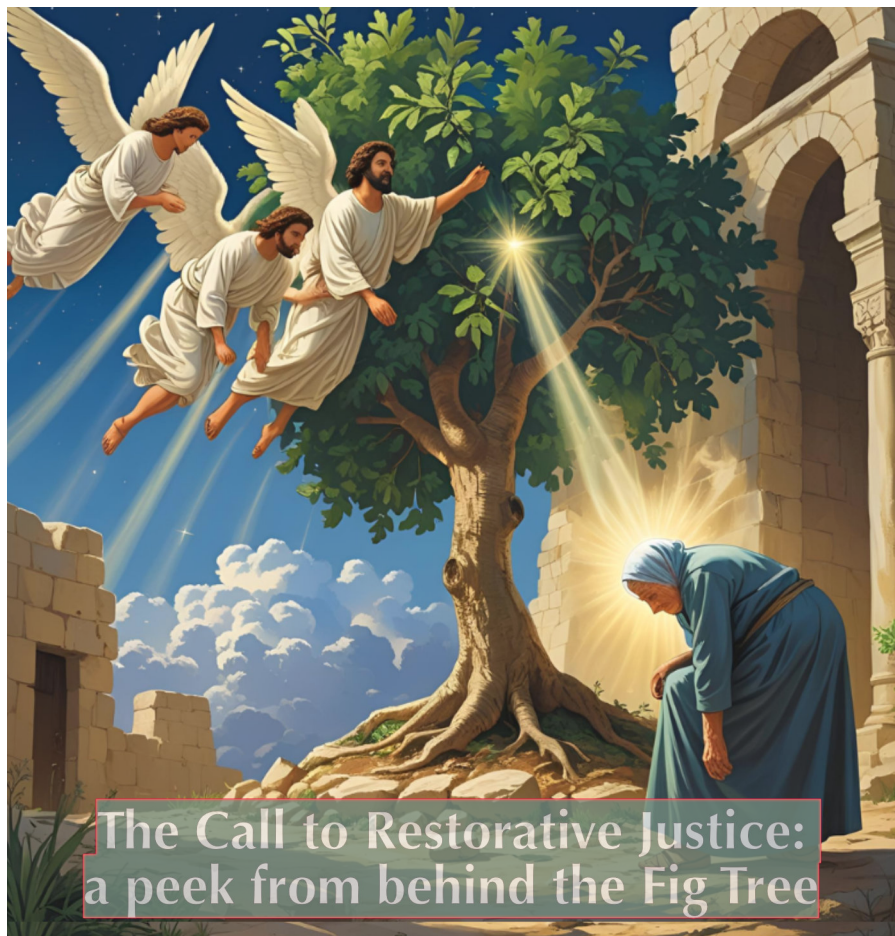


Breaking Open the Word

Pentecost 11C, Proper 16, Ordinary Sunday 21
24th August, 2025

together with St Bartholomew



The Call to Restorative Justice:
a peek from behind the Fig Tree

A weekly reflection based on the preaching at St Peter's by the Lake, Paynesville, together with a study guide based on the readings, some liturgical resources RCL Lectionary, and a weekly devotion

Dennis Webster



Revised Common Lectionary Related

Pentecost 11C

Proper 16,

Ordinary Sunday 20C

Isaiah 58.9b-14

Psalm 103.1-8

Hebrews 12.18-29

Luke 13.10-17

John 1.43—end



Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

*Let thy merciful ears, O Lord,
be open to the prayers of thy humble
servants:
and that they may obtain their petitions
make them to ask such things as shall please thee;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Almighty and everlasting God, who didst
give to thine Apostle Bartholomew grace
truly to believe and to preach thy Word:
Grant, we beseech thee, unto thy Church, to love
that Word which he believed, and both to preach
and receive the same; through Jesus Christ our
Lord.*

INTRODUCTION

What does true worship look like when rules meet mercy? Today's reflections weave together biblical wisdom and modern insight to challenge our understanding of authentic faith. Through the story of Jesus healing a woman bound by illness for eighteen years, he illuminates how God's heart beats for freedom and restoration, not rigid rule-keeping.

Drawing from a compelling personal anecdote about a Tasmanian farmer's Sabbath dilemma, Dennis illustrates how well-intentioned religious observance can sometimes conflict with God's deeper purposes of mercy and compassion. He masterfully connects the woman's physical condition of being "bent over" to our own spiritual burdens—whether from anxiety, grief, or worry—reminding us that Christ sees us and calls us to stand tall in His freedom.

