



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

"To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known"

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR OCTOBER 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.
- 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.

October 4, 2020

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

The issue of legalism – of prioritising law over love – may be thought as a “spiritual” problem only. However, as we allow this week’s Lectionary to speak, we discover that the way the law is used in both so-called “sacred” and “secular” contexts can be equally life-giving and/or equally destructive. The challenge is to allow the law its proper place, and use it to lead us to life, while ensuring that the same gift of life is available to all.

May we our worship lead us beyond legalism into a life that clearly demonstrates the power of the law of love.

READINGS:

[Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#): God speaks God’s commandments to the people of Israel who are terrified by the thunder, lightning, smoke and trumpet sounds. They ask Moses to speak to God on their behalf, because of their fear, but Moses reassures them that God is simply keeping the people in awe so they don’t sin.

OR [Isaiah 5:1-7](#): A prophecy of judgement in which the people of Israel and Judah are likened to a vineyard which God tends and cares for, but which produces rotten grapes instead of good ones.

[Psalm 19](#): A psalm celebrating creation which proclaims God’s glory, and God’s law which enlightens brings reward to those who keep it.

OR [Psalm 80:7-15](#): A plea to God to come and save the vine that God planted, but which has now had its wall torn down, and is vulnerable and open to destruction.

[Philippians 3:4b-14](#): Paul, who has good reason for confidence under the law because of his upbringing and observance, values only the righteousness which he has received through Christ, and through which he knows the power of Christ’s resurrection and participates in Christ’s sufferings.

[Matthew 21:33-46](#): Jesus tells a story about a farmer who cultivates a vineyard and then rents it to tenant farmers, who, instead of giving the farmer his share of the fruit when it’s due, kills his servants and then the farmer’s son. In this way, he explains, God’s reign is being given to those who will produce fruit.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week is a challenging follow on from last week, and may, in some ways, appear to contradict it. Where last week's emphasis was on inclusivity, and the Living Water of God that flows into every nook and cranny, this week the central image is the Law, and on how some are excluded from God's life because they have allowed the Law to become stagnant, repressive and legalistic. In the Exodus reading, the Moses journey continues, with the Israelites receiving God's Law. But, because of their fear, they choose a lifeless Law, passed on to them second-hand through Moses, over a relationship to which the Law is simply a doorway. Here the Law ends up being an end in itself, rather than a means to an end – intimacy with God. In the Isaiah reading, which connects with the Gospel, the Song of the Vineyard demonstrates what happens when God's people fail to live out the life that the Law is supposed to bring, and fail to find real relationship with God and one another. The fruit they produce, in this case, is rotten, rather than good and life-giving. In Philippians Paul, who could celebrate his righteousness under the law, express his disregard for legalistic purity, and embraces, rather, the life of Christ – both his resurrection and his suffering – for it is in Christ that he knows true life, and true connection with God and others. In Jesus' parable, it is the people of the law – the religious leaders, who are represented by the wicked tenants. Their inability to recognise their place as custodians of God's vineyard, and their unwillingness to receive the "farmer's son" reveals how their devotion to the law has robbed them and others of life, and has led them into a destructive legalism. In response to this, the Psalm offer us two songs that are helpful expressions of our longing for God, and our desire to keep God's law in its rightful place. In Psalm 19 God's law, like creation, is shown to be simply a way that God is revealed, and is a gift that brings life – which is as it should be. In Psalm 80 the response of grief and prayer for the vulnerable vineyard that has failed to produce fruit guides us away from judgement and into intercession for those (including ourselves) who make of the law an idol and end up producing fruit that is contrary to God's life and God's reign. So, here at last, we recognise that this week is not a contradiction of last week, but a development of it. The only ones who end up excluded are those who use the law to exclude others. The result is less a judgement than a consequence. When Christ seeks to include all, those who insist on excluding some, end up only excluding themselves. What a tragedy that the Law, which is designed to bring life, should become such a destructive idol for some – and what a warning against any tendency to legalism we might find in ourselves.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The issue of legalism may, at first glance, seem to be a purely religious one, with little relevance to wider society where the rule of law is usually held up as the only basis for organising society. However, on closer inspection some fascinating insights may emerge. To begin with the law, whether “secular” or “sacred” is never intended to be an end in itself. It is always only meant to be a way to a life of justice, peace, equity and community. When the law does its work well, people are encouraged to live considerately and respectfully, and to abide by principles that seek the common good. However, the law is too easily recruited to the very agendas that it is supposed to protect us against. One example might be the aggressive way that copyright law is being enforced in the face of changing ways of consuming media and the arts. In a system where wealthy executives control intellectual property and make a lot of money out of it, there is little will to change to embrace new realities with the result that ordinary citizens are viewed as criminals, and even artists are prevented from benefiting from their own work when it has come under the control of powerful corporations. In similar ways, political lobby groups in industries as diverse as power, food production, pharmaceuticals and international trade ensure that lawmakers become their allies in the accumulation of wealth and the criminalising of anyone who would get in the way of their quest for profit. Again, lists upon lists of examples could be given, but you need look no further than the political influence exerted by petroleum companies, or the laws that control the use of patented seeds. The net result is that the law, which should have brought life, equity, justice and the common good, has been manipulated to favour the powerful, to pamper the rich and to keep the poor and unconnected in check. The vineyard is now truly producing rotten fruit, and those who point this out are often mocked, persecuted or even arrested. And this reality exists in so-called “developed” and “civilised” countries as much as those that are considered to be under the control of “tyrants”. In the face of this, followers of Christ are called to speak the truth, to uphold the values of life, peace and justice, and stand against the law when it becomes the servant of evil and oppression. Such was the prophetic task of the Church in apartheid South Africa. Such remains the prophetic task of the Church in a world of fossil fuel dependence, widespread poverty, AIDS, war and globalisation.

