



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR JUNE 2020

As we continue to worship from home, please find enclosed materials to assist.

If you are unsure where to start, perhaps the following is a useful guide (with thanks to *A Sermon For Every Sunday*):

- If you are with your spouse, partner, and/or family, gather around a table. If you are on your own, find a place that is quiet and comfortable.
- Light a candle to symbolise the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that you are entering sacred time.
- Start with a simple opening prayer, acknowledging that Jesus promised to come to wherever people gathered in His name.
- Read through the weekly readings, as outlined in our newsletter. If in a group, take turns on reading out loud to the group.
- Follow up with a discussion based on the readings. (Discussion topics can be found in this guide.)
- Enter into a time of prayer. This can be as simple as “What am I thankful for?” and “What am I concerned about?”

If you need a bible at home, please call the church on 4832 1026, and one can be provided. If you are interested, *Songs of Praise* airs on ABC TV at 11:30am each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au/collection/2016>

We are still the Church.

Stay safe.

June 7, 2020

Focus Passage: Matthew 28.16-20.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the bad news in this passage? What do you find troubling, problematic or uncomfortable?
2. What does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit do in this passage?
3. What might God be saying to you through this passage?

Matthew Skinner, *God With Us*, "Working Preacher"

"Jesus' final words to his followers in Matthew 28:18-20 get a lot of attention for their explicit mention of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and for the instructions they give to Jesus' followers. But don't miss the promise at the very end: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The narratives of the New Testament tell of people coming to recognize God being manifest among them through the course of their experiences. The people of scripture don't learn about God as much as they encounter a God who will not remain far off. In Matthew 28, it's through encountering the risen Christ and recognizing divine authority at work in his teaching, presence, and behaviour. In Acts 2 and Acts 10-11, it's through encountering the Holy Spirit as nothing less than the enduring and holy presence of Jesus. The Spirit among us continues to make incarnate God's embrace of all people.

Were it not for the conviction that Jesus is forever "with" us, we would not have a sense of God as Trinitarian. This does not mean that people of other faiths cannot experience God as intimately involved in their lives and within the created world. But *Christian* faith discovers this theological reality through Christ and the solidarity he expresses—a solidarity lived out (incarnated) through his life, death, and new life *with* the oppressed and rejected members of the human family.

Shawn Copeland can explain the connection between God's incarnate love and the current situation better than I can. And by "current situation" I mean the reality that confronts us right now: a world in which black bodies are being deliberately hunted, vilified, and infected. Copeland urges us to avoid confusing a Christ-based solidarity with popular notions of identity politics. Instead, for believers:

Solidarity begins in *anamnesis*—the intentional remembering of the dead, exploited, despised victims of history. This memory cannot be a pietistic or romantic memorial, for always intentional recovery and engagement of the histories of suffering are fraught with ambiguity and paradox. The victims of history are lost, but we are alive. We owe all that we have to our exploitation and enslavement, removal and extermination of despised others.... Our recognition and regard for the victims of history and our shouldering responsibility for that history form the moral basis of Christian solidarity....

This shouldering of responsibility obliges us in the here-and-now to stand between poor women of colour and the powers of oppression in society, to do all that we can to end their marginalization, exploitation, abuse, and murder. In memory of the cross of Jesus, we accept this obligation, even if it means we must endure rejection or loss.... Solidarity affirms life—even in the face of sin and death....

Such shouldering cannot be done by [one person] alone; agapic praxis characterizes Christian community. In remembrance of the Body of Christ broken for the world, the followers of Jesus, in solidarity with one another, stand shoulder-to-shoulder, beside and on the side of exploited, despised, poor women of color.

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Finally, may we approach Trinity Sunday with repentant and humble hearts, for a theology that is Trinitarian, confessing faith in a Holy, self-giving, and immanent God, can never become smug. Trinitarianism rules out pretentiousness.

Too often we take Jesus' pledge *I am with you always* in a presumptuous way. We assume "I am with you" means Jesus is saying, "I am on your side" or "I will follow where you lead."

The blood of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many other black bodies is crying out to God from the ground. So too are the lonesome remains of people of colour whom America is offering as sacrifices to COVID-19. It is past time for white preachers in particular to take another look at the "with" in Matthew 28:20. (Matthew Skinner is an American preacher from Minneapolis, commenting on the recent events in his home town; which have a different but relevant link to events in Australia.)

Instead of reading “with” as an endorsement of our self-serving ideologies or an assurance of personal comfort, let us take it as a simple claim that Christ is always present around us, calling to me from among “the other.” In that call I experience judgment but also invitation.

