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CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR OCTOBER 2021

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 2:30pm each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au/collection/2016>

We are still the Church.

Stay safe. God bless.

**October 3 2021**

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

Human beings are not created to live alone, but for connection, community and relationship. Our relationships are not just with one another, but with the God who created us as well. But, all of these relationships are destroyed when we become unfaithful, or we when we allow our commitments to be weakened or broken by life’s turmoil, or by our own hardness of heart. But, when we remain faithful, our relationships become the place where we experience the grace and salvation of God, and where the Reign of God is dramatically revealed.

May our worship lead us deeper into faithful commitment to God and one another this week.

**READINGS**:
[**Job 1:1, 2:1-10**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%201:1,%202:1-10&version=CEB): The Adversary (CEB) challenges God, saying that Job only stays faithful because God has not allowed Job to be harmed – even though the Adversary has already taken so much from Job. Then God allows the Adversary to afflict Job, as long as he spares Job’s life. But, even though Job gets very sick with a skin disease, and though his wife tells him to curse God, he refuses to give up on his faith.
OR [**Genesis 2:18-24**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%202:18-24&version=CEB): God seeks to provide a companion for the man, so he brings all the animals for the man to name, but no companion is found. Then God creates woman, and the man celebrates her, as one like himself.

[**Psalm 26**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2026&version=CEB): The Psalmist pleads with God to save and protect him, because he has stayed away from foolish and evil people, preferring to spend time in God’s house and to bless God in the congregation.
OR [**Psalm 8**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%208&version=CEB): God is majestic, yet notices human beings, making them just a little lower than the angels and putting them over all of creation as God’s stewards.

[**Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%201:1-4,%202:5-12&version=CEB): God has spoken, as never before, through Jesus Christ, who was made a little lower than angels for a time in order to lead human beings – whom he calls sisters and brothers – to salvation.

[**Mark 10:2-16**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2010:2-16&version=CEB): The religious leaders challenge Jesus on whether it is acceptable to divorce one’s wife. Jesus says that the law allowed it only because of our hard hearts, but that if someone divorces and remarries, they commit adultery. Then, when the disciples scold those who bring children to Jesus to be blessed, Jesus stops them and tells them that God’s kingdom belongs to those who are like children, and that if we don’t welcome children, we cannot be part of God’s Reign.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME**:
The connections in this week’s Lectionary are fascinating and challenging. While Job suffers innocently under his affliction, he remains faithful, even as the Psalmist, in [Psalm 26](https://biblia.com/bible/nlt/Ps%2026), pleads with God for deliverance from suffering. The call to faithfulness, though, extends beyond just our tough times. It reaches into our families, and our attitudes, both to creation and to the God who made it. In Genesis, the man is given a fitting companion – a woman – with whom to work as stewards of creation. The miracle, as [Psalm 8](https://biblia.com/bible/nlt/Ps%208) reflects, is that these human beings have been made a little lower than angels, and crowned with glory. As much as this is primarily true for the one who fulfilled humanity’s purpose – Jesus – it is also true for all those who are called by Jesus to share in God’s salvation and glory. So, as stewards of creation, and children of God, we are called to faithful devotion to God, and care of all that God has made. Finally, in the Gospel, Jesus speaks about how faithfulness to God must be reflected in our treatment of others. Our relationship with our spouses is not to be lightly discarded – even when it gets tough (as with Job and his wife) – but to be nurtured, sustained and honoured. So, too the place of our children in God’s Reign must be nurtured and honoured, both for their sakes and for our own – for our hearts need to learn childlikeness in order to follow Jesus.

