



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

"To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known"

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR NOVEMBER 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.

November 8, 2020

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

There is a strong connection between hope, wisdom and connection. Without hope, we struggle to stay the course, and we make foolish, impulsive mistakes. With hope, we discover stamina and perseverance we didn't know we had, and we are able to slow ourselves down and move beyond our fear to the choices that bring life. This is the basic message of the Lectionary this week.

May our worship renew our hope, and, through it, give us strength to commit to, and the wisdom to act in alignment with, God's always coming reign – for which we remain always watchful.

READINGS:

[Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25](#): Joshua challenges the people to turn from their idols and serve only God, and they commit to doing so.

OR [Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16](#): A celebration of Wisdom, which brings great benefit to those who seek her, and who searches for those who are worthy of her.

OR [Amos 5:18-24](#): The prophet challenges the people who long for the Day of the Lord, warning them that it won't be what they imagine, but will be a time of pain and judgement. Then he calls the people to justice and mercy.

[Psalms 78:1-7](#): A call for people to hear a message of God's greatness and goodness, remembering how God gave the people laws and instructions so that they and their children could remember God's deeds and hope in God.

OR [Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20](#): Those who desire instruction are those who find the beginning of wisdom, and who enjoy long life and closeness with God.

OR [Psalms 70](#): A plea for God's help to come with haste, for those who seek the Psalmist's downfall to be stopped, and for those who seek God to rejoice.

[1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#): A word of encouragement to remind the believers that death is not the end, but that believers, both dead and alive, will enjoy life eternal in union with Christ, which is our Christian hope.

[Matthew 25:1-13](#): Jesus tells a story about bridesmaids who are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom at a wedding. Some have extra oil and are able to wait for as long as it takes, while others, who do not have extra, have to leave to find more and so miss the groom's arrival. Then, when they return, they are shut out and not allowed in. Then Jesus encourages his hearers to be alert.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

As we begin to move closer to the end of this year and the start of the Advent season, the Lectionary offers a set of readings that make a good preparation. In the

Gospel Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids is a reminder that God is always coming to us, and that we need to be alert and watchful so that we don't miss God's presence and activity in our lives. In the letter to the Thessalonians, this reminder extends to death and to the end of time when our hope in Christ is fulfilled. The connection, though, of course, is that we need to live this hope now in each day of our lives. In the Old Testament related readings, the Day of the Lord is viewed by the prophet Amos as a time to be watchful of, and a reason to embrace justice and mercy. In the continuous Old Testament reading, Joshua challenges the people to be committed to God alone. Finally, in the Psalms and Wisdom readings, there is the celebration of living with wisdom, of remembering God's gracious acts on behalf of God's people, and of trust in God's help. When all of these ideas are brought together, we find there is a single, cohesive theme that emerges: As we hope and trust in God's coming and God's activity in our lives and our world – past, present and future – we are inspired and challenged to live out this faith and hope by being alert, mindful and wise. Our hope in Christ, then, forms the basis for wise and abundant living.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: Despair never solves problems, creates justice or brings life. To make a positive impact on the world requires faith, hope and love. This is the challenge of the Lectionary this week. In the face of the overwhelming challenges of our world, it is tempting to despair. But when we remember our hope in Christ, when we commit to stay true to Christ's message and mission, we discover resources that empower and sustain us for our work. These resources include an alert watchfulness to recognise God's coming – God's presence and activity – and co-operate with what God is doing, the wisdom to know how best to respond to the challenges we face, and the stamina to keep going when it gets tough. When we remember that God's reign arrives in the subtle, unexpected ways Jesus spoke of, we discover that these resources are exactly what we need to make the small, consistent commitments and contributions that really do change the world for the better.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is unfortunate that Christianity has become an 'evacuation' faith (to borrow Brian McLaren's word). Instead of engaging our communities and getting involved in the struggles of people, we have offered an escape and a lame hope that may promise bliss in eternity but has nothing to contribute to our world now. This is tragic and misguided. But, when we allow the hope that the Scriptures offer us (as in the Lectionary readings this week) to capture us, our engagement with the world changes dramatically. As we embrace our hope for the future we live differently now. We gain the wisdom of God's perspective and the faith to work as agents of inspiration and possibility in our communities. We begin to be alert and watchful for the signs of God's coming in the lives of those we serve and we become more committed to live out our hope now. In this way we are able to contribute to the manifestation of God's reign where we are. And when our lives and ministries reflect Christ in this way, we can't help but be agents of grace, healing, and salvation to hurting, hopeless people.

November 22, 2020

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

This week marks the end of Year A in the three year Lectionary cycle. Of course, as usual, the year ends with an encounter with Christ as King, and each year gives us a different, surprising view of Christ's reign. This year, as we finish our journey with Matthew, is no different. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats can do nothing but shift our perceptions of what it means for Jesus to be the monarch of our lives and of the world – and the picture it offers us is one of a realm of radical inclusion, welcome, grace and mutual service.

May we have the courage and the humility to embrace this reign and begin to live as its citizens, and may our worship this week help us to do so.

READINGS:

[Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24](#): God promises to rescue God's sheep, like a good shepherd, and to bring them to a fertile land, and then to judge between the sheep, protecting the weak from the bullies.

[Psalm 100](#): A call to come and worship God and to enter God's temple with thanksgiving as people who are made by God and are the sheep of God's pasture. OR [Psalm 95:1-7a](#): An invitation to celebrate the God who made and owns the whole of creation and to kneel before God as God's people, the sheep of God's hands.

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#): Paul gives thanks for the Ephesian Christians and prays that they may know God, God's call which is their hope, and God's power which raised Christ from the dead and made him head over all things, and which works in them.

