



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR NOVEMBER 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.

November 7 2021

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

What does faith look like? How does faith connect to power and wealth? What part do we play as we seek to trust in God? These are some of the questions that are evoked by the Lectionary readings for this week. They challenge our alliances, our use of our resources, our care for the most vulnerable in our world, and the extent to which we are willing to "gamble" all on God's Reign.

May we discover a deep, practical, generous, and compassionate trust in God as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17: Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz, which she does. Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife, and she bears a son called Obed – David's grandfather.

OR **1 Kings 17:8-16**: God instructs Elijah to go and stay with a widow from Zarepath and her son. When he asks her for food, she says she only has a little oil and flour, which she and her son will eat before they die. Elijah assures her that, if she makes him a small loaf first, the oil and flour will not run out. She does what he asks, and their food does not run out.

Psalms 127: A psalm celebrating God's protection and provision, and the gift of children.

Or **Psalms 146**: A psalm encouraging praise and trust in God's care, justice, and rule, and warning against trust in human leadership.

Hebrews 9:24-28: Christ entered into heaven, offering himself once as the sacrifice for human sin. Then, he will appear a second time to save those who wait for him.

Mark 12:38-44: Jesus warns against the legal experts who seek honour, and who cheat poor widows and show off with long prayers. Then he comments on a poor widow who places a small offering in the collection box, saying that she has put in more than anyone else, because she has given out of her poverty.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The Scriptures for this week all examine the dynamics between those who are powerful from a human perspective and those who are poor and weak, but who trust in God. Ruth, who is poor and vulnerable finds protection and acceptance from the wealthy but good Boaz. While, in contrast, Elijah the powerful prophet, finds security and provision at the hands of a poor widow. Both Psalms celebrate God's protection and provision, while **Psalms 146** warns against placing too much trust in human leadership. In Hebrews, Christ is shown as both priest and sacrifice, who offers himself in order to save his people, while, in Mark, the religious leaders, who should be sacrificing for the sake of others, are rather using their position for self-aggrandisement and corruption. The message is clear – human power is limited, often corrupt and ultimately fails those who trust in it. God's care, protection and justice is sure and eternal, and through the self-offering of Christ, all people can find security within the grace of God. The challenge is to ensure we place our trust in the

right place, while also endeavouring to be faithful and righteous in whatever power or leadership we may exercise.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

Security and provision for material needs are a constant human concern. From a purely human perspective, these needs are addressed by accumulation of wealth, and by aligning oneself with powerful people. In the global economy, the powerful and wealthy control the means of both security and provision, using their resources to favour themselves & their allies, and ignoring or neglecting the weak and poor. Ultimately this strategy undermines the very security and comfort that is hoped for. Only when God's priorities of faith, sacrificial giving and solidarity with the least are implemented can we find the peace we so long for. What this means is that, as Church, we need to be very careful of aligning ourselves with any political party, government structure or position of power and wealth. To do so is to betray our trust in God, and to fail in our mission to proclaim and embody God's Reign. Rather, as we work for justice, we are called to place our trust in God and God's ways, and remain independent of such authorities, in order to be able to work with them, while still speaking in challenge or confrontation of them when necessary. It also means that, whatever authority or wealth we may have must be used for the sake of bringing justice to the least, and not for any kind of self-aggrandisement.

Local Application:

There are two specific applications of today's readings on a local level. The first is the challenge to be engaged in the work of justice and compassion in our own communities and churches, where rich and poor often live and worship side by side. We must be careful how we measure the "success" of our churches – not by wealth and power, but by commitment to God's Reign – and we must ensure that we embody in our neighbourhoods, the compassion and generosity of Christ. The second application has to do with where we place our faith, and how this impacts how we live. The Scriptures contrast our trust in human leadership and resources with trusting in God. Whatever we may do to ensure that we have life's necessities, we always need to remember that it is ultimately God in whom we must trust – as both Ruth and the poor widow did. However, as Ruth demonstrated, this trust does not mean that we do nothing, but we actively do what is necessary to provide and protect our lives, while trusting God's guidance and empowerment to sustain and enable us. In both cases, the trust that God seeks is very different from that of the religious leaders, who claim faith, but live by corruption and exploitation.

November 14, 2021

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

How are we to respond when we face the violent upheaval of our world, or when others use mockery to dominate us in personal power plays? What does it mean to trust in God's grace and protection, to live out the peace and justice of God's Reign in a world of war and injustice? The call to peace is always a difficult one to answer, both personally and collectively, but it is a call we must face in worship this week.

May our worship lead us into a deeper commitment to Jesus' way of peace.