The message of the Lectionary, this week, then, is focussed on relationships as a reflection of our place in God’s Reign, and of our faithfulness to the ways of God. When we remain faithful to Jesus, our relationships will enjoy the benefits and blessings of our faithfulness, and, in the healing and unity that our relationships bring, we will grow more faithful in touching the world with the grace and salvation of God.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE**:
***Global Application:***Family relationships are an important foundation in the well-being of society. These relationships can be broken down in two ways – through moral and ethical choices that undermine monogamy, fidelity and compassionate child care, and through rigid, one-dimensional definitions of family that ignore the realities and challenges of today’s world, and that keep God’s grace from those who seek to create faithful monogamous families outside of the “norm”. Both lack grace, and both fail to reflect God’s love and compassion in the way that family relationships were intended to. However, when we graciously celebrate and support those who seek to build faithful relationships, and create meaningful and stable families in whatever form they may take, they reveal God’s grace, and help to provide a strong foundation for a faithful and compassionate society. Our faithfulness in working for justice and in building God’s grace, then, is necessarily and powerfully reflected in how we work for support, recognition and resources to build strong, faithful and life-giving relationships in our world, especially in the family context. This means we are called to support at-risk children, orphans and child-headed families however we can. It also means we are called to sustain good, committed and faithful relationships, ensuring that intimacy, mutual care and self-giving become the norm, rather than the exception in our communities. Anytime we fight against legislation that makes committed relationships (of any kind) harder, we risk standing against the relational call of the Gospel, and we risk becoming contributors to the injustice in our world.

***Local Application:***In every community there are families in need of care and support. Many of these families are ignored because the way they do family life is different from the narrow definitions we generally consider “normal.” And so families break down, and society is harmed, and one of the best pictures we have of God’s love and commitment to human beings is distorted. When we can begin to offer guidance, care, support, and love for all families, and allow them to reach their full potential in Christ, not only do they benefit, but our community grows stronger, more loving and more aware of God’s grace, as these families again become the parables God intended them to be. In addition, when we work to sustain the integrity and faithfulness of our own families and communities, even when it is hard and we are threatened or suffering, we reflect the grace and glory of God to the world. When we recognise that our love and faithfulness to God must overflow into love and faithfulness to each other, we are able to open ourselves to the presence and strength of God that sustains us, and we are able to enter all of our relationships with the self-giving of Christ, and with the intentionality to commit, to connect, and to grow into deeper intimacy and faithfulness together.

**October 10, 2021**

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

The question of suffering may absorb the minds of theologians and philosophers, but it is not an issue to be debated. Nor is it a problem to be solved. Rather, suffering is a reality to be entered into with compassion and mercy in the name of Christ. When we encounter those who suffer, the Gospel calls us to give our lives and resources to serve and heal. And when we are faced with suffering of our own, the Gospel gives us the assurance of God’s presence and grace, and a community of companions to journey with us. This is the call of the Lectionary this week.

May we never use our worship as an escape from suffering, but allow it to drive us to be the presence and compassion of God to those who suffer wherever we may.

**READINGS**:
[**Job 23:1-9, 16-17**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%2023:1-9,%2016-17&version=CEB): Job longs to put his case before God, but he does not know how to find God. If he could get to God’s dwelling place, he believes, he could lay out his case, but God is absent to him.
OR [**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Amos%205:6-7,%2010-15&version=CEB): The prophet calls God’s people to turn to justice and compassion in order to avert God’s wrath and avoid God’s judgement. Those who reject justice and righteousness, who lie and exploit others, will not get to enjoy their homes or their produce, but those who seek good, and establish justice may receive God’s grace.
 [**Psalm 22:1-15**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2022:1-15&version=CEB): A cry for God’s presence and rescue in a time of great persecution and trial in which God seems to have forsaken the Psalmist. God is holy and the Psalmist’s ancestors trusted God and were saved, but now the Psalmist is being attacked, and is suffering greatly, and no rescue seems to be forthcoming.
OR [**Psalm 90:12-17**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2090:12-17&version=CEB): A plea for God to return to God’s people and have compassion on them, filling them with God’s love so that they can rejoice and celebrate, and so that their works may last.

[**Hebrews 4:12-16**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%204:12-16&version=CEB): God’s word is sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing into the deepest parts of our beings and judging our thoughts and intentions. Therefore we need to keep our trust in Jesus who was tempted in every way, as we are but did not sin. In him we can draw near to God’s throne and find grace.