Christ beckons us out of our own fortified assurances. You have heard his voice again, probably more loudly than usual, during the past one or two weeks.

Christ continues to cry out in agony, cast out to die in abandonment.

That cry, that presence of a suffering God, must pull and not repel us.

Christ continues to show up among the outsider and the oppressed. Christ continues to surrender his own advantages and privileges, urging us to join him.

Will we be with him?”

June 14, 2020

Focus Passage: Genesis 18.1-15 (21.1-7)

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the bad news in this passage? What do you find troubling, problematic or uncomfortable?
2. What does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit do in this passage?
3. What might God be saying to you through this passage?

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, “Sacredise”

There are two elements to all of the readings this week. The first is that the readings all speak in some way about God’s election of God’s people. God chooses a people to partner with God, to be God’s own treasured possession, and to experience God’s promise, God’s presence, and God’s love. But, the second element in the readings this week is that this choosing is not for the sake of those who are chosen. God’s choice of Abraham and Sarah, of the Israelites, of the disciples, and of all who follow the way of Jesus is for the sake of those who will come to know God’s grace and love through them. The clear call of this week, then, is for us to be a people who respond to God’s choosing by partnering with God in sharing the values, priorities, and purposes of God’s

Reign with our world. But, if we accept God's invitation, God's choosing of us, we have to know that this will mean that we have to endure suffering and persecution. This is inevitable because following Jesus way means being out of step with the society around us. But, it also means that whenever we find ourselves being misunderstood or questioned or challenged we have an opportunity to share the message of Jesus and to demonstrate God's love and grace through our actions.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: There is a double challenge in this week's theme as we seek to live out the call of God. The first is that election, or choosing, has become a potentially destructive idea in our world. Some extreme religious groups use their sense of being chosen by God as a way to justify violence and terrorism against those who look, think, believe, and act differently from their beliefs. Some nations view themselves as more important or more significant to the world and to God because they are exceptional and somehow a better embodiment of God's values and purposes. The result of this thinking is that these "chosen" ones expect to be treated better than others. They feel justified in making their needs, their opinions, their beliefs, and their self-interest more important than anyone else's. And naturally this results in oppression of other "lesser" people, it causes the legitimate needs of the "less chosen" to be ignored, and it results in massive imbalances in power, wealth, and well-being across the world. The second challenge comes as a reaction to the first, which is to reject the idea of election or choosing altogether. Certainly it is difficult to speak about any kind of choosing if we are committed to equality and justice for all. But, if we can overcome any sense that to be chosen is to be favoured or better, and see chosenness rather as a result of circumstance and opportunity, something magical can begin to happen. We can begin to recognise that those of us to whom much has been given have a great responsibility to share what we have with those who have less. We can begin to recognise that our greater opportunities, or education, or resources mean that we have a greater capacity to address some of the great challenges in our world. And it can also, paradoxically, offer us the chance to work much harder to recognise and celebration the "chosenness" of those who, in our society's terms, seem not to be chosen at all.

LOCAL APPLICATION:

It is always tempting to seek to find ways in which we are special, or chosen. We may begin to think that our church or our community or our family is particularly chosen by God and has a special place in God's heart and purposes. We may also begin to fall into an arrogant pride that we are so valuable to God. We may begin to devalue any small works of God, and hidden moments of grace, and any unexceptional experiences of love. But, when we allow our faith to be governed by this attitude, we begin to feel persecuted whenever society doesn't conform to our standards. And we begin to feel that we should be treated differently by everyone, and by the powers-that-be in our society. We might even believe that we should be the powers-that-be. But, in the meantime we end up missing the work of God that happens in small, unexpected ways. And we begin to miss the way God chooses the least likely people in our midst. And we miss how God seeks for us to serve those around us, and not be served. We miss that our chosenness is a calling to sacrifice and compassion, not to privilege and status. But, if we can embrace the call of God as a chance to work with God in serving the most vulnerable and marginalised in our community, we can experience God's presence and power in very ordinary, but extraordinary, ways.

June 21, 2020

Focus Passage: Genesis 21.8-21

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the bad news in this passage? What do you find troubling, problematic or uncomfortable?
2. What does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit do in this passage?
3. What might God be saying to you through this passage?

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

The Ordinary Time, or Kingdomtide, season this year kicks off with a direct challenge for us to take the Reign of God seriously. The call to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel sounds like the opposite of abundant life, but Jesus asks us to believe in this counter-intuitive way of being, to love the Gospel above all things – including our own lives – and to give ourselves in service, sacrifice and simplicity in order to proclaim the message of God's Reign through our lives, and to bring God's grace and love to the world.