READINGS:

1 Samuel 1:4-20: Hannah grieves her inability to conceive, and the mockery of Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, so when the family goes to the temple she prays for a child. After Eli accuses her of being drunk, she explains that she is grieving and he blesses her. Following this, she falls pregnant and gives birth to Samuel.

OR **Daniel 12:1-3:** In a time of great trouble, the people whose names are written in God's scroll will be rescued, some being resurrected to life and others to disgrace. But, those who are wise and lead others to righteousness will shine like stars.

1 Samuel 2:1-10: Hannah sings a song of praise for God's grace and justice in response to Samuel's birth and dedication to the Lord. She celebrates God's strength and holiness, and proclaims that God shatters the bows of the powerful, while filling the hungry with bread, that God gives life and raises the poor, while also bringing the wealthy low. Note the strong resonances here with Mary's Magnificat.

OR **Psalms 16:** A Psalm in praise of God's protection and blessing, God's instruction and guidance, God's presence and God's ways of life.

Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25: Jesus offered the perfect once-for-all sacrifice and then sat down at God's right hand. He perfected God's people, and now we can enter God's presence with confidence because of our faith, the cleansing of God, and our high priest in God's house. In response we are to hold on to our hope, and motivate each other to acts of love and goodness.

Mark 13:1-8: As they leave the temple, Jesus' disciples are awed by the size and beauty of the building, but Jesus predicts that it will be destroyed. When the disciples ask for a sign, Jesus warns them about false messiahs who will come, reports of war, earthquakes, and famines. But, these, he explains, are just the beginnings of the end.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

Violence, destruction, war and ridicule are common troubles that we all face in the world – perhaps even more so as we seek to follow Christ. The temptation is to respond in kind, offering violence for violence and using force to overcome force. However, the way of Christ, revealed through the Scriptures, is the way of peace, forgiveness, and faith in God's ultimate justice. This way is demonstrated by Hannah's prayers in the face of Peninnah's taunts (and in her song when she presents Samuel at the temple), in Daniel's prophecy of the shining resurrected ones, in the Psalmist's celebration of God's protection and guidance, and ultimately in Jesus' self-giving on the cross. It is interesting that, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus'

warnings are associated with the disciples' awe at the temple building, which represented wealth and power (both of a spiritual and political nature, although Jesus revealed in his life and death that the latter seemed to have become more prominent). It is when we get absorbed in the trappings of power and wealth that we become violent and oppressive. In a time when children were wealth, Peninnah's mockery of Hannah was as much about power as it was about womanhood. Daniel's prophecy, likewise, reflects on the conflicts of power against power. The way of "powerless peace" that Jesus demonstrated, which brings us into right relationship with God, and enables us to support and encourage one another presents a stark contrast to these violent power plays.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

In a world in which war and violence are a constant reality, humanity desperately needs to learn two things. First, we need to relinquish our addiction to wealth and power, which inevitably creates both competition and oppression – winners and losers. Second, we need to embrace the Jesus way of "powerless peace", in which we trust in God's justice and love, even when the world seems to be descending into chaos and anarchy. The way of peace is not a "quick-fix" alternative to injustice. Nor is it an apathetic, inactive resignation which accepts reality without trying to change it. It is a painful, sacrificial journey that takes a long view of human history. When peacemaking rises up against violence and injustice, things often get worse, and oppressors and tyrants use greater violence and threats to try and silence the peace and justice making. But, when we remain steadfast in our faith that God is at work in our world, and that God's purposes of justice and peace will continue to overcome violence and oppression, we can absorb the pain, refuse to respond in kind, carry the cross, and ultimately wait until, as inevitably must happen, God's Commonwealth prevails.

Local Application:

Power plays and violence do not only happen on national and global scales through wars and revolutions. Every human community and family has its share of power plays and conflicts – some of which may turn violent. Often the most simple form of peace making is refusing to retaliate, refusing to hold a grudge, and embracing the sacrificial way of forgiveness. Every person, and every community, has been hurt by someone else, or some other group. Our natural human inclination is to try and hurt them back, to even the score. But, the way of cross is the way of absorbing the violence and pain, and responding in love, forgiveness and acceptance. As hard as this is, it is the Kingdom view to which we are all called. Who needs us to choose this response today?

November 21, 2021

Church of Scotland

Today is Christ the King Sunday, or The Reign of Christ Sunday. It is set aside to reaffirm the Kingship of Christ as lord over all of life, in time and in eternity. On one hand, this Sunday marks the end of the ordinary time in the Christian calendar, commemorating the normality of God's care and protection as integral to the life of the church. Within the Reformed tradition, the sanctuary paraments and clerical stoles are green, representing the survival, growth, and flourishing of the church in God's providence. On the other hand, Christ the King Sunday ushers in the beginning of a new Christian year that points us to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as Lord and King. For this Sunday, the paraments would be white, an expression of the purity and sanctity of Christ elevated and celebrated.