[**Mark 10:17-31**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2010:17-31&version=CEB): A wealthy man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus answers that he must follow the commandments – which the man claims he has done. Then Jesus tells him to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him, at which point the man goes away sad. Then Jesus teaches that it is very hard for the wealthy to enter God’s Reign. When Peter points out that the disciples have left everything to follow him, Jesus responds that those who have left behind loved ones and possessions for the Reign of God will receive much more in return, both in this life and in the one to come.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME**:
The overwhelming awareness in this week’s Scripture passages is of the reality of suffering, and the pain and indignity that it brings. In Job, the suffering of Job is made worse by his sense of abandonment by God, and his longing to put his case before God. In [Psalm 22](https://biblia.com/bible/nlt/Ps%2022) the sense of abandonment is echoed, as the Psalmist speaks of being persecuted, without any sense of God’s presence or rescue. In the Amos reading, there is the threat of judgment on those who ignore the suffering of others, and who refuse to turn to justice and compassion on behalf of those who suffer. In [Psalm 90](https://biblia.com/bible/nlt/Ps%2090) there is the call for God to have compassion of God’s suffering people. In Hebrews we find the assurance that Jesus is trustworthy because he was tempted as we are and overcame, and because he offers us mercy. Finally in the Gospel, after graphically revealing how hard it is for the wealthy to embrace the sacrificial life of God’s Reign, Jesus assures his disciples that their sacrifice – and the persecution which they will certainly experience – is not in vain, and that God will restore good things to them.  A huge part of the struggle for those who suffer is the sense of loneliness, isolation and unwantedness that is brought on by the pain, and that heightens it. Even Jesus shared this experience. However, underlying all of it, is the assurance of God’s compassion and the mercy that God offers. And, in Jesus’ words in Marks’ Gospel, there is the call for us to be agents of God’s mercy, grace and friendship.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE**:
“I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can experience.’ Mother Teresa.

***Global Application:***Our world is full of “shadow people” – the unseen sufferers who struggle daily with poverty, dread & infectious diseases, lack of clean water and sanitation, with few resources and fewer opportunities. For many of the wealthy, these people remain unseen even when they live next door, and “out of site” is “out of mind.” It is easy to fall into the trap of viewing these “shadow people” as “issues” to be resolved. It is easy to lose our sense of their humanity, even as we fight for justice on their behalf. It is easy, as we, who are relatively comfortable, secure and wealthy, go to “help” those who suffer that we embrace an uneven power dynamic in which we are “saviours” coming to “uplift” and “rescue” the “poor.” The call of the Lectionary this week to do more than this. A powerful, healing work of justice is to really notice the “shadow people,” to acknowledge and honour their humanity, and then to offer, not just a hand of help, but a hand of friendship and solidarity.

***Local Application:***Every community has suffering people, but often these people find themselves feeling isolated and marginalised even within our churches. Too often we try to avoid facing or acknowledging the reality of suffering, and in the process we leave sufferers feeling hurt, humiliated and lonely. This week, is there a “wealth that you can give to the poor” in your community? Whether it’s a wealth of friendship or compassion or support, we do have wealth to offer struggling, sick and lonely people. The friendship, the “standing with” and the acknowledgment is often a far more powerful gift than any material help we can offer – which sometimes only confirms our superiority and further disempowers. Furthermore, when we face suffering ourselves, it is always important that we have the humility to receive the help and compassion of others, and not embrace a proud, stoic aloofness. It is only as we walk through suffering together that we can really experience and reflect the mercy and compassion of God.

**October 17, 2021**

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

In the upside-down (or right-side up) Reign of God, greatness is defined very differently from the power, fame and fortune criteria that is used by most human systems. Unfortunately, even we who claim to follow Jesus struggle with this essential truth of the Gospel. Yet, when we are faced with the Great Creator who willingly becomes a humble human man, we cannot avoid the call of God to the greatness of service and sacrifice.