May our worship give us the strength, courage and vision to embrace God's Reign and to give our lives in service of it.

The clear challenge this week, as we begin our journey through Ordinary Time, is to embrace the Gospel call to self-giving. Jesus' words are some of the toughest to read in the gospels, but they indicate the extent to which we need to be committed to the Gospel if it is to have any impact in our lives and our world. If we are not completely devoted to God's Reign, loving it more than all else, we will be incapable of loving others as they need, or as God requires. But, if we embrace the way of Jesus in this radical way, we will find ourselves in conflict with the power-that-be, and we will experience persecution. But, if we try to avoid this, saving our lives through silence or compliance with human powers, we will ultimately lose the abundant life that God's Reign brings. This is why Paul speaks about us dying to sin and rising with Christ – it is only as we die to the self-protective life of power-games, pleasure seeking, and excessive accumulation of wealth that we can embrace the abundant life of simplicity, service and sacrifice that Jesus offers. Both Psalms echo the pain of being persecuted for our commitment to God's ways, and are comforting and

encouraging in the way they reflect our experiences of suffering for the Gospel's sake. Finally, in the Old Testament readings we encounter two faithful people who were persecuted through no fault of their own. Hagar, who was cast away because of Sarah's jealousy, but who was nevertheless cared for by God, and whose son was blessed, and Jeremiah, the prophet, who was persecuted for speaking the truth, but continued to trust in God's salvation. While it seems like the call to sacrifice and self-giving is the opposite of abundant life, the Scriptures are consistent in their call for us to believe in this counter-intuitive truth, and to have the courage and faith to give our lives for the sake of God's Reign, while trusting in God to sustain us through whatever struggles we may face.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The world's systems are all built on the foundations of self-protection and self-interest. Our systems of power, whether religious, political, ideological, or relational, all work on the assumption that some must lose in order for others to win. Our economic systems are based on the idea that competition is healthy and natural and that winners are rewarded while losers are unimportant. Our systems of entertainment and pleasure are all based on the idea that instant gratification and constant novelty are always better. The values of contemporary Western society leave no consideration for altruism, self-sacrifice, service, simplicity, collaboration, and mutual care. Yet, our current ways of doing things are not helping us to address the greatest challenges of our world, and they are not bringing us peace, happiness, or deeper connection with one another. As we seek to save our lives, we are losing them, and when anyone stands up to challenge the status quo, they are shouted down, at best, or silenced through persecution or execution, at worst. Yet, our world desperately needs those, both leaders and ordinary citizens, who will embrace a different set of values and priorities. Our world needs those who will embrace the Gospel call to sacrifice, service and simplicity, and who will willingly turn away from the self-protective habits of contemporary society. If, as followers of Christ, we can do this – each in our own small corner of the world – we can have a massive impact on how our world operates. As we begin to support clean energy, just and honest leadership, fair trade and equitable labour relations, mindful consumption, and caring, forgiving, diverse communities, our influence spreads through society, and begins to make the alternative values of God's Reign visible.

LOCAL APPLICATION: We all face moments of decision, when we have to choose whether to preserve our own lives through silence and compliance with those who threaten us or others, or to endure ridicule, persecution and rejection for speaking out for what we believe is right. These decisions are often much smaller, but more significant, than we may realise. When we refuse to laugh at racist, homophobic or chauvinistic jokes, we put ourselves in the firing line. When we stand alongside those whom others want to judge and reject, we risk being rejected and judged ourselves. When we refuse to participate in acts of violence or retribution against our “enemies” we may be seen as traitors. In our own families and churches, when we begin to embrace beliefs and values that are different from the “norm” we may be disowned or excommunicated. Yet, if we fail to stand up for our convictions, we lose something of our own souls, and we contribute to making the world an unsafe and threatening place for anyone who is “different” in any way. While it may hurt to live out the welcoming, forgiving, serving, peaceful and justice-seeking values of God’s Reign, to fail to do so hurts us and our world far more. This is why the Lectionary challenges us this week to love the Gospel above all – for only then will we live as people who truly, and selflessly love family, friends, neighbours, and even enemies as God calls us to.

June 28, 2020

Focus Passage: Matthew 10.40-42

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the bad news in this passage? What do you find troubling, problematic or uncomfortable?
2. What does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit do in this passage?
3. What might God be saying to you through this passage?

