



Presbyterians *Read*



Week 5

“It is through Jesus’ crucifixion, Matthew insists, that Jesus becomes what he was born to be: the saviour (1.21). And this is how he does it: by extending his arms on the cross, enfolding us in the God-with-us embrace, and bringing us with him through death into a whole new life” (Wright, p. 118).

Theme: The Kingdom of God is Present *and* Yet to Come

Opening Psalm

To open your discussion each week, we recommend reading a psalm together. N.T. Wright uses the psalms from the Revised Common Lectionary as the basis for his Sunday devotions. This week’s psalm is Psalm 130.

General Opening Questions

Depending on your group, you may want to start with a general opening question. Here are a few options that you can use throughout the study:

- What struck you about this week’s readings?
- Is there a specific passage from this week’s readings that caught your attention? Why?
- What did you find challenging about this week’s reading?
- Was there a theme in this week’s readings that stood out?

Overview of Theme

We recommend reading this overview together as a group. It will help contextualize the discussion questions and focus the conversation.

As readers in the twenty-first century, we know that Jesus’ earthly life ends with a brutal crucifixion. But Jesus’ followers in his lifetime had no idea that their messiah, the one they’d been expecting to rescue them from earthly tyranny, would die at the hands of Roman authorities.

In this week’s readings, we witness Jesus preparing his followers for his death and their life without his physical presence. Using Old Testament prophecies, he warns them against false prophets who will come after him. Using parables, he urges his followers to live by kingdom principles and look after God’s people until he comes again. Using powerful imagery, he promises there will come a time when God will heal all of creation and all things will be renewed.

Through Jesus's teachings about his coming death, we learn something important about God's kingdom. It is both *present* and *yet to come*. As we've come to understand these past few weeks, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God, also known as God's reign, in the world. Through Jesus, the heavenly realm, where God's intentions, authority and power rule over all things, intersected and overlapped with the created world. The kingdom of God is, therefore, *present* in the here and now. But, as Jesus emphasized in this week's readings, it is also *still to come*.

Jesus tells his followers of a future time when the whole of creation will be free from its slavery to the powers of death and will enjoy all of God's intended freedom. He reminds them that nobody knows when that time will come, so they must wait patiently, live by what Jesus taught, and use the gifts God had given them to participate in the work of the kingdom. He also reassures them that one day God will do for them what he is about to do for his son in the resurrection. First, though, they must live through a difficult, but essential, part of God's unfolding kingdom story. It is through Jesus' crucifixion that he will become what he was born to be: the one who makes new life possible for all of us.

Reading Focus

The final scripture reading for this week is the whole passion narrative. It is several pages longer than the other scripture readings we've encountered in this study. N.T. Wright reminds us that to read it quickly or to glance at its general outline and tell ourselves that we know the story well enough is "to trivialize and so to misread it" (116). He reminds us to *slow down* and *find ourselves in the story*. The question he invites us to ask as we read is the same one the disciples ask when they hear that one of them will betray Jesus: "Lord, is it me?"

As we delve deeper into the passion narrative this Holy Week, you are encouraged to take N.T. Wright's advice seriously. Avoid the temptation you may feel to skim over this familiar story. Instead, imaginatively place yourself there and linger on the details. Where are you in this story? Which of the people in the passion narrative do you identify with? What are your feelings as you witness Jesus being betrayed, sentenced to death, led through the streets, and nailed to the cross? What are you thinking as you sit outside the sealed and guarded tomb where Jesus' body lay?

Opening Discussion Questions

- 1) Discuss how *the kingdom yet to come* is described in this week's readings. What do you find challenging about the future kingdom as it is described in Matthew? What do you find hopeful?
- 2) Waiting and trusting God in uncertain times is a major theme in this week's readings. Has there been a time in your life that waiting has been difficult? Where did you encounter God (or not) in that waiting?

Key Scripture Verse: Matthew 26:1-13

- Read N.T. Wright's translation of Matthew 26:1-13 (found below and on p. 105).
- Read or listen to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Matthew 26:1-13, or another version of your choice.

Matthew 26:1-13

So this is how it finally happened.

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "In two days' time, as you know, it'll be Passover! That's when the son of man will be handed over to be crucified."

Then the chief priests got together with the elders of the people, in the official residence of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas. They plotted how to capture Jesus by some trick and kill him.

"We'd better not try anything at the feast," they said. "We don't want the people to riot."

While Jesus was at Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him who had an alabaster vase of extremely valuable ointment. She poured it on his head as he was reclining at the table.

When the disciples saw it, they were furious.

"What's the point of all this waste?" they said. "This could have been sold for a fortune and the money could have been given to the poor!"

Jesus knew what they were thinking.

"Why make life difficult for this woman? He said. It's a lovely thing, what she's done for me. You always have the poor with you, don't you? But you won't always have me. When she poured this ointment on my body, you see, she did it to prepare me for my burial. I'm telling you the truth: wherever this gospel is announced in all the world, what she has just done will be told, and people will remember her."

Biblical Reflection Discussion Prompts:

- 1) Jesus' reaction in this situation seems counterintuitive. Many of us, had we been there, would probably have assumed the same thing as the disciples: that the woman would have been better off to spend her money on the poor. What do *the woman's actions* and *Jesus' reactions* teach us about the kingdom of God?
- 2) Jesus was eating dinner with friends when an outsider interrupted their meal. How would the insiders in your congregation react if a special event or dinner was interrupted by an outsider in such a dramatic and unexpected way? What is your congregation doing to equip people to respond to the surprising ways the demands of the kingdom interrupt daily life?
- 3) As Jesus predicted, the woman who anointed his head with oil at Simon's house has been remembered. Her story of boldly entering a space normally reserved for men to honour Jesus in an extravagant way continues to be told as a key story in the gospel narrative. What are the parts of your life, or the life of the congregation to which you belong, do you imagine that Jesus praising as examples of what it means to live out the good news?

Closing Prayer

To close your discussion each week, we recommend saying the Lord's prayer together. For suggestions on using the Lord's prayer as a guide for intercessory prayer, see the Lenten Spiritual Practice guidelines.