May we reject any expression of faith or worship that glorifies systems of wealth, power and instant gratification, and may we embrace again the worship of humble, selfless service.

**READINGS**:
[**Job 38:1-7, 34-41**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%2038:1-7,%2034-41&version=CEB): God answers Job, questioning where he was when God created the earth, who orders the clouds and lightning and can create rain, and who provides food for wild animals and birds.
OR [**Isaiah 53:4-12**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2053:4-12&version=CEB): The suffering servant carried our sickness and suffering, was pierced for our transgression, and though he was oppressed did not open his mouth. Though he had done nothing wrong, he was killed and crushed, but God’s plans will be fulfilled through him, and he will make others righteous.

[**Psalm 104:1-9,24,35c**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20104:1-9,24,35c&version=CEB): In praise of God’s glory and majesty, for the way God established the earth and commanded the waters, and for the way God has filled the earth with God’s creation.
OR [**Psalm 91:9-16**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2091:9-16&version=CEB): God promises protection and rescue to those who are devoted to God, and who trust in God, crying out to God in times of trouble.

[**Hebrews 5:1-10**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%205:1-10&version=CEB): High priests offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people and deals with them gently, because he is aware of his own weakness. In the same way, Jesus was appointed by God, and offered prayer for his life to God, who saved him. Now he offers salvation to those who trust him.

[**Mark 10:35-45**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2010:35-45&version=CEB): James and John ask Jesus to be allowed to sit at his right and left when Jesus enters glory. Then after assuring them that they will share in his suffering, Jesus teaches all the disciples that those who want to be great among his disciples must be the servant of all, just as Jesus came to serve and not be served.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME**:
What does greatness mean? In the Lectionary this week we are confronted with God’s greatness as God questions Job, but we are also faced with the greatness of the suffering servant who is persecuted and suffers for the sake of others. We see God’s glory revealed in creation, but we also encounter God’s glory in God’s compassionate rescue of those who cry out to God. We recognise the greatness of Jesus whom God has appointed as a high priest because he journeyed through suffering and is able to offer salvation. And we learn that those who are great in God’s Reign are those who are willing to be the servants of all – just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve. The contrast between the God of creation and the suffering servant, Jesus, is a powerful way for the Lectionary to address the question of greatness. While God has all the power and glory that the name implies, even God does not express God’s greatness in domination and conquest. Rather, in the incarnation, God’s glory and greatness are revealed through humility, service and the embrace of suffering. For those who seek greatness on God’s terms, we must expect that the same should be true for us – and this is exactly what Jesus taught. The challenge for us this week is to decide whether we can find the courage to define greatness in this way, and, if we can, to live as “great ones” in God’s Reign.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE**:
***Global Application:***It’s amazing and encouraging that, in this world obsessed with adversarial political discourse and the allure of fame and wealth, we still honour those who give themselves sacrificially in service of others. It is not the leaders who use their power for their own aggrandisement that we truly honour. It’s not the corporate executives that amass huge fortunes that really impress us. It’s not the celebrities that get addicted to their own fame and influence that inspire us. It’s those who, having reached a position in which they could use their influence and resources for personal benefit, lay it all aside in service of the greater good. These are our heroes and heroines, and these are the ones who bring the greatest healing to the world. The temptation to always seek the bigger and better ministry, organisation, impact or influence can lead us to act in arrogance, and to seek to manipulate or dominate others according to our own agendas. But, what is desperately needed in our world is a culture of “greatness” that celebrates self-giving, humility, service and small acts of contribution to the greater good. The creation of this culture starts with us when we choose not to get caught up in the hype over the latest celebrity or movement, but to embrace and celebrate the humble, serving people around us. In addition, when we use our vote and our contributions to reward humility, service and sacrifice, rather than accumulation, hubris and power-mongering, we can make a significant difference to the way our world works.