LOCAL APPLICATION: The legalistic application of law is a destructive influence in relationships from families to faith communities. The parable of the vineyard is a powerful description of what this looks like. Legalistic people, who believe they control the “vineyard” (which can be truth, a particular community, a particular ministry, a family or a person), impose strict regulations on it, sucking all the “fruit” (energy, love, connection, wisdom, giftedness etc.) out of it and leave it in the position that it is only able to produce fruit that is rotten. Or, alternatively, they leave the “vineyard” in a situation where its fruit is available only for them. And, when others try to bring insight, healing or correction into this situation, the legalists react aggressively, using the law (or their version of it) as a club with which to beat all opponents. Such

abuse is all too common in our churches and in the homes of those who claim to follow “the Bible”. It’s another situation in which the law (or the Bible) which is intended as a doorway to life, ends up becoming an end in itself, and robs life. It is this abusive use of the law that leads husbands to force their wives to “submit” or parents to force their children into terrified adherence. It is this abusive use of the law that leads pastors to control their congregations through threats and self-righteous judgements. And it is this abusive use of the law that leads Christians to judge and condemn those with whom they disagree – even those whom they should consider to be their brothers and sisters in Christ. Whenever law becomes the focus of any relationship or community, people end up lifeless and battered. Ultimately the only “righteousness” that has value is that which Paul speaks about – the righteousness which is given to us as a gift in Christ, and which draws us into the life and joy of Christ’s resurrection, even as it leads us to serve and love others with cross-embracing self-giving. From another perspective, the temptation is always there for us to choose law over the unpredictable, scary journey into intimacy with God. Like the Israelites, we may find dealing with God too difficult or frightening, and so we may settle for rituals or traditions which lose their ability to point us to God because we make them idols to replace God. Ultimately, the truth we must face this week is that whenever we choose law over relationship – with God or with one another – we lose life, and we become destructive, like vineyards that produce only rotten fruit.

October 11, 2020

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

One of the toughest question we face as people of faith concerned with justice and peace, is how to hold together the invitation of the Gospel with the confrontation that God's reign brings against personal and corporate sin and evil. But, as tough as it may be, we do not have the luxury of avoiding this question, and this week's Lectionary brings us face to face with it in dramatic and helpful ways.

