling in Christ.

## Hymns

- Let us build a house together, where love can dwell (Tune: Two Oaks (Church Hymnary, 198). Lyrics: Marty Haughen)
- The love of God stands close (Lyrics: Shirley Murray; Tune: Love Unknown, TiS 341)
- Come, celebrate the women (Tune: Ellacombe: Lyrics: Shirley Murray)
- Christ is alive! Let Christians sing (TiS 387: alternative tune: Truro, TiS 84)

Read: Professor Gillian Triggs, “Social Cohesion and Multicultural Australia: The Importance of Human Rights”: <http://ow.ly/QK6ZY>

Listen: To Mona Siddiqui (a Muslim woman) reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer. What was your response to hearing a woman from another faith speak on the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: <http://ow.ly/QK76k>

## *Week 2: 9/11 and Identity Matters*

We live in an age where many people have become confused as to their identity. That should not be unexpected when there is such a global flow of peoples around the world. Some of us have multiple nationalities. Ethnicity itself is often not a stable sign of who someone is. There is an increasing percentage of the population who have one or more parents born overseas. There is an increasing percentage of people who think of themselves as being hyphenated - for example, a Korean-Australian. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has described our world as being one of “liquid modernity.” Our life together is becoming more fluid, light and flexible rather than solid and heavy. For many people it is becoming very confusing to say where “home” is and indeed, what does the word “home” actually mean and signify.

There is great pressure brought to bear on religious and cultural traditions which would once have given this sense of identity. Over the course of centuries the great religious traditions have provided their adherents with comprehensive world views and a ‘sacred canopy’. Now there are so many competing voices surrounding each one of us all of the time laying claim to our loyalties and fears. Where do we belong and to whom?

Our Christian identity is formed by the way in which we respond to the question Jesus poses to the disciples: “who do you say that I am?”. It is sometimes said that this question is the beginning of a continuing interrogation of us. The way in which we answer the question will alter at different times in our lives. What I might say now is likely to be different from when I was a child. How our answers can change through the course of our own lives has been well exemplified by Marcus Borg in his essay on “Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time”. Borg maps out his journey of understanding from the time he was a six-year-old child infatuated

with Christmas to his more critically reflective self as he became a New Testament scholar.

Some decades ago now Dietrich Bonhoeffer invited us to consider how the initiative behind this question comes from Jesus himself. There is in his thinking a kind of implicit merging of John's prologue and Mark here. There is silence before the Word – the Word speaks first – and asks us “who do you say that I am?” It has sometimes been said that when we begin to answer that question Jesus put to his disciples, “who do you say that I am?”, we end up revealing something of ourselves. That is what questions can do. The right ones can open us up.

The underlying assumption behind this core question is that our identity is “in Christ”. Sometimes that identity in Christ can call into question our identity in culture or ethnicity. The way in which Mark poses this continuing question is now pertinent in a new way. The “who do you say that I am?” question is preceded by Jesus asking the disciples “who do people say that I am?”.

We might well ponder who these “people” might be for us today. The context in which we seek to answer Jesus' core question of us takes place inside a society which is both secular and made up of many faiths. What might those who adhere to a different religious tradition say about Jesus? Who is he for them?

# *The Gospel Reading: Mark 8:27-38.*

## **Peter's Declaration about Jesus**

<sup>27</sup>Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"<sup>28</sup>And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."<sup>29</sup>He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."<sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

**Other Readings:** Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3: 1-12

## **Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.<sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.<sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.<sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.<sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?<sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?<sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

## The Gospel:

At the heart of Mark's gospel lies a journey which begins in Caesarea Philippi and ends up in Jerusalem. Caesarea Philippi is the furthest point Jesus will be away from Jerusalem in the whole of this gospel. The journey begins with a couple of questions. The first is more general and is addressed to 'men' ('people'). The response which is given is similar in intent to those opinions on him given in response to Herod Antipas in the wake of the death of John the Baptist. The second question is more specific: the Greek 'you' is actually in the plural – so it is asking the disciples who do they as a group rather than as individuals think Jesus is. It is Peter who makes the confession that Jesus is the Messiah compared with Herod who thought he might be John the Baptist raised again to life.