***Local Application:***In a world of reality television, it’s tempting to define greatness, even in the church, by the world’s terms. When we’ve “succeeded” – amassed lots of money or recognition or influence – then we consider ourselves great, and if we haven’t managed to do this, we try to find ways to get it right. But, in this quest for universal exceptionalism, we’ve lost our souls, and the knowledge of true greatness. We’ve forgotten how significant it is for a struggling single mother to raise children to be responsible and generous. We’ve forgotten how powerful the influence of an attentive parent or grandparent can be. We’ve forgotten what a difference small acts of kindness and service can make to our neighbourhoods and communities. We’ve even forgotten that the quest to be great in God’s Reign can lead to the same competitiveness that the disciples experienced – even to the extent that we compare who is the “servingest” of us all! Yet, the ultimate test of greatness is when greatness becomes irrelevant – when we no longer care about how we’re seen, or what we’ve achieved, and we begin to live as humble, sacrificial servants simply because it’s the right thing to do, and it’s one of the best ways to contribute to the healing of the world. Ironically, it’s the moment we stop seeking greatness or defining ourselves by the quest for greatness that we become authentic followers of Christ, and that’s when we become truly great, according to God’s standard.

**October 24, 2021**

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

The Scriptures are clear – God is in the business of restoration. How this restoration happens, and what its results are, can be surprising. This week reveals the importance of restorative relationships in our experience of God’s restoration, and in the quest for a world of justice, peace and love.

May we seek to build these restorative relationships as we worship together this week.

**READINGS**:
[**Job 42:1-6, 10-17**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job%2042:1-6,%2010-17&version=CEB): Job recognises that he had spoken without knowledge, and that he has now encountered God. Then God blesses Job beyond the prosperity he had at first.
OR [**Jeremiah 31:7-9**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah%2031:7-9&version=CEB): God’s promise to restore all of Israel’s people, including the weak and marginalised, and bring them into a life of peace and well-being.

[**Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2034:1-8,%2019-22&version=CEB): A song of thanksgiving for God’s restoration received when the Psalmist sought God. Though the righteous have troubles, God delivers them.
OR [**Psalm 126**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20126&version=CEB): When God restored the fortunes of God’s people, they were so joyful, and now they continue to pray that God will bring them prosperity and joy.

[**Hebrews 7:23-28**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews%207:23-28&version=CEB): Jesus is an eternal priest who constantly prays for God’s people. He doesn’t need to offer sacrifices every day because he offered himself once and for all.

[**Mark 10:46-52**](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%2010:46-52&version=CEB): As Jesus enters Jericho a blind man named Bartimaeus shouts out asking for Jesus to have mercy on him. Then Jesus calls the blind man, and asks him what he wants. When he answers that he wants to see, Jesus heals him, and he follows Jesus.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME**:
There is no question, when faced with this week’s readings, that God is biased toward restoration. Every reading speaks about God’s restoring, saving work in some way. Job has a transforming encounter with God and is restored beyond the prosperity he had enjoyed before his trial. God’s people are assured of God’s restoration by Jeremiah, who includes the weakest and most marginalised people in this promise. Both Psalms reflect celebration at God’s restoration from trouble or from exile. In Hebrews Jesus is portrayed as the one who intercedes for God’s people and who offered himself as the only necessary sacrifice. Finally, Bartimaeus receives his sight, which not only restores his vision, but also his life. The key to these stories, though, is that they are not just about restoration of circumstances, but are about restoration of relationships, especially with God. Ultimately this is the truth in all restoration stories. It can be comforting to have our outward circumstances restored, but it is when our hearts are restored, when we are delivered from the fear, self-protection, defensiveness, and isolation our brokenness or suffering has brought on us that we are truly saved. The challenge for us this week is to be people who find our restoration in relationship with God and others, and who, as we work for justice, remember the humanity of those we serve, bringing them into safe, healing relationships.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE**:
***Global Application:***When we speak about justice, a lot of our language reveals a bias toward what has been called “retributive justice” – the “punishment” of offenders, and the restitution that “balances the scales” and “evens the score”. Yet God’s justice appears to be more biased toward “restorative justice” – making things whole and bringing about the healing of both perpetrator and victim, and of society as a whole. The role of community in this restoration cannot be over stated. If we are to view God’s justice in these restorative ways, then we cannot ignore the importance of the restoration of the heart, and of relationships. Those who have been punished by society for crimes, cannot become healthy contributing members of society without strong, supportive relationships. Those who have been marginalised through poverty, sickness or trauma, cannot find healing and a sense of security without protective and healing relationships. In every circumstance where we work to bring God’s restoration to others, we need to ensure that networks of relationships are provided. The church, of course, is the perfect place to create and nurture these relationships, which is why, when we allow ourselves to become retributive, we fail in our mission.

