



# Breaking Open the Word

26<sup>th</sup> January, 2025

*Very courageous, Minister*



Prepared by

Dennis Webster



St Peter's by the Lake  
Paynesville, Victoria Australia  
Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

Luke 4.14-21

---

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

---

Introduction

---

Reflection

---

---

Discussion Questions

---

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

---

Almighty and everlasting God,  
mercifully look upon our infirmities,  
and in all our dangers and necessities  
stretch forth thy right hand  
to help and defend us:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## INTRODUCTION

In this sermon, Dennis reflects on the connection between historical narratives and contemporary issues of justice, compassion, and faith.

He begins with a nostalgic mention of the 1979 disco version of Psalm 137. He parallels his experience teaching Australian history through folk songs, which often celebrate anti-heroes and complicated legacies.

Highlighting the themes of oppression in Psalm 137 and modern struggles, Pastor Dennis emphasises the ongoing plight of marginalised individuals searching for dignity and justice in a world marked by division.

As Dennis weaves together scriptural insights and contemporary examples,

particularly referencing the critical words of Bishop Budde towards political leaders, he urges the congregation to recognise the inherent call for mercy and solidarity in their faith.

He draws upon the teachings of Ezra and Nehemiah to encourage the community to remain steadfast in understanding God's purpose for justice and renewal.

The message culminates in a call to action for believers to embody the principles of compassion reflected in Jesus' ministry, to articulate God's justice and mercy in their lives, and to remember that they are called to challenge oppressive structures with love and honesty, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and humane society.

### Prayer Prompts

- Look at the prayer requests as printed in the pew bulletin.
- Pray for courage to apply the message of compassion and justice in our daily lives.
- Seek God's guidance in understanding and embracing the stories of those around us.
- Request strength to embody mercy, love, and fairness in our interactions with others.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,  
your gift of life so that we, made in your image  
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

Many recall the 1979 Boney M disco version of Psalm 137 and 19, “By the Rivers of Babylon,” performed with awkward hairstyles and dance moves. While researching and reflecting on my insights into Psalm 19 and other scriptural themes, I wandered down memory lane to my high school years. There, I fondly recalled the so-called dancing and lycra costumes. Some images, once seen, are never forgotten!

I was asked to find a creative way to teach Australian Anglo history to Year 5 students. My idea was to use various Australian folk songs, from sea shanties to our national anthem, which glorifies a sheep thief from the 1890s shearing strike—an anti-hero who deemed suicide more honourable than justice. As Nino Callota (Frank O’Grady) reflected, we’re a weird mob! Goodness, we’ll elevate a criminal or two to national hero status! Such is life; poor Ned, you’re better off dead; at least you’ll find peace of mind!

Today’s scriptures come together like a puzzle. The imagery of oppression, Rastafarians, and reggae music aligns with the historical narrative of those denied human rights and imprisoned due to perceived racial inferiority. (This

makes me chuckle! Al corrected ‘Rastafarians’ to ‘Rotarians.’ It’s important to stay aware of the Rotary movement!)

Returning to where his faith was nurtured, Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of the Lord, carried a message of liberation, compassion, and restoration from tyranny. Echoing the prophet Isaiah in worship, Jesus’ message had political and societal implications. We often see religion and politics as incompatible. He likely never received such communication since memos didn’t exist in Jesus’ time. Yet, two millennia later, a follower displayed a similar boldness in being subversive as Jesus.

I watched with interest as the Bishop of Washington was criticised for reminding the incoming US administration that the policies they support challenge what today’s gospel demands of us. There are many; Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde reminded Trump and Vance, who are already burdened by the threat of having their humanity treated with disregard and contempt.

“Our God teaches us to be merciful to the stranger, as we were once strangers in this land,”

Bishop Budde concluded. “May God grant us all the strength and courage to honour the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth in love, and to walk humbly with one another and our God for the good of all the people of this nation and the world.”