There are two things which flow from Peter's confession. The first has to do with the 'Messianic secret' which permeates this gospel. Every time someone (usually someone who is healed) recognises who Jesus is, then he bids them to keep quiet. The identity of Jesus is thus being held in reserve. The second thing about Peter's confession is that he is half-right and half-wrong. He can accept that Jesus is the Messiah but not the subsequent description of how Jesus understands his messianic vocation. Jesus makes no secret of his imminent suffering and how he will undergo great suffering, experience rejection, be killed and then rise again on the third day. That the Messiah should be rejected and be put to death is contrary to the more triumphal expectations which surround this figure. It is worth reflecting on Peter's inability to deal with Jesus' description of his dying and rising in the light of other traditions. Paul believes that death on a cross is a stumbling block for the Jews - it is something accursed – and for the Greeks it is folly – it is idiocy. Luke recognises that the resurrection will be like an 'idle tale'.

Jesus makes use of Peter's confession to say something about what it means to follow him. It is a way of denial. The life of discipleship is likened to taking up a cross. There is an abiding assumption that there is a cost involved. It requires decisions to be made with regards to what one values in life. It is evident that life is saved not through one's own effort or winning the whole world. Following this cross-bound Jesus is likely to lead to shame.

## **“Scriptural Reasoning” & the Common Good.**

- How might someone else from another faith or no faith hear our thinking on this text?
- How might our reflection encourage a civil society, a public good?

In the immediate wake of 9/11 there was a marked spike in Islamophobia. That this should have come about should not be a matter of great surprise. The response was informed by a deep grief, a numbing shock, a sense of outrage. That kind of response has been observed in the wake of many other similar acts of terrorism. Over the past year we have seen the continuing rise of ISIS, the Charlie Hebdo attack, the Lindt café incident in Martin Place and the plight of the Rohingya Muslim asylum seekers fleeing Myanmar. On the television news we are repeatedly exposed to bombs going off in Gaza, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Tunisia, northern Nigeria. There is a rhetoric of fear, talk of terror alerts, “illegal immigrants”. The climate of opinion does not appear to be designed to nurture a sense of belonging. It is destabilising and does not cultivate the formation of a gracious identity.

9/11 is like a symbol. It is an iconic sign of the times. It can stand for terrorism in general and other attacks in particular. It is evident that these incidents generate a mood and politics of fear. They

also lend themselves to a branding of the “religious other” with broad brushstrokes. Everyone who belongs to the faith associated with the attack – whether they be Muslim, Buddhist or Jewish - is made to feel vulnerable. The film made out of Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows how attitudes towards the “other” can change sharply in the immediate wake of an attack. The level of suspicion is raised and can lead to a deepening sense of alienation and radicalisation.

It is rather fitting that at this time of the year - the anniversary of 9/11 - we should be asked to consider these questions Jesus asked of his disciples: “who do people say that I am” and “who do you say that I am?” Our Christian identity comes from how we answer this question. For the sake of the common good it matters how we address the second of these and how we let that answer inform the way we live our lives. Jesus is inviting his followers to take up their cross in order to follow him. This pattern of discipleship may not be the same as the surrounding culture. Rather, it may be one that is willing to risk shame for the sake of “good news” worthy of the kingdom of God.

Some of the tensions between the call of faith to forgiveness and renewal and the claims of culture in the wake of an attack can be discerned in the story now associated with St. Paul’s Trinity Church in Manhattan, Broadway at Wall Street. ([link below](#))

It is also rather timely for us to consider how people in other faiths say who Jesus is. For Muslims, Jesus is named as Isa in the Qu’ran. He is a prophet, the spirit of Allah is with him and he is the son of Mary. Especially in the wake of the Holocaust both Christian and Jewish thinkers have explored the significance of Jesus being a Jew. In other parts of the world Buddhists have made a comparison between Jesus and Buddha, while Mahatma Gandhi was powerfully influenced by the Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

## **Possible Sermon Starters**

- What ‘barriers’, ‘boundaries’ and ‘exclusion zones’ seem to be present in your neighbourhood?
- Tell a story of someone who overcame fear and took up their cross for Christ’s sake.
- Tell a story of someone you’ve met from another faith and what Jesus and his followers today look like to people from that other faith.
- Reflect on the verses of “Who is this man?” and “Will you come and follow me,”. What kind of Jesus do they “imagine” or “see”? What kind of discipleship do they suggest?
- Reflect on hymns composed to commemorate 9/11. (see below)