***Local Application:***In our personal lives we all too easily define justice in our own terms, and in our own favour. We use this sense of justice to hold on to our grudges and to wish for revenge against those who have hurt us. And we do this even with our sisters and brothers in Christ. Yet, as we seek healing and restoration for ourselves, we must also recognise that our restoration is linked to that of others who are hurting, of our society, and even of those who have hurt or offended us. If we seek justice and restoration for ourselves, we can do well by asking who, in our communities and in our lives, need restoration and justice. As we seek to bring God’s justice to others, we often find it for ourselves. And as we allow God’s restoration to lead us back into relationships with others, we find the healing we need. There is a virtuous cycle at work here: Restoration drives us into relationships, and these relationships, in turn lead us into further healing. However, there is a vicious cycle that can take its place if we let it, where our fear and pain leads us into isolation, which deepens the pain. May we become those who work to restore others wherever we can, and who build safe, healing relationships in order to restore and heal others and ourselves.

**October 31, 2021**

Church of Scotland

## Introduction

In his book, ‘The Witness of Preaching', Thomas Long offers an image of preaching where the preacher enters and dwells within the text, taking time to ‘become a witness' to see what happens in the story and within themselves as they read it. Next, the task is to form words that they then share as they ‘bear witness' to the events they have seen. Our task, he says, is to ‘tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about what we have seen'. This process of ‘dwell and tell', being the witness and then testifying and bearing witness, is for many worship leaders and preachers, one of the most rewarding, engaging and exciting activities in their ministry.

Preaching and liturgy can create moments that encourage gathered worshippers in their own ability to take the text, enter into it and pay attention to everything they see – hopefully building confidence and trust in their own insights; we hope that this resource offers simple ways to do that with these texts.

When an act of worship, or even just a small part of an act of worship, enables a whole congregation (not just those who have been preparing the sermon and prayers) to ‘dwell and tell' then ‘speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about what is seen', how much greater, fuller and truer might our shared understanding and telling of the Story be?

In these resources we will highlight some of the themes that are contained within the texts, offering some thoughts about how different worshippers might relate to them. Later, we will suggest some conversation starters and questions that might help shape a sermon and/or liturgy that facilitates a ‘dwell and tell' experience.

## [Ruth 1:1-18](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=496213398" \o "This external link will open in a new window" \t "_blank)

How can we let this story tell itself? What themes emerge from it that might resonate with those of us gathered in public worship?

### **Food and Famine**

What do we know of the insecurity that women and widows of Ruth, Orpah and Naomi's day would have faced? When have we wondered where our next meal will come from? When have we feared that the usual places where food can be found might have less, or none?

For some, the famine in the story may remind them of Covid-related panic buying in supermarkets in 2020, job losses from lockdown measures, international trade restrictions meaning demand exceeded supply, visiting foodbanks for the first time, only to find them depleted or even closed.

Other worshippers may remember back to wartime rationing or a long period of unemployment or essential benefits being withheld.

### **Grieving**

Orpah, Naomi and Ruth are all bereaved – even without the additional hardship of famine, they are already very vulnerable. Ruth and Orpah have lost husbands and a father-in-law and Naomi lost her husband and two sons – how must they have all felt?