May our worship this week invite us deeper into God's reign and confront the places in our lives where we refuse God's reign entrance into us.

READINGS:

[Exodus 32:1-14](#): While Moses is on the mountain with God, the people, struggling with how long he has been gone, ask Aaron to make them gods. He agrees, takes their gold jewellery and makes a golden calf which the people then worship, even though he tries to remind them that their celebration is "to the Lord".

OR [Isaiah 25:1-9](#): A song of praise to God who brings down tyrants, provides refuge for the poor and needy, brings an end to death and creates a celebration for all people on God's holy mountain, removing the shame of God's people.

[Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23](#): A psalm of confession, remembering how God's people turned away, and traded God for an image of a calf, forgetting God's saving acts for them. Also, a recognition that God seemed intent on destroying the people, but for Moses pleading on their behalf.

OR [Psalm 23](#): A song of thanksgiving and security, recognising that God cares for and guides God's people as a Shepherd.

[Philippians 4:1-9](#): Paul encourages the Church to stand firm, to agree with one another, to live as those who await Christ's appearance, and to meditate on those things that are good, true and beautiful.

[Matthew 22:1-14](#): Jesus tells a story about a king who prepares a wedding feast for his son, but the none of the originally invited guests want to go. So, he sends his soldiers to destroy those guests, and then he invites others from the streets to come in, but when someone is found without wedding clothes, that person is thrown out. Jesus finishes with the well-known saying that many are invited but few are chosen.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week's reading are a bit startling, perhaps even shocking, at first glance. The shock is found in the rather violent way that God's judgement is portrayed, especially in Jesus' parable. However, this image must be placed in context with another theme that also emerges from the readings this week – that of inclusive welcome. Let's begin with the Gospel. Here Jesus tells a parable of a king inviting guests to his son's wedding. When the guests refuse to come, the king responds in anger and violence, but then invites those who would not normally be welcomed to come to the feast. Following the other parables of the last few weeks, this invitation is a clear indictment against the religious leaders who should have been willing to accept God's invitation into God's reign, but who refuse. The king's response in the parable must not be taken literally as God's response to the leaders, but it does serve to indicate that God does not simply accept their rejection of Christ. Then, there is the further shock of the person who is rejected for having the wrong clothes. This would indicate that entrance into God's reign requires us to adopt the "clothes" (the ways of being) of God's reign. The invitation is open to all, but we only experience God's life when we allow God's reign into us. With that as the background, then, we can see both the invitation and the confrontation of God's reign. This is expressed through the other readings as well. In Exodus, the people, who have been rescued from oppression, turn away from God and stir God to anger. But, in the person of Moses as a kind of "conscience" for God, God remembers grace and continues to lead God's people. In Isaiah there is the song of praise for the celebration (resonant of the wedding feast) on God's mountain for all people. The Psalms echo the two Old Testament readings, revealing that, as much as God saves us, we need to remember God's grace and allow it to change us (Ps. 106), and when we do allow this, we know the joy and peace of being like sheep nurtured by a divine Shepherd (Ps.23). Finally, in Paul's letter to the Philippians, the life of grace that is possible for all those who have come into God's reign and allowed God's reign into them is described – united, gracious, expectant and focussed on the best qualities of life, all leading to a sense of God's presence and peace. So, in spite of the seemingly violent first impressions of this week's lectionary, the conclusion the readings invite us to is the peace of God which passes understanding.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: It can be hard to hold both confrontation and invitation together as we seek to follow Jesus in the world. It is all too easy to emphasise confrontation, judge those with whom we disagree, stand against our opponents and embrace some form of violence in order to achieve our goals – and then, even though our goals may be good, or in line with God's reign, we end up becoming the same as what we oppose. On the other hand it is all too easy to emphasise God's invitation, be naive about evil, and run the risk of bringing those who need protection into harm's way because the ones who threaten them are allowed to continue unchecked. It is crucial then, that we hold these two elements of the Gospel together, recognising that God's reign does not seek only to bring all people in, but seeks also to get in to all people. It is important that we