We know the prophetic words and the appeal were heard. Later that day, Trump referred to Bishop Budde as a ‘so-called bishop’, and once again, the usual rhetoric about nationhood overshadowing individual needs for mercy was expressed. Severe disruption to the Diocese of Washington followed as followers of the MAGA movement organised a denial of service on the Diocese’s communications, accompanied by the familiar cry that ‘politics and religion do not mix.’

They do not mix because they can be problematic when those in power favour a different narrative. I find comfort in the idea that today’s scripture, established during the Season of Epiphany by the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary, will resonate with the devoted followers among the esteemed children of Israel, who are inclined to heed the genuine demands of the Lord.

When Nehemiah worked to restore the treasures of the Temple to their rightful place, many generations now enjoying freedom in the promised land remained unaware of the stories and histories that had

come before them. They had lost sight of why God was returning this land to them, despite many having been brought up on the text of Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.”

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” the psalm questioned. Indeed, many displaced people across the globe today grapple with the same question. How can they sing the Lord’s song, as it has been passed down in their mother tongue, in a land where they feel restricted? Once more, the words of Bishop Budde ring true: almost all of us have been strangers in a foreign land. Perhaps for some, this national holiday is still marked with tears in this nation girt by sea.

Let’s return to Ezra and Nehemiah, who were dedicated to helping the Israelites rebuild both their spiritual and physical homes after exile. Ezra taught the Scriptures, the Psalms, and historical narratives to help people understand God’s purpose for them. His message was clear: allow God’s Word to guide your words and heart. Sound familiar? It’s the same message we share today.

The Israelites wandered from God’s teachings, prioritising appearances over genuine faith. Social divisions deepened, and the most vulnerable—widows, orphans, and the poor—were



overlooked. A carpenter from Nazareth reminded us of God's desires: mercy, justice, and love. Jesus demonstrated that the Lord's song transcends rituals and rules; it reflects God's grace and redemption.

A community torn apart by social pressures and bullying fails to cultivate justice or mercy. When the vulnerable fight their battles alone and widows and orphans are overlooked, where can we find proof of God's love and compassion?

If people are sidelined, imprisoned, and exiled due to their birthplace, where is the forgiveness and atonement? The Lord's jubilee forgives debts, restores land, and frees slaves; how can a Bishop in Washington, especially a woman, question a nation that claims, "In God we Trust?" Should a day of unity be undermined by declarations that this land is empty?

A young rabbi from Nazareth reminds the community that Isaiah's divine requirement is as crucial now as before the Babylonian exile. With Presentation replacing the fourth Sunday of Epiphany, we miss the community's response to Jesus' words. Next week, we will hear Simeon's prophecy; however, we overlook that the messenger of liberation, justice, and mercy was pushed to the edge of a cliff. He experienced a denial of service, silenced because of his inconvenient message.

The Spirit of the Lord was upon him. Undoubtedly, the Spirit of the Lord was with Bishop Budde. What the Spirit led to in the song is a lament that things ought to be better. The path we are called to follow, with courage, indeed challenges those

who would keep people in poverty, hinder community participation based on disability, sexuality, creed, colour, orientation, or status, profit from discrimination beyond individual control, and scapegoat entire communities instead of being a voice for release from the captivity of mammon. Political or not, our baptismal duty calls us to demand mercy. We are called to live out what we believe. We are called to ensure that the words of our lips reflect the meditation of our hearts and our faith in our Lord, the rock and redeemer of all people.

The day before this happened in our sight and hearing was Martin Luther King Jr Day. It was the day King's words echoed across the Lincoln Memorial and are now etched in history.

Wednesday will likely be remembered as Budde Day as we reflect on the profound impact of Martin Luther King Jr.'s words on the 250,000 individuals present and those along other waterways across the suffering world.

"With this faith, we'll be able to carve out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we'll be able to transform the discordant notes of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we'll work together, pray together, struggle together, face jail together, and stand up for freedom together, knowing that one day we'll be free."

The year of Jubilee has been proclaimed. In this year of Jubilee, in which mainstream traditional churches emphasise hope, our hope must be that where there is despair, there is a need for peace, healing, wholeness, and the

courage and strength to express it.