The message bridges ancient scripture with contemporary relevance, emphasising that true worship flows from hearts aligned with God's mercy. The reflections conclude with an urgent invitation to move beyond mere ritual to embrace a faith that actively breaks chains, lifts burdens, and brings healing to others.

As we gather at the Lord's table, we're challenged to become agents of restoration in a world desperately needing God's transformative mercy.

Prayer Points

- Ask for prayer requests from group members.
- Pray for God to help us live as people of mercy and justice.
- Ask for the strength to stand tall in the freedom given by Christ.
- Request guidance to align our hearts with God's mercy and compassion.

As we walk on this sacred ground, teach us
Lord to make known your kingdom, and let
this reflect in all that we do and speak.

breaking-open-the-word.org

In our readings today, we hear a consistent call—God inviting us to align our hearts with His: a heart of mercy, justice, and restoration.

Isaiah reminds us that true worship is not found in empty ritual, but in breaking the yoke of oppression, feeding the hungry, and caring for the weak. When we do this, the prophet says, our light will shine in the darkness and healing will spring up. This is the heart of God—a heart that longs to set people free.

The psalmist sings of this same God: merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. God forgives, renews, and heals us. When we bless the Lord with all that we are, it is because we know this God of compassion is always near.

The letter to the Hebrews takes us further, reminding us that we belong to an unshakable kingdom. Earthly powers may falter, but God's reign is steady and eternal. Our response, then, is to worship with reverence and awe, offering lives of gratitude rooted in trust.

And in the Gospel, we see God's heart revealed in the person of Jesus. On the Sabbath, He encounters a woman bent over for eighteen long years. The leaders could only see rules; Jesus saw her. He called her forward, laid His hands upon her, and set her free. The synagogue rulers protested, but the people rejoiced. This is true Sabbath worship—not rigid law-keeping, but glorifying God through acts of mercy and healing.

I'm reminded of a story from Cuprona, in Tasmania, from the time our family also had a farm in the district. A Seventh-day Adventist farmer was out helping neighbours bring in the hay. It was late in the day, the skies were darkening, and everyone knew that if the hay weren't brought in before the rain came, the whole crop would be ruined.

But as the sun went down, the farmer stopped. For him, the Sabbath had begun, and he told the neighbours that the rest of

the work could wait until Sunday. The neighbours replied, "But Sunday is our day of rest!" And so, the hay was left in the field, vulnerable to the storm.

It's a powerful story because it reminds us how easily rules, even when kept with good intentions, can sometimes cut against the grain of mercy, common sense, and care for creation itself. Jesus makes the same point in today's Gospel: "Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" Mercy is not self-serving; it is the natural overflow of God's heart.

Now, think for a moment about what it means to be "bent over." The woman could not lift her head to see the sky. For eighteen years, she had been staring at the ground, her world narrowed to dust and dirt. But when Jesus touched her, she stood tall—able to see the heavens again, able to meet people face to face, able to rejoice. It's a powerful picture of what God's mercy does in our lives: it raises us, restores our dignity, and allows us to live fully.

And perhaps we, too, know what it feels like to be bent over. Not necessarily in body, but in spirit—bowed down by grief, weighed down by anxiety, bent under the burdens of guilt, work, or worry. The good news of today's Gospel is that Christ sees us as we are, and He calls us to stand tall in His freedom.

When Isaiah speaks of "healing springing up quickly," and when Hebrews tells us of an "unshakable kingdom," these promises are not abstract. They come alive whenever we let God's mercy guide us—whenever we choose compassion over indifference, freedom over fear, and life over legalism.

As we come to the table today, we are invited again into God's mercy. Here Christ feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Here, Jesus renews our weary spirits. And from here, He sends us out to live as people of restoration in the world—breaking chains, lifting burdens, healing wounds, and proclaiming freedom in His name.

So may our lives shine with the light of His compassion, and may we, like that woman, stand tall in the freedom Christ gives.

Amen.

St Bartholomew (Nathanael)

Today we celebrate the life and witness of St Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael. We don't know as much about him as we do about Peter or Paul, but what we do know reveals someone open, honest, and ready to follow Christ when he realised who stood before him. His story reminds us that discipleship isn't about being famous or influential—it's about being faithful.