follow Jesus' lead in confronting evil and those who perpetrate it. It is important that we hold ourselves and others accountable to God's standards of grace and justice and peace. However, it is also important that we follow Jesus' lead in welcoming all people, especially the excluded, marginalised and vulnerable. It is important that, like Jesus, we seek to bring grace and healing, justice and basic survival requirements to those who need it. It is impossible to work for justice effectively unless we do both. And so, this week, we find ourselves challenged to stand against systems, leaders (political, economic, or religious) and structures in the name of justice, equality and peace. We may do this by speaking out, by using our vote, or by praying and living in ways that demonstrate the qualities of God's reign. But, we also find ourselves challenged to stand with those who are excluded, hurting, marginalised, stereotyped and oppressed. We can do this by working at grass roots level to meet the needs of those who struggle, by marching with those who protest injustice, by giving of our resources to help those in need, or by simply developing relationships with those who need to be welcomed. Naturally, both invitation and confrontation happen together – often simultaneously – and we cannot help but seek to find our peace in both modes of living out the Gospel. Grace, then, is not “soft” or “cheap”. It is powerful and transforming if only we allow Jesus to teach us how to live it.

LOCAL APPLICATION: In every community and relationship there are times for invitation and welcome, and there are times for confrontation and holding people accountable. It is not ungracious to confront abusive spouses and hold them accountable. It is not ungracious to challenge those who mistreat their workers, or to confront those who stereotype or judge others because of insignificant differences. One of the strengths of the Wesleyan revival in England was that, in the class meetings, accountability and confrontation were built into the process of coming to Christ and joining the community. On the other hand, it is not a compromise to welcome those who have been excluded, those who are different, those who need love, direction, help, basic needs or a place to belong. It is not a compromise to put relationship above law, and to stay faithful to relationships even when we disagree. The challenge of the Gospel is to learn, in our homes, our marriages, our churches and our neighbourhoods, to confront graciously and to welcome with integrity. We are called to sacrifice for others, to love others and to welcome others. And we are called to hold ourselves and our companions to the standards of justice and peace of God's reign. It is as we learn to allow others to hold us accountable, and as we learn to graciously challenge those with whom we journey, that we learn to live as citizens of God's reign. And it is as we forgive, include and seek to understand others that we discover the richness of God's grace and the power of God's reign to transform us in meaningful and healing ways. The question is whether we are willing to do the work and to face the tough realities of living in this invitational/confrontational community that God seeks for us.

October 18, 2020

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

The readings this week bring together two powerful and complementary ideas. In the continuous Old Testament reading, we are invited with Moses to seek God’s glory and to rely on God’s presence to empower and guide us as we interact with our world. In the Gospel Jesus challenges us to “render to God what is God’s and to Caesar what is Caesar’s”. In the intersection of these two ideas lies an amazing call – to enter the world in intimate connection with God, such that God’s glory is revealed through us in all times and places, even as we seek to discern as clearly as we can what is “God’s” and what is “Caesar’s” – in other words, maintaining a clear distinction between our role as people of faith, and our role as citizens of the world. The struggle for us is to work out how to maintain an appropriate separation between “church” and “state” while still operating in our world completely as followers of Christ.

May God reveal God’s glory to us and through us as we worship, and may we learn, a little more, to give God what is God’s and Caesar what is Caesar’s this week.

READINGS:

[Exodus 33:12-23](#): Moses pleads with God for God’s presence to go with the Israelites, which is what will distinguish them from other nations, and God promises to do so. Then Moses asks to see God’s glory and God agrees to pass by Moses, speaking God’s name, while hiding Moses in a cleft in the rock, and then to then allow Moses to see God’s back, but not God’s face.

OR [Isaiah 45:1-7](#): A prophecy about Cyrus and how God has prepared his way and given him power and position for the sake of God’s people, though he does not know God, and God has strengthened him so that the whole world will know that God is God.

[Psalm 99](#): A call to honour and worship God, because God is holy and mighty, and has answered Moses, Aaron and Samuel when they prayed, and has shown that God is forgiving and just.