[Matthew 25:31-46](#): Jesus tells a parable about judging the nations as a shepherd who separates sheep from goats, rejecting those who have failed to serve and love their neighbours, but embracing and welcoming those who have.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week, as Year A comes to a close, we are faced with images and Scripture passages that are so well known that our familiarity can cause us to lose the power of this closing to the year's journey. But, the images of sheep and shepherd, and the parables of judgement which accompany them, are not comfortable, however well we may know them. The hinge point, of course, is the Gospel, which portrays the nature of Christ's rulership. The shocking invitation which we are given is to recognise the King in those who are anything but royalty – the sick, the naked, the hungry and thirsty, the homeless and imprisoned. And our ability to be welcomed

into the realm of this Shepherd-King is not so much about how Jesus decides to treat us, but about how we choose to treat one another. If we are able to make the shift to seeing Christ in all others, we discover that we are citizens of this new realm that Jesus preached – because suddenly God’s reign is visible everywhere and can be experienced and enjoyed in every moment, every place and every interaction. When we fail to see Christ in all others, we have chosen to close our eyes to the miracle of God’s reign which infiltrates every life and every circumstance, with the result that we find ourselves – by our own choice – outside of the experience of God’s reign. Ezekiel’s prophecy is simply another way of saying this same thing – God will judge between those who are “lean” – who are satisfied with enough and are not greedy and dominating – and those who are “fat and strong” – those who bully others and take more than their share. Both Psalms invite us into the joy and worship of those who have learned to be God’s faithful sheep, trusting in God’s care and provision – which is, of course, the basic foundation that enables us to live as “lean sheep” and to serve one another. Finally, Paul celebrates Jesus as the one who has been placed over all, especially of the Church which is Christ’s body – the vehicle through which Christ interacts with the world now – and prays that God’s people may know God’s resurrection power and the hope we have in Christ, both of which are sorely needed for us to be the agents of Christ’s grace and compassion that we are called to be. The reign of Christ, then, is not about seeing Jesus as some dominating despot, or conquering military victor. Rather, we are invited to see Christ’s reign as the gift of God’s grace, service and compassion that is available to all, and that we share with one another as we live as the body (the physical presence) of Christ in the world today.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: It is tragic that for so many the reign of Christ is seen only as some great military victory that Jesus will enforce on the world at some later time. It is tragic that for so many, this image of Christ’s reign leads to cold disregard for the injustices in our world, and the suffering of the poor, the weak, the sick and the marginalised. Nothing could be further from the image of Christ’s reign that we are asked to see and embrace in this last week of Year A. Here we are given a vision of a ruler who does not dominate or conquer by violence, but who chooses to be revealed in the margins of society – in the very ones we too often consider to be outside of God’s grace and welcome. Here we are given a vision of a ruler who chooses the image of a nurturing and protective shepherd to describe his reign, not metaphors of violence, opulence and domination. Here we are invited to recognise that finding our place in God’s reign is not about retreating from the world into some holy enclave and pointing fingers at all the “sinners” out there while we wait for Jesus to come and get “us” and destroy “them”. Rather, finding our place in God’s reign is about recognising that we – and all the outcasts that we thought were left out – are already included, if we will just see it, and see Jesus in each other. Then, as we

serve and love and protect each other as we would Christ, and as Christ would us, we find that we are living and enjoying belonging in God's compassionate, gracious and serving reign. We do not need to wait for some future time for the parable of the sheep and the goats to be a reality for us. We can experience its truth today as we open our eyes to the Jesus in others and serve them accordingly, and as we allow them to serve us in return. We can know God's reign right now as we live from the hope that compassion and grace and welcome can be the principles on which our world is based, and as we allow that hope to give us the faith to trust in God's provision and care for all of us. Then, as we begin to see and experience the truth of God's reign in our daily lives, we will begin to show the generosity, the understanding and forgiveness, the inclusivity and celebration of difference that makes this reign of Christ manifest in our world now.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is tempting to think of God as "our" Shepherd, and God's pastures as "our" home, and then to exclude those who don't fit with "us". In our churches and communities, and even in our families and social circles, this sorting of society according to our categories and sensibilities is ubiquitous. But it is also a massive exercise in completely missing the point. When we are faced with the parables and readings of this week, we cannot help but see that God's sorting method is wholly different. In fact, it isn't even, really, God who does the sorting, it's us! The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats may, at first glance be a parable of judgement, but that's not the point of it. The point is whether we have learned from Christ enough, whether we have become intimate enough with Jesus, that we can recognise him even when he looks out at us through his "distressing disguise" as Mother Teresa put it. And then, if we have learned to see Jesus even in the outcast, we will have learned to see & experience God's reign in our own lives. But, if we haven't learned to see Jesus, we wouldn't know how to recognise God's reign, even if it should kick us in the pants! The challenge of this week, then, is for us to release our obsession with sorting, and to focus instead on seeing – seeing Christ in all people – and on serving – serving others as though they were Jesus himself. Then, we will have entered the reign of God without even trying and we will see and experience God's reign in every place and every moment. The hard part is for us to make the conscious and difficult decision to recognise Christ in all others. It takes work and imagination, grace and a willingness to let go of our pride, our control and our natural tendency to stick with people like us. It's a scandalous truth – which Matthew's readers must have choked on at first – that everyone belongs. It's only those who cannot find a way to accept this who ultimately end up excluding themselves. The Shepherd really does welcome everyone, and those who are willing to follow the Shepherd's example, discover this to be true for themselves. The question is how we can be the inclusive, God's-reign-reflecting community that God calls us to be. May our worship this week help us to discover some practical ways to do this.