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, "Sacredise"

How is righteousness defined, and how does it connect with our relationship with God and one another? This seems to be the central question of this week in the Lectionary. God's infinite love and care for God's people is both an invitation and a challenge. It is an invitation for us to embrace the hospitality which God offers us, but it is a challenge for us to offer hospitality to others in God's name. God does not require us to prove our devotion through dramatic sacrifices, but welcomes us by grace. Similarly, we are to welcome others in Christ's name, reflecting God's goodness and love through our hospitality.

May our worship lead us into deeper connection with God, and into greater Christ-likeness in our daily living.

There are so many seemingly disparate themes that emerge from this week's Lectionary – the role and test of a prophet (and the reward for receiving a prophet), the sacrifice of Isaac, Paul's call for believers to turn from evil and embrace righteousness, and the Psalmist's celebration of God's unfailing love. What seems to emerge as a common thread, however, is God's care, presence and protection that is always available to God's people. In Genesis, Isaac is saved from sacrifice by God's provision of another sacrifice. In Jeremiah, a simple test of the prophet is given – whether his words reflect God's (gracious,

saving) activity or not, as seen by whether what is prophesied actually happens. In Paul's letter followers of Christ are called to embrace the life that is found in righteousness, and this is further clarified by Jesus' teaching that receiving, welcoming, and providing hospitality for even the least is how 'righteousness' is lived and expressed. In resonance with this, both Psalms – one of celebration and one of lament – reflect a trust in God's goodness, and the life and goodness that God brings to those who trust and follow God. Ultimately, then, the word 'hospitality' may be a simple summary of this week's theme – God's hospitality for us, and ours for one another in God's name, which is the 'definition' of righteousness.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: On a global scale, hospitality hardly makes sense. In what ways can hospitality be exercised across borders, or to whole nations? Yet, the readings this week offer some fascinating insights that can help us to live as globally hospitable Christ-followers. First, there is the challenge of intervening on behalf of those who, like Isaac, are sacrificed on the altars of ignorance, legalism and fear-based religion. People of faith have allowed too much rhetoric which denounces other religions on the basis of a few extremists. This applies to all of the major religions. Secondly, there is the call to speak truth to those who would proclaim that the world as it is is fine, and we will all be fine with no need for change. It is a tough hospitality to call attention to the realities that threaten us and that seek to make the poor and marginalised part of the conversation. Like Jeremiah, we may indeed find ourselves at odds with those who claim to be prophets, but who avoid the tough realities we must face for justice and peace to come. Finally, there is the simple hospitality of receiving – accepting, serving and including – all people. While we may never meet some of those we are called to receive, we offer hospitality simply by refusing to stereotype, to pre-judge and to reject others in our words and attitudes. We offer hospitality by refusing to harbour any belief in our own exceptionalism, or to embrace any sense of being better than others. We offer hospitality by always being willing to listen, understand and welcome the stranger. When each of does this in our attitudes toward people in other countries, other religions, and other race groups, the righteousness (right-standing) of us with one another, and with God is fostered, and the holiness of hospitality is spread across the earth. In the end, this hospitality will

offer us both healing and connection, and will enable us to know the life that God longs for us all to share in Christ.

LOCAL APPLICATION: On a local level, hospitality is both easy to understand and difficult to implement. Opening our homes to ‘receive’ prophets and righteous people seems easy – we can trust them, and there is always some blessing or ‘reward’ that we experience. But opening our homes and our lives to the ‘least’ can be a different story. They may seem untrustworthy or threatening. There is no benefit from showing hospitality to these – only cost. Yet, if we are to recognise that hospitality is, as Matthew Fox suggests, a synonym for holiness, we cannot avoid the call to hospitality. This can, however take many forms. We may be called to stand alongside one who is being ‘sacrificed’ on the altar of discrimination or prejudice. We may be called to stand against those who, while claiming to speak in God’s name, proclaim things that contradict the grace and love of Christ. We may be called to grieve with those who feel abandoned by God and join in their lament. We may be called to celebrate with those who feel close to God and who enjoy a sense of blessedness. We may be called to change how we live – to reject the sins of pride, self-protection and rejection – to which we are enslaved and which hurt others, and to embrace righteousness – the love and grace of Christ – which makes others feel welcomed and included. As individual Christ-followers and as communities of faith, we do well to ask ourselves how we can become more hospitable – how we can reject the selfish, self-protective sin that so easily enslaves us, and how we can embrace the righteousness of receiving prophets and the least equally in Christ’s name.