OR [Psalm 96:1-9 \(10-13\)](#): A call to sing to God and praise God’s name, because God is mighty, majestic and beautiful and God deserves to be worshipped, and God is coming to judge the earth justly with righteousness and truth.

[1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#): Paul expresses his joy and gratitude for the Thessalonian church, for their faith, hope and love, and for the way they have witnessed to Christ in their part of the world, spreading the word they received in the Holy Spirit’s power, in spite of their suffering.

[Matthew 22:15-22](#): The religious leaders try to trap Jesus by asking him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus responds by asking for a coin, and asking whose inscription is on it. When they reply that it is Caesar's, Jesus tells them to give Caesar what is Caesar's and to give God what is God's.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

One of the most important questions we face as we seek to follow Christ and manifest God's reign in our world in some way, is how we respond to the God we're seeking to serve. All of the readings this week challenge us to keep God in the place in our lives and thoughts that is rightfully God's. Moses asks for God's presence to go with God's people, and for himself to see God's glory, revealing a recognition of his and Israel's need for God to be acknowledged and worshipped and responded to as God. In Isaiah a prophecy of hope for God's exiled people reveals God's sovereignty and God's gracious action, as God, on behalf of God's people. In both Psalms people of all nations are called to honour and worship God as God deserves, and in the epistle, the Thessalonian Christians are celebrated for their faithful worship and service of God and God's purposes which reveals their true acknowledgement of God. In the light of all this, Jesus' response to the attempted entrapment of the religious leaders is a powerful and challenging word. Where they have missed God and God's new, creative work among them, and have fallen into domesticating God to their purposes, Jesus challenges them to put God into the proper place of sovereignty and majesty in their lives. Essentially Jesus turns their question on its head and bypasses the tax question, confronting the leaders with the insignificance of things like taxation in the face of God's greater claim on our worship and our lives. In a faith culture in which it is often popular for God to be reduced to simply a divine friend, or "the man up there", or a "higher" part of ourselves, this call to recognise God's transcendence is important and life-giving.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: As we attempt to engage with some of the challenging issues of our time, the question of where we place God in our lives and priorities may seem insignificant, even self-indulgent. The quest to "see God's glory" may, likewise, appear to be far too "otherworldly" to have any practical relevance for us. However, as we begin to dig a little deeper, we discover that it may well be one of the most important questions for us to engage. To begin with, the ability to discern what is God's and what is Caesar's, and to ensure that the two don't get mixed up or intertwined, is crucial. This may be one of the few dualisms that it is important to maintain. When we allow Caesar into the place of God (allowing faith/religion and politics/government to become enmeshed for example) we always end up with weak religion and over-reaching human institutions. When we allow God into the place of Caesar, we find ourselves on a misguided attempt to create a theocracy on earth, with inquisitions and witch-hunts (of various kinds) the inevitable result. As we work in the world as people of faith, and as we bring our faith with us into human institutions and organisations, it is important that we learn to keep both God and Caesar