"May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer." As Ezra taught, the message remains unchanged. The Lord encourages us to engrave the Word of God in our hearts as if in stone so that all we do and say is rooted in the truth and Spirit of God. St. Paul reminds us that we are all given different voices to enable this.

Whether we find ourselves by the rivers of East Gippsland—the Mitchell, the Snowy, or the Thompson; the icy waters of the Potomac; the reflection pool at the Lincoln Memorial; or the blood-soaked waters of the Jordan, the message remains as urgent today as it ever has been. If we cannot articulate the words of God and reflect on His justice and mercy within our hearts—locally, communally, or even globally—then perhaps we should, as a community, pause and mourn while contemplating Zion: the eternal city to which our Lord Jesus invites us to approach.

The words of a young man filled with the Spirit of the Lord, the brave bishop standing before the so-called ruler of the free world, and those of a group of people by the shores of an ancient lake—may the meditations in their hearts and the words on their lips help bring release from the captivity of oppression and sin, here, now, and always. Amen.



## Discussion

What connection can be drawn between the Israelites' story in Psalm 137 and the contemporary feelings of displacement or exile many experience today?

- The sermon emphasised how the Israelites pondered their ability to sing the Lord's song while in a foreign land, illustrating the challenges faced by displaced individuals.
- Could you reflect on a moment when you felt out of place or disconnected? How did you manage those feelings?

In what ways do you think faith can influence social and political issues, as mentioned when the sermon discussed the Bishop of Washington's comments?

- The sermon highlighted how some religious leaders, like the Bishop, leverage their faith to speak out against social injustices and remind political figures of their duties.
- How can you use your beliefs to advocate for issues you care about in your community?

What does it mean to have the Spirit of the Lord upon you, as mentioned in the sermon's discussion about Jesus and the Bishop?

- The sermon highlighted that the Spirit empowered both Jesus and the Bishop to deliver messages of liberation and justice.
- What personal strengths or values enable you to stand up for what is right in tough situations?

What does it mean to have the Spirit of the Lord upon you, as mentioned in the pastor's discussion about Jesus and the Bishop?

- The sermon highlighted that the Spirit-empowered both Jesus and the Bishop to deliver messages of liberation and justice.
- What personal strengths or values enable you to stand up for what is right in challenging situations?

How can acknowledging and reflecting on our nation's history, as the sermon mentioned regarding Australian history, influence our current actions and attitudes?

- The sermon highlighted the importance of understanding historical narratives to appreciate contemporary contexts, including the stories of those who fought for human rights.
- How can learning about history reshape how you view your role in promoting justice today?

# Walking Gently on Sacred Ground



This five-day devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend.

## Day 1 Psalm 137:1-4

speaks to those who feel out of place, just as people did in ancient times. The verse asks, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" This prompts us to think about our feelings of being exiled physically or emotionally. Today, many struggle with feelings of exclusion and neglect in society. Seeking justice and mercy, we must uplift the voices that share the joys and sorrows of our shared human experience.

Reflecting on this scripture, we should think about how to express our song even in tough times. Justice thrives in a supportive community that listens with empathy.

What does it mean to sing together, recognising those who are suffering? It challenges us to join the movement for freedom and healing.

- What does your personal 'song' look like in times of struggle?
- How can you help others find their voice?
- What steps can you take to ensure justice is served in your community?
- Pray for those who feel silenced or unheard in society.
- Could you seek guidance on living out justice and mercy daily?

## Day 2 Isaiah 61:1-2

Today's scripture from Isaiah emphasises the prophetic declaration of freedom, justice, and comfort to the afflicted. Reflecting on these verses, we recognise the weight of the world's injustices that continue to challenge us. This call speaks to our modern context, urging us to reclaim the Lord's mandate of liberation for ourselves and others. In a world where oppression manifests in numerous forms, we are invited to embody the spirit of compassion that seeks to uplift the marginalised. The journey towards justice requires courage.