## **Hymns**

- TiS 182: Bring many names, beautiful and good (Tune: Westchase; Lyrics: Brian Wren)
- TiS 682: When human voices cannot sing (Tune: St. Columba; Lyrics: Shirley Murray)
- Who is this man (Tune: Londonderry Air, CH3 309; Lyrics: Mary Pearson)
- Will you come and follow me (Tune: Kelvingrove, Church Hymnary 4, 533 Lyrics: John Bell, Graham Maule)

## **Hymns Commemorating 9/11**

- God, we’ve known such grief and anger (Tune: In Babilone, 8.7.8.7 D. “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”)
- O God, Our Words Cannot Express St. Anne 8.6.8.6 (“Our God, Our Help in Ages Past”) From Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (Upper Room Books, 2009) <http://ow.ly/QK7SP>

**Read:** The story associated with St. Paul's Trinity Church in Manhattan This Chapel is for everyone: St Paul's on 9/11: <http://ow.ly/QK7Ur>

**Listen:** to Peter Ostroushko's Hymn 9/11: <https://youtu.be/tO4xeAaaA6A>

## *Week 3: The Myth of Greatness*

“Who is the greatest?” So often greatness is associated in the popular mind with power and with strength. So often it has to do with military, political and economic prowess. Here greatness can be measured by way of military warheads, the latest technology and the size of the GDP. Our world is often organised along the lines of power conceived in terms of greatness and the desire to exercise that power over others. We live in a world which has often been shaped by those nations which have been dubbed a ‘great power’. From our reading of history we can see that this kind of greatness passes. Eventually another power emerges and the one which has held pre-eminence for a while enters into decline. The power that was once the greatest is now a shadow of its former self.

There are times when we are often tempted to say in a period of great complexity that we want a strong leader. That is not uncommon in the life of nations as well as in religions, including the Church. The underlying assumption here is the belief that this ‘great leader’ will provide us with direction. “We” will benefit as a consequence. And sometimes that may be true but often there is a hidden cost. The myth of greatness is established upon a degree of competition. There are those who will be somehow lesser or weaker by way of comparison. The language of greatness can carry with it a sense of superiority.

Sometimes faiths are lined up against each other in order to determine which one is the “best” or “the greatest”. Jesus, for instance, might be compared with the Buddha or Muhammad for the sake of proving which one should be given priority. That was not an uncommon practice over a century ago when the new discipline “the science of religion” first appeared on the scene.

Sometimes greatness is of a different nature, however. It is not necessarily sought. It is conferred. It is a signal of honour and esteem. It can thus become a virtue. But here we have a further twist. The link is made between greatness and being a servant. The defining characteristic is the willingness to welcome and serve the seemingly least powerful. It has often been said that the greatest leader/country is the one which takes care of its weakest and most vulnerable members. Here greatness acquires a moral and spiritual category.

## *The Gospel Reading: Mark 9:30-37.*

### **Jesus Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

## Who Is the Greatest?

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

**Other readings:** Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1;  
James 3:13-4:3,7-8a

## **The Gospel:**

Jesus has come down from the mountain following his Transfiguration. Once again the matter of his identity has come to the fore. Peter, James and John have been on the mountain with him. They have heard a voice speak out of the clouds: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” They have been instructed “to tell no-one about what they have seen” – thus the theme of secrecy as to who Jesus is is maintained. The gospel will move on to speak of Jesus passing through Galilee and his “not wanting anyone to know it”.

This secrecy exists alongside a failure to understand. The disciples have already seen Peter rebuked following Jesus’ first prediction of his death and resurrection. Now they are silent in the wake of the second prediction. He has taken his disciples apart and advised them that the Son of Man is to be handed over into human hands, betrayed, killed – and he will rise again. They do not know how to respond. They are afraid to ask.

Once again the nature of the coming kingdom of God is intimated through the various episodes of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The gospel of Mark has the longest account of the healing of the boy with the unclean spirit which convulses him. The healing of the boy shows Jesus once again overcoming laws of purity.

This healing had immediately followed upon an argument between the scribes and the disciples. The argument seems to turn upon the disciples’ inability to heal the boy. This particular argument subsequently becomes one which is designed to illustrate the nature of faith and Jesus’ power to drive out unclean spirits. The narrative presupposes a close relationship between faith and healing. Here the boy’s father professes his belief, “help my unbelief”. The disciples are told in private that this casting out

of the epileptic spirit can only come about through “prayer”.