In our listening to the text, perhaps some will recall times when they lost a spouse or a child or a parent. There may be people who have lost more than one loved one because of the pandemic. Perhaps older people will remember entire families who lost every husband, father and son during the War. Others might not relate to the death of a family member but know what it is like when the chief earner of the family goes away, leaving the family with little income or security. Others may know what it means to be in a different part of the world, in danger and with no knowledge where support might be found.

Again, how can we honour these insights into this poignant story, which is as contemporary as it is ancient? How can we create space for people to make a personal connection, using it as way into prayer and worship in that very moment?

### **Blaming**

Naomi believes that this was all done to her by the will and hand of God who had turned against her. Whilst the starting points may be different – food security, grieving, safety, sorrow – we may find comfort for the times when we too have felt that God had brought or allowed hardship, perhaps used ‘tough love' to correct or punish us. We may find reassurance that we are not the only ones to ask where God was during a hard time of our lives, or even prayed ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?'.

## [Psalm 146](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=496213418)

What happens when we read this psalm? What happens within each of us when we read it alone and what happens when we read it aloud together? Where are the common reactions and responses? Where does one person's response stand out distinctly from other peoples and how can we create space for these reactions in worship?

When I read it, I found myself disagreeing with the Psalmist that ‘human beings can't save' – they can. So what am I missing here? I felt discomfort at idea that after praising God all my life – this past year has had moments when I wondered if I would still love God by the end of it or if I would still believe that God was real. I found myself wrestling with the Psalmist's claims about the wonderful things God does for people in need – this year I have had to work hard to call occasional good news stories to mind rather than just auto-play the showreel of devastation that the various news Apps have brought to my smartphone, day after day.

But there the psalm stands, unapologetically full of praise, speaking from a context where the writers were no strangers to hardship, depression, struggle and loss. Perhaps it has done its job by interrupting my preoccupation with what is difficult in the world just now and challenging me to meditate on what is still wonderful about the world and the God who made it. But honestly, right now, I'd love to hear about how other people are experiencing psalms of praise like this one. Who finds them to be out of place in a pandemic world and who finds them to be essential, vital reading?

## [Hebrews 9:11-14](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=496213437)

The book of Hebrews seems largely concerned with one matter: the supremacy of Christ above all things. That Christ has fulfilled, surpassed, replaced and overwritten all that God's people relied upon. The Law, the sacrificial system, the first covenant, Levitical laws, earthly tabernacles and sanctuaries, cleansing rituals, the High Priest tradition, the prophets, kings and judges.

Christ is the High Priest and through His blood He enters the Holy Place (not the earthly one made with hands) and obtains eternal salvation. This same blood will not only cleanse us outwardly, but inwardly, purifying our conscience.

For those of us who have spent time as Christians, the centrality of Christ, His sacrifice and resurrection are so core to our faith that this passage may not seem particularly gripping. For the intended readers, this theological reorientation could have been life-changing; earth-shattering; mind-blowing.

Throughout the text the author uses logic, argument, exhortations, poetry and a host of other literary techniques to engage and persuade readers that Christ is our Way in life, now and eternally. That He is the source of our perfection, fulfilment and wholeness.

## [Mark 12:28-34](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=496213452)

An interesting passage to use alongside Hebrews, here we have Jesus not abolishing the previous laws, but homing in on that which has gone before Him and is of most value – the commandments to love God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves. He speaks plainly, no parables or sophisticated rhetoric: ‘There is no commandment greater than these.'

What interests me is that this is the only place in Mark where a Scribe is cast in a positive light. In fact, in a few verses after this passage the author has Jesus telling people to beware of the Scribes.

It is as if the author wants to highlight something about loving God and our neighbours by framing the exchange about these two commandments between Jesus and someone from a group who he would normally be in contention with. This could perhaps be an interesting angle to explore in a sermon or with some conversational moments of worship.