Just as Jesus boldly proclaimed freedom, we must also be audacious to confront the injustices surrounding us. Let this day serve as a reminder that our faith demands action. We are responsible for advocating for those whose cries have been drowned out, reminding ourselves that true liberation is rooted in love and community.

- How can you apply the message of liberation in your life today?
- In what ways can your actions reflect God's compassion?
- What personal biases do you need to confront to promote justice?
- Pray for the strength to advocate for those in need.
- Reflect on opportunities you may have to be a voice for the voiceless.

### **Day 3      Matthew 5:7**

teaches us about mercy, which is more than just a concept; it requires us to support others, especially those in need actively. To show mercy, we must recognise the struggles of those around us and cultivate empathy and kindness. How often do we allow our busy lives to distract us from our duty to show love and understanding?

Our spiritual journey includes accepting God's mercy and encouraging us to share that same kindness in our communities. Remember, even the most minor acts of love reflect our true selves. Through our daily acts of compassion, we express our Lord's character and fulfil our role as peacemakers.

- Who in your life could use more mercy right now?
- What steps can you take to be more merciful?
- How do Jesus' teachings on mercy impact you personally?
- Pray for a heart that is willing to show mercy to others.
- Ask God to help you find ways to show compassion each day.

### **Day 4      James 1:27**

In James 1:27, the call to care for orphans and widows goes beyond simple acts of charity; it emphasises our dedication to living our faith genuinely within our communities. Considering justice, mercy, and

compassion, we must reflect on how well our actions match our beliefs. True religion, as described in the book of James, is a profound expression of faith that requires us to respond to social issues. Helping those in need should be a fundamental part of our journey with Christ, not just an afterthought. We show our faith through our actions by working to reduce suffering and bring hope to those who are hurting. Our community is encouraged to support those in need, reminding us that we can help create a more just and compassionate world.

- How can you help those in need in your community?
- How does your faith inspire you to take action?
- What obstacles stop you from helping others?
- Pray for insight into the needs around you.
- Ask God to show you how to serve better.

### **Day 5      Lamentations 3:22-23**

As we finish this devotional, let's focus on the unshakeable hope in God's faithfulness. We are invited to renew and refresh our spirits even in tough times. Our past, filled with challenges and unfairness, can lead us to a hopeful and purposeful future through God's love and guidance. Acknowledging our shared struggles opens opportunities for healing and restoration, benefiting both ourselves and our community. By embracing the hope that faith brings, we are called to take action. Just as we experience God's faithfulness, we are encouraged to spread hope to those around us. Remember that our loving actions can inspire change and uplift those who feel lost. As we move forward, may we proudly carry the message of hope, allowing it to empower our words and actions.

- How can you embody hope for others in difficult times?
- What areas in your life need God's renewal and restoration?
- How will you respond to the call of hope in your community?
- Pray for the ability to be a beacon of hope for others.
- I'd like you to consider ways to act as a source of encouragement to those around you.

# End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina:     The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)  
                      The Gospel of Matthew  
                      The Gospel of John

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke:**, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1991

The Worship Cloud: articles by N.T. Wright and Jane Williams  
The Vine Newsletter SPCK

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

Bible Hub



Brabarlung Totem  
This is produced on  
Gunaikurnai Land, and our  
respects are paid to the First  
Nations people everywhere.

Prepared by Rev'd Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville, Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

Acknowledgement of use appreciated

Subscription to "www.breaking-open-the-word.org" is available.  
Published every weekend, usually on Saturday evening, AEST.

Biblical Quotes are from The New Revised Standard Version - Anglicised, which is © 1990 the National Churches of Christ, USA.

Study notes are prepared in conjunction and by subscription of www.church.tech, an AI open source for pastors. Content is modified for local use.

Images are either from public domain, theworshipcloud.org, original work or Adobe AI generated.

tastigr.info  
is registered to D. M Webster  
and all rights are  
reserved. © 2025

[www.breaking-open-the-word.org](http://www.breaking-open-the-word.org)  
Email: [dennis-at-stpetersbythelakeanglicanchurch.org](mailto:dennis-at-stpetersbythelakeanglicanchurch.org)