in their “rightful” places. The paradox, though, is that it is as we journey in the world that we seek and discover God’s glory – even in Caesar’s territory, or Caesar’s very person. In practical terms, this means that we must be careful never to lose our identity as people of God as we work for justice, peace and the well-being of the most vulnerable. We must never allow ourselves to become nothing more than just another welfare organisation. And we must seek to avoid the temptation to cynicism, expediency and cold pragmatism that comes from losing sight of God’s glory in both those we seek to serve and those we may be called to confront. When we remember that we are those who live and act out of relationship with God (out of having seen God’s glory), we are able to engage in the world’s challenges with hope, energy and creativity, trusting in God’s Spirit to empower and guide us. When we remember that everywhere we live and act we do so in Christ’s name and in God’s presence, we no longer need to “impose God” on situations where religious practice, ethics or control is inappropriate. When we remember our faith, hope and love (as the Thessalonians did) we are able to render to God what is God’s – our lives, our devotion and our commitment to reflect the character and purpose of Christ – and we are able to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s – our commitment to live as good citizens, to pay our “dues” whatever they may be, in service of the country where we live, and our voice to challenge what is unjust and to support and strengthen what is good, and just and peaceful. While at times these ways of being will overlap, in our hearts and minds we do well to keep the distinction clear, and to seek to act and interact appropriately according to the “realm” in which we find ourselves.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is unfortunate, but all too common that the presence of the Church in many communities is one in which “what is God’s” and “what is Caesar’s” is confused. When we allow ourselves to believe that we must impose our standards of morality, organisation, belief and behaviour on our neighbourhoods, cities and societies, we have confused “what is God’s” and “what is Caesar’s”. When we believe it is God’s will for us to denigrate, exclude or judge those who believe or behave differently from us, we have confused “what is God’s” and “what is Caesar’s”. When we believe that we deserve some sort of privileged treatment in society because of our faith, we have confused “what is God’s” and “what is Caesar’s”. Unfortunately, we do this all too often, and the result is that we alienate people, and turn them away from the Gospel which could bring them life and joy. There is no question that followers of Christ have a calling to be “salt and light” to “witness to Christ” in the power of the Holy Spirit, as the Thessalonians did. There is no question that we are to be distinguished from others by the presence of God in our lives and the practices of following Christ that define how we live. However, this witnessing, this distinguishing, is best done by living in ways that are attractive, serving, contributing and just, not by pointing fingers, “Bible-bashing” or demanding our way. In addition, as we work for justice, we must be careful not to allow our work to fall into a religious oppression of others, but must rather be driven by commonly-held values of human rights, human dignity and justice. This means that it is not only appropriate, but necessary, that we align

with other organisations, communities and people that hold to the same values of justice and peace, even though they may differ from us theologically or religiously. It means that we hold ourselves to the high standard of Christ's character and purpose ("what is God's") but hold others to the standards of law and justice that all people agree on ("what is Caesar's"). In this way we can champion those who are marginalised, oppressed or vulnerable without seeking to impose our belief on society. In our own churches and families, similar principles can also be applied. Rather than seek to force those we associate with to take on our beliefs and standards, we can live the gracious and just life of Christ ("what is God's"), and call others to live in ways that honour one another and are just, peaceful, respectful and equitable ("what is Caesar's"). Finally, we can also learn to recognise God's glory in those with whom we live, worship and even disagree. and we can seek to allow God's glory, grace and compassion to be revealed to them through us.

October 25, 2020

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

Two significant passages form the basis for worship this week in the Lectionary: The Great Commandment and the death of Moses. Depending on whether you are following the Gospel or the continuous Old Testament readings, you may focus on only one of these, but the connections between the two are also a wonderful springboard for this week’s worship. In so many ways Moses, who struggled with the people of Israel for so long, is a challenging example of what it means to love God and neighbour.

However we may approach it, though, this week we will be unable to avoid the challenge to love better, to love more widely, and to love more passionately.

READINGS:

[Deuteronomy 34:1-12](#): Moses climbs Mount Nebo and views the whole of the promised land. Then he dies, but no one knows where his grave is. After the thirty day mourning period, Joshua takes over as leader of the Israelites.

OR [Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18](#): God commands Moses to tell the people to be holy as God is holy. Commands are then given that they must deal justly and fairly with one another, and must love their neighbours as they love themselves.

[Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17](#): A prayer accredited to Moses, praising God for God’s greatness, God’s help for God’s people and God’s calling of the people to turn back to God. Also a plea for God’s kindness to be with God’s people and for God to sustain their work.

OR [Psalm 1](#): A song in celebration of the righteous whose lives are built on God’s commands, and who, unlike the wicked, bear fruit and prosper.

[1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](#): A description of the faithful ministry of the apostles among the Thessalonians, in spite of persecution – a ministry approved by God, free from impure motives or boasting, not seeking special treatment, but caring and gentle.