1. God's Promise of a Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15–18)

Moses tells the people that God will raise a prophet from among them, one who will speak God's words. This is a promise of guidance and truth. We believe this is fulfilled most perfectly in Jesus Christ, the one who is not only a prophet but the very Word of God made flesh. Yet the promise also points us to the way God continues to work: through men and women who speak truthfully, who align themselves with God's heart. Bartholomew was one of those chosen to carry forward the words of life given by Jesus.

2. The God Who is Near (Psalm 145:10–18)

The psalm proclaims that “The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds... The Lord is near to all who call upon him.” This is the heartbeat of the Gospel: that God is not far away, but close. Jesus showed this nearness to Nathanael when he said, “I saw you under the fig tree.” It was an intimate reminder that God sees us and knows us. For us today, remembering St Bartholomew is remembering that God sees us in our ordinariness and calls us to extraordinary faith.

3. An Israelite in Whom There is No Deceit (John 1:45–51)

In the Gospel, Nathanael begins with scepticism: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Yet when he meets Jesus, his honesty shines through. Jesus calls him “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” And Nathanael responds with faith: “Rabbi,

you are the Son of God.” In that moment, he discovers the Way, the Truth, and the Life. His journey from doubt to faith encourages us to be honest with our questions, to bring them to Christ, and to remain open to his transforming call.

4. Apostolic Foundations (Revelation 21:9b–14)

Finally, Revelation gives us a vision of the New Jerusalem. Its foundations are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Bartholomew's name is among them. His witness, like that of the others, is not forgotten. It is part of the eternal foundation of God's kingdom. This is both a comfort and a challenge: comfort, because the faithful service of every disciple endures; challenge, because we too are called to build our lives on Christ, adding our witness to that foundation.

Conclusion: Aligning with the Heart of God

So what do these readings say to us as we commemorate St Bartholomew? They remind us:

- To listen for God's truth and speak it with courage.
- To trust in the nearness of God, who sees and knows us.
- To follow the Way, the Truth, and the Life, even when we begin in doubt.
- To live faithfully, so that our lives too may become part of the enduring witness of the Church.

Bartholomew shows us what it means to align our hearts with the heart of God: to be people of integrity, openness, and faithful witness. May his example strengthen us today, and may we, like him, look forward with hope to the city of God, where every tear is wiped away, and where Christ is all in all. Amen.

What does it mean to be 'bent over' spiritually in today's world, and how does Jesus offer freedom from these burdens?

- The sermon describes the woman who was physically bent over for 18 years as a metaphor for being bowed down by grief, anxiety, guilt, work, or worry.
- What are the things that cause you to feel 'bent over' in your own life, and how might Jesus be calling you to stand straight?

In Isaiah's message, true worship is described as breaking oppression, feeding the hungry, and caring for the weak. How can we make our worship more aligned with these actions?

- The sermon emphasises that empty ritual is not true worship, but rather active engagement in works of mercy and justice.
- What specific actions could you take this week to make your worship more meaningful through service to others?

The sermon discusses how rules, even when kept with good intentions, can sometimes work against mercy and compassion. How do we find the right balance between following religious rules and showing Christ-like mercy?

- The story of the Seventh-day Adventist farmer who stopped helping with the hay harvest due to Sabbath rules, which could result in crop loss, illustrates this tension.
- When have you faced a situation where following strict religious rules conflicted with showing practical care for others?

How does Jesus's example of healing on the Sabbath challenge our understanding of what it means to honour God with our time?

- Jesus points out the hypocrisy of those who would water their animals on the Sabbath but object to healing a woman who had been suffering for 18 years.
- What religious practices or traditions might we need to reconsider in light of showing God's mercy to others?

The sermon speaks of belonging to an 'unshakable kingdom.' How does this truth affect how we handle life's challenges and uncertainties?

- The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that while earthly powers may falter, God's reign is steady and eternal.
- What current situations in your life need to be viewed through the lens of God's unshakable kingdom rather than temporary circumstances?

This five-day devotional will take a peak from behind the fig tree to consider the sermon(s) from this weekend. We will explore themes of mercy, justice, and restoration, drawing insights from scripture and real-life applications to enrich our spiritual journey.