Jesus and his disciples come to Capernaum. On the way they had been arguing. It has been an embarrassing discussion. Earlier in the gospel they had been informed that whoever wishes to follow Jesus must be willing to take up his/her cross. They have been called to deny the “self” and not seek after what the world prizes. They have been arguing about “who is the greatest”.

The enquiry into why the disciples were arguing along the way leads into Jesus’ teaching what we might say is the way of being in the kingdom. The disciples are “sat down” – which is the posture in which formal learning occurs. It is a three-fold illustration. Those who wish to be great must be servant of all, the first must be last. Here we have a reversal of usual expectations. It is, in effect, saying from the perspective of Jesus what is true greatness. Jesus does not say that a follower should not aspire after greatness: he defines what it is. The welcome afforded the child is symbolic of the inclusion of the least and the most vulnerable. Here we must take into account the low value and esteem in which children were held in the Greco-Roman world. The characteristic of this coming kingdom is one of welcome to the most needy. This welcome represents the generous hospitality of God.

## **“Scriptural Reasoning” & the Common Good.**

- How might someone else from another faith or no faith hear our thinking on this text?
- How might our reflection encourage a civil society, a public good?

It is always an interesting exercise to reflect on how those outside

the Christian faith might “hear” what a gospel passage is seeking to convey. The dilemma arises because the gospel narratives are designed to show what the gospel is to those who have already committed their lives to Christ. The ever-present temptation is to look for texts which can more easily speak across the differences between one faith and another.

It is likely that someone who has no faith would find yet another miracle/exorcism story a stumbling block. It is likely that someone from another faith might well imitate Mahatma Gandhi’s response to the Christian faith. He believed that it was pointless trying to ‘argue’ with other faiths for the superiority or “greatness” of the Christian faith on the basis of miracles. Gandhi noted that most faiths have accounts of the “miraculous”. Gandhi much preferred to focus upon the humility of Jesus and his teaching.

Our reading this week is complex. It includes a number of different subsections which are not tailor-made for a Sunday which has been designated Peace Sunday. At least, at face value, this reading is not an apparent perfect fit – except for the way in which it speaks of “greatness”. So often “greatness” has been accomplished through various modes of war, both in terms of military and economic pressure. The peace which arises out of such is often an imposed peace by the successful and those who wield much power. But that is not what Jesus is teaching. His teaching about “greatness” is bound to humility, service and a generosity of welcome.

This word “peace” can be deceptive. Its meaning needs to be teased out. It can be seen as the opposite of a formal war or armed conflict. In a much troubled world that understanding of peace would bring considerable relief to countries ravaged by war. But such an understanding of peace can be misleading. Prejudice, hatred, injustice can still remain. The “greatest” in terms of might and power can still impose their way on the more

vulnerable, all under the cover of the label of peace. There may not be any overt state of conflict, but the seeds of alienation and future strife have already been sown.

The biblical understanding of peace involves more than the mere absence of war. It looks towards a just peace. It is one which expects to find a network of right relationships between peoples and the rest of creaturely existence. It is not simply the absence of war. It looks towards wise and just dealings between and among peoples who differ on any one of a number of grounds.

The language of “greatness” for the followers of Christ may have more of a place in the construction of this kind of peace than we sometimes recognise. “Greatness” might even mean the willingness to welcome one who belongs to another faith and to do so in a spirit of service and humility. It might even mean a willingness to find out more about one of the “great” spiritual leaders, teachers and poets from another faith - like Rumi, Al-Ghazali, Siddhartha Gautama, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore.

## **Possible Sermon Starters**

- Explore why it can be difficult to have ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ in today’s world, noting that all faiths are having to wrestle in some way with the global, secular forces of the current age.
- Give an example of someone you believe to have been one of the ‘greatest’ in faith. What were the things which set them apart?
- Consider an “argument” between a follower of Jesus and someone who had no faith or belonged to another faith. In what ways might this call to be last rather than first be played out.
- Explore how Christ has sometimes been manipulated in the

service of empire, the pursuit of wealth and the encounter with peoples of a different culture. In what ways was Christ 'crucified'? What measures of justice and service might be appropriate for the sake of a just peace?

- Tell the story of someone who has been a peacemaker when there has been conflict between two faiths.