[Matthew 22:34-46](#): Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, and he replies that it is to love God with everything and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Then he asks whose son the Messiah is. When the religious leaders reply that he is David’s son, Jesus asks why David refers to the Messiah as “Lord” – and no one is able to give an answer.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The Great Commandment resonates powerfully through this week in the Lectionary. It's significant that this is what ends the great debate between Jesus and the religious leaders in the Gospel reading – even in confrontation, the focus of Jesus is on love. The related Old Testament reading (Leviticus) gives the original reference for the second part of the commandment, about loving our neighbours. In the continuous Old Testament readings we come to the end of Moses' life on the brink of the promised land. Moses power in leading the Israelite people is praised in this account, which evokes the memory, not just of Moses' mighty works, but also of his great patience and care for God's people – a quality which, although not specifically mentioned here, certainly contributed to his greatness. The Psalm of Moses, however, definitely picks up Moses' compassion and love as he pleads (as he often did) for God to care for and be kind to God's people. Psalm 1 connects with the Gospel, celebrating those who obey God's laws which, in this case, relates specifically to those who live in love of God and of neighbour. Finally, the letter to the Thessalonians gives a description of a ministry that is performed in grace and love, which is focussed on bringing others into the joy of the love of God, and which expresses deep love for the people to whom the ministry is being offered. In many ways, this is a picture of what obedience to the Great Commandment looks like in practice. There can be no question this week – the Scriptures never let us off the hook of love.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: In the world of war, climate change, poverty, economic crisis and dread diseases, love may appear to be powerless and irrelevant. This may be because our view of love is so often informed not by Jesus, but by Hollywood. When love is nothing more than a feeling that one "falls" into and out of, it has nothing to say the big issues we face. But, when love is lived as Jesus did – practically, sacrificially, passionately and justly – it speaks directly to the root causes of our struggles. Ultimately all of our dealings in the world will grow out of one of two sources. If fear is the primary driver of our lives, we will ensure we have more than enough weaponry to protect us and we will easily attack any person or country we perceive as a threat. If fear is our foundation, we will hoard our wealth, and we will grab what we can with little concern for the impact on others or on our environment. When fear is our foundation, we will tend to minimise care and compassion for those who are unrelated to us or different from us. But, when love is our foundation, everything changes. Love drives us to seek connection and understanding, not war. Love drives us to share what we have so that all may have their needs met. Love leads us to think carefully about how we treat our environment and how we use our resources, and how we deal with those who are suffering, even if they are unrelated to us. Authentic love is expressed in practical efforts to bring justice, in tough and vulnerable peacemaking, in concern for the "least" and most vulnerable. Authentic love recognises the connections and interdependence between all people and between us and our world. Authentic love is the most desperately needed, and most powerful, solution to the tough struggles of our

time. The challenge is whether we are prepared to embrace love, to live love, to “preach” love and to work to spread love through the world. Can we allow love to be the primary force behind our voting, our ethics, our morality, our social participation and our interactions. If we can and do, we will discover that, little by little, the world begins to shift further along a trajectory of compassion.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It should be common sense, and yet, love is so often rejected as a “strategy” for engaging other people in our communities and neighbourhoods. There is never a shortage of opportunities to express the kind of authentic love that Jesus practiced. Within our own homes and families, when we prioritise showing love, we discover deepened relationships, higher commitment levels, and the kind of self-giving serving of one another that enables us to navigate whatever conflicts may arise. In our churches, when we make love the primary framework within which we engage each other, we find ourselves learning from one another, celebrating our differences and making space for the needs of others. In this environment, conflicts over style of music, times of worship, and ministry priorities become less important and are much easier to navigate. In addition, when love is the driver of our ministry, the surrounding community inevitably feels and notices the difference. Those who struggle financially are able to find support and dignity in the church. Those who seek God are welcomed, even though they may think or act differently. Those who find themselves in crisis discover a place of safety and comfort and help. This has always been how the Church should look, but unfortunately, we have too often allowed our fear to trump our love, and we have become a people who too easily shut others out, point fingers and pronounce judgment. It is not our condemnation of others, nor our fear of them, that will lead us to God’s life. Rather, it is our striving to live out the self-giving love of Christ that will bring life to those around us and those who are share in our community. Somehow we know this, but fail to live it. Perhaps this week our worship can help us to let what we know become what we do.