Day 1

Isaiah 58:6-8

In the book of Isaiah, true worship goes beyond rituals to embrace acts of kindness and justice. When we break the yoke of oppression and extend our hand to people in need, our light shines, illuminating the world around us. This passage invites us to reflect on how our daily actions can mirror God's heart for mercy and justice, bringing healing not only to those we help but also enriching our own lives.

Our calling is to manifest God's love through tangible acts of service and compassion. As we do so, we transcend personal barriers and societal norms that confine others, participating in God's restorative work. Such active faith transforms us, aligning our lives closer to God's purpose and powerfully declaring His presence in the world.

- In what ways can you "break the yoke of oppression" in your everyday life?
- How does God's compassion inspire you to serve others differently?
- What barriers prevent you from living a life of mercy and justice?
- Pray for the courage to live a life that reflects God's heart.
- Ask for guidance in identifying opportunities to serve others with compassion.

Day 2

Psalms 103:8-13

The psalmist beautifully paints a picture of God's nature: merciful, gracious, and overflowing with steadfast love. This intimate portrait of God invites us into relationship, assuring us of His ever-present forgiveness and renewal. Such assurance is the heartbeat of our worship and the compass for our lives.

As we dwell on these truths, let us reflect on how living in awareness of God's compassion can transform our interactions with others. By embracing this merciful love, we foster communities of grace, where healing and reconciliation can flourish, allowing us to bless the Lord with all that we are.

- How does understanding God's mercy influence your relationship with Him?
- In what ways can you extend God's love and forgiveness to those around you?
- How does living in community help you experience God's steadfast love?
- Pray for opportunities to show grace and mercy in your relationships.
- Reflect on areas where you need to experience God's renewal.

Day 3

Hebrews 12:28-29

In Hebrews, we are reminded of the certainty of God's unshakeable kingdom. Earthly systems may crumble, leaving us uncertain, yet God's reign is eternal and unwavering. This truth calls us to live with gratitude and reverence, seeing beyond temporal chaos to the stability offered by God's kingdom.

Our response to this promise is reflected in a life marked by trust and joy. With hearts rooted in such assurance, we are empowered to navigate life's uncertainties with a posture of worship, acknowledging God's enduring presence and provision.

- In what ways do you find assurance in God's unshakeable kingdom?
- How can you cultivate a life rooted in gratitude despite uncertainties?
- What challenges your ability to trust in God's eternal reign?
- Ask for wisdom to see God's faithfulness amidst life's challenges.
- Pray to cultivate a heart of thankful worship.

Day 4

Luke 13:10-17

The story of Jesus healing the woman on the Sabbath reveals the heart of true worship, challenging rigid legalism. Jesus' actions showed that mercy transcends law, setting an example of compassion and freedom. The woman, once bent over by her affliction, stood tall through Jesus' touch.

This narrative invites us to evaluate the "rules" in our lives that may obscure compassion. When we align our hearts with Jesus', we find liberation—for ourselves and others—highlighting the vital role of mercy in our faith.

- Reflect on how mercy and compassion play out in your own life.
- What "rules" or traditions inhibit your ability to show mercy?
- How does the story of the healed woman inspire you to act?
- Pray for eyes to see where compassion can lead to healing.
- Seek courage to act mercifully, even when it challenges norms.

Day 5

Matthew 5:14-16

The call to be "the light of the world" resonates with our theme of living out God's mercy. By embracing Jesus' teachings, we carry His light into dark places, illuminating paths with love and grace. Our lives become testimonies of God's transformative power as we engage with the world around us.

As we conclude this devotional journey, reflect on the ways our actions shine God's light. Living mercifully allows others to see God's image in us, fostering environments where restoration and hope can thrive, continuously bearing witness to His enduring faithfulness.

- How can your daily actions reflect God's light to others?
- In what ways can mercy bring transformation to your community?
- Consider the potential impact of living as a beacon of light in your surroundings.
- Pray for boldness to embody and share God's love in all areas of life.
- Seek God's guidance in being a faithful witness to His mercy

End notes and further reading

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

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

David Adams, Glimpses of Glory, Year C

The following authors as featured at The Worship Cloud

www.theworshipcloud.com

N. T. Wright,
Jane Williams,
P James Woodward,

Paula Gooder
Mark Pryce,
David Perry



Brabarlung Totem

This is produced on
Gunaikurnai Country and
our respects are made to
the First Nations people
everywhere.



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