## **Hymns**

- Come, all who look to God today (Lyrics: Richard G. Jones; Tune: Gonfalon Royal, TiS Church Hymnary 4, 713)
- TiS 398: Come down, O Love divine (Lyrics: Bianco de Siena; Tune: Down Ampney)
- TiS 650: Brother, sister, let me serve you (Tune: Servant Song; Lyrics: Richard Gillard)
- We sing a love that sets all people free (Lyrics: June Boyce-Tillman; Tune: Woodlands, CH4 622, TiS 161)

## *Week 4: “In My Name”*

Back in 2005 Archbishop Peter Jensen was asked to deliver the prestigious Boyer Lectures on Radio National. The theme of his six lectures was the future of Jesus in Australia. The actual delivery of the fifth lecture coincided with the first night of the Cronulla race riots. The causes of that explosion of violence have now been well researched across many disciplines. It was not, of course, a conflict between rival religious claims but it is evident that those who participated in the riots made occasional use of the religious difference between the Christian faith and Islam.

Jensen did not address the theme of the future of Jesus in a multi-faith Australia. His audience was more a secular Australia which was ‘once Christian’. One of Jensen’s most insightful comments had to do with how quickly the narrative surrounding the name of Jesus was disappearing from Australian culture. Jensen argued that Jesus was fast becoming an anonymous character in this country and something of a footnote in the telling of its history. He described an encounter with two highly intelligent men who ascribed well-known sayings to Abraham Lincoln rather than to Jesus. For Jensen this lack of familiarity is one of the signs of the times.

Jensen’s line of argument is not entirely accurate, of course. The name of Jesus Christ often features in the mouths of people but perhaps, more often as an expletive than as an act of confession. “For Christ’s sake” is, strictly speaking, a plea, the ending of a prayer, an act of invocation, praise and worship. That it should become so widely used as an expletive is an episode in the evolution of the history of swearing.

The comparison might be made with the way in which the names of Muhammad and Buddha are used in the public sphere.

We have become well used to the way in which the image of Muhammad can be employed in a condescending manner. Its misuse can lead to significant acts of protest. All the while the name of Jesus/Christ is commonly misused. Does it matter?

The name of Jesus has meaning. It means “he will save his people from their sins”. Christ refers to the “the anointed one”. “Emmanuel” means “God with us”. It is thus a name which effectively represents both the humanity of God and the purposes of God for us. It has a meaning and significance far removed from expletives or casual neglect. It is also a name which has meaning in Islam. Jesus is Isa ibn Maryam: Jesus the son of Mary. He is al-Masih: a messenger of God.

The followers of all other faiths have, of course, been exposed to the name of Jesus due to the global expansion of the Christian faith. The way in which that name has been represented in these encounters is ambiguous. Sometimes the name of Jesus and talk of the risen Christ has engendered fear and lament at that which has been lost. Sometimes the name of Jesus has signified a story of humility and self-sacrifice which has been seen to be attractive. So much depends upon the spirit in which followers have embodied the name of Jesus and carried out deeds in his name.

## *The Gospel Reading: Mark 9:38-50.*

### Another Exorcist

<sup>38</sup>John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” <sup>39</sup>But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.” <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

## Temptations to Sin

<sup>42</sup>“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.<sup>43</sup>If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.]<sup>45</sup>And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.<sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,<sup>48</sup>where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.<sup>49</sup>“For everyone will be salted with fire<sup>50</sup>Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

**Other Readings:** Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20

## The Gospel:

It is not easy being a disciple in Mark's gospel. Their following of Jesus has set them apart and led them into arguments with the scribes. They are unclear as to what they should make of Jesus and have become afraid to ask. The Jesus whom they are following shrouds his identity in secrecy. They are subject to his criticism for their discussion over which one of them was the greatest. They have been unable to cure an epileptic boy – and now they are seeking to stop another exorcist who was casting out demons in Jesus' name: "we tried to stop him because he was not following us". They are concerned with their own participation rather than what is happening in the name of Jesus. Jesus takes issue with them. It is not a case of this exorcist not following "us" that is important. It is what is done in the name of Jesus. He is being pragmatic. If they do good in his name, then they will not "soon afterwards" be able to speak evil against him and his cause. Those who are not against us are for us. Those who help anyone "because you bear the name of Christ will receive a reward".

In the context of the gospel Jesus has been provoking a gathering of those opposed to him – most notably the Pharisees, Sadducees and the scribes. In the circumstances it might well be expected that Jesus would draw up a boundary line between those who follow him and those who do not. Here Jesus does not exclude those who are doing things in his name and over which he has no obvious control.

There continues to be an ongoing concern for those who are least. The reference to "little ones" might refer to children or it might refer to those new to the faith. It is hard to determine who "the any of you" is. It seems to imply a broader Christian fellowship than the disciples. The dire warnings which follow

seem to presume a community – perhaps a community under pressure, maybe under pressure to fall from their Christian faith. How then should we read the language which follows? If the hand, eye, foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better that this should happen than you be thrown into Gehenna. Is it overstated, deliberately exaggerated, hyperbolic for a purpose? Or, in the view of some religious practices around the globe, should they be understood in a literal sense, meaning what they say?

Of course, it is not the hand, the foot or eye which causes us to stumble. Jesus himself has concentrated more upon what is within a person and how that leads to a lack of purity. Whatever the case, the imagery demonstrates the seriousness of sin – and there are consequences. Here there is reference to Gehenna. It is misleading to think of Gehenna initially as a place of eternal damnation. It was the place where babies were sacrificed to Moloch. It became a garbage dump, continually smoking. It conjures up images of smouldering rubbish sites outside some of the world's big cities.

The reading concludes with reference to being “salted with fire” and the possibility of losing one's saltiness. The imagery is perhaps to ritual sacrifice. Jesus en route to Jerusalem is the primary example of self-sacrifice. The disciples have been learning what it means to follow him while they have been on this journey with him. It would seem as if they would lose their saltiness if they do not observe a way of lowly service, openness to those who call upon the name of Jesus but are different, and do not care for the young or those new to the faith.

## **“Scriptural Reasoning” & the Common Good.**

- How might someone else from another faith or no faith hear our thinking on this text?

How might our reflection encourage a civil society, a public good? It is often assumed in contemporary Australia that we should not talk about our faith in public. Now that we are a society which is made up of many cultures and many faiths we should use language and ideas which everyone understands. Our public conversation should be reasonable. The overriding democratic virtue is tolerance. Our faiths are not understood or accessible to all. The society in which we find ourselves is secular in its public life.

That is a well-rehearsed argument - one which sometimes leads to calls for the Lord's Prayer not to be said at the beginning of each day of Parliament. But that is yesterday! It is now increasingly being said that we live in a post-secular society. One of the striking things about the past couple of decades has been the return of religion or as one news columnist said, "God is baaack!"

There has been much work done now on the role of religion in the public space. Every faith can provide a world view which informs and inspires men and women to act well and contribute to the good of society as a whole. Living in this world of many faiths it can be extremely helpful to say where one is coming from. A Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jain might all be committed to the ecological health of the country, for example – but what inspires each one to hold those views and act upon them will be quite different.

Here we need to think about what might be the significance of the name of Christ Jesus in the public and private spaces of our lives together. What is it about our following of Christ which might lead us to support a number of social and ecological concerns? How can that concern be tied back to the story of Jesus – and is it a way of doing which allows us to work with others and not be a stumbling block to those who might share our faith?

Over the course of the last few years there has been a growth in

the way in which the Church acts in coalition with other voluntary groups. Those groups will often include men and women of other faiths. It is their faith which inspires them to work for the common good and the well-being of their neighbourhood. For Christians this exposure can be a timely reminder of how Jesus is also a Muslim prophet. His name is mentioned 93 times in the Qu'ran. Maybe this text is inviting us to consider what kind of “salt” or “flavouring” the Christian faith can add to this work.

## **Possible Sermon Starters**

- Consider how easy/difficult it is to use the “name” of Jesus/Christ in your context/neighbourhood.
- If you were given the opportunity to talk about the future of Jesus in Australia, what would your themes be? Would they include the way in which the followers of Jesus now find themselves in a society of many faiths – as well as none?
- If someone from another faith was given the opportunity to talk about the future of Jesus in Australia, what do you think they would say?
- Describe an interfaith encounter and consider what kind of “flavouring” the Christian faith brought to the discussion.

## **Hymns**

- TiS 179: Praise with joy the world’s creator (Lyrics: John Bell; Tune: Praise, My Soul).
- TiS 686: Lord Jesus, we belong to you (Tune: Cooke Plains; Lyrics: John Kleinig).
- O God, we bear the imprint of your face (Lyrics; Shirley Murray; Tune: Song 1, CH4 254; TiS 521).
- ‘Great God of every human heart’, (Lyrics: Jean Dick; Tune: Ellacombe, TiS 361/453).