This Sunday also marks the week commencing the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. The 16 Days of Activism is a United Nations campaign that begins on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and ends on 10 December, Human Rights Day. It began in 1991, established by women activists to challenge the world for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the campaign. With its theme, 'From Awareness to Accountability,' the campaign calls us all to self-evaluation about what actions we have taken to speak out against and stop all forms of abuse for women, for girls, and by extension for all persons. The World Council of Churches, other church denominations and Christian organisations have adopted this campaign to raise awareness about and call for appropriate action against the vicious circle of gender-based violence. The Thursdays-in-black (TiB) campaign is one of such strategies to end gender-based violence.

Christ the King Sunday provides an apt opportunity to consider the reign of Christ in the context of violence. The United Nations estimates that one in three women experience gender-based violence, often perpetrated by known persons, such as family members, intimate partners, or friends. A 2018 UN study also found that women with disabilities face up to ten times more incidents of gender-based violence than women who do not have disabilities. With COVID-19, these numbers have gone up significantly. The UN now refers to domestic and gender-based violence as a 'shadow pandemic.' COVID-19 restrictions are easing; but physical and sexual violence continues to be perpetrated against women and girls. Both victims and survivors suffer psychological, emotional, and mental trauma, with systems of justice often in favour of the perpetrators. Often, the victims are asked 'what did you do?' or 'what have you done?', just like Pilate asked Jesus in our gospel reading of John 18. The implication was that Jesus must have done something to warrant being betrayed and victimised by those closest to Him.

Therefore, Christ calls us to be accountable to those who are unable to defend themselves as well as those who seek justice from all forms of violence and discrimination. 2 Samuel 23 verses 4 and 6 provide a vivid differentiation between justice and injustice. Justice is like the "light of the morning, like the sun rising on a

cloudless morning, or gleaming from the rain on the glassy land," while injustice is akin to "thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up with the hand." Psalm 132 urges us to seek ardently the eternal reign of Christ in righteousness and justice as a form of worship. Revelations 1 reminds us that as King, Christ, the pierced one, comes to us loving and liberating all who would receive Jesus by faith. These passages, which form our readings for today, help us look to Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty as the King who restores justice and dignity for all.

It is usual practice in my church congregation to call on people to take different aspects of the service. In preparing this weekly worship, I prayerfully spoke with friends and asked one to contribute some prayers as indicated in the prayer section. I consulted the with personnel at the World Council of Churches, Geneva, for current information about the 16th Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence as well as information about Thursdays-in-Black campaign.

In each of the passages below, I have provided some background information to the readings as well as my personal reflections. I hope these would further facilitate the process of identifying thoughts that resonate with your contexts, as sermons and reflections are being prepared. I use the Africa Bible Commentary (2) as a resource in preparing sermons or biblical reflections, because I like its practical application in its commentaries. I often read the Bible verses several times over many days from different translations such as the NRSV, The Good News Version and the New International Version before beginning to write. I try to tease out the theme for the Sunday to make it relevant to the congregation, but always mindful that with livestreaming, many other people outside my immediate congregation may listen in or join in worship.

[2] Adeyemo, Tokunboh, Solomon Andria, Kwame Bediako, Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Yusufu Turaki, eds. Africa Bible Commentary. Second edition. Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2010.

2 Samuel 23:1-7

This passage provides a poetic rendition of some of the last words of David. Within the African context, as in many contexts, the last words of an aged dying person are usually taken very seriously. Often, it is a reminiscence of the person's past, lessons learnt, and advice for the future. Here David takes stock of his life, his relationship with God, and his rule as king of Israel. Verse 1 describes David as the "oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favourite of the Strong One of Israel." But he is also the "son of Jesse," a simple young shepherd boy that God chose to be King of the great nation of Israel. Here we are reminded of the everlasting covenant between God and David that would be extended to David's descendant, hence the expectation for justice from the Kings of Israel.

In verses 3-4, and 6-7, the writer gives a graphic picture of the difference between two rulers – the godly and the ungodly or the just and the unjust. The godly, who rules justly with the fear of God is "like the lighting of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land." The ungodly, on the other hand, "are all like thorns that are thrown away; for they cannot be picked up

with the hand; ...they are entirely consumed in fire on the spot." The preference is for the just and not the unjust.

David did not always act justly or in a godly manner. David's past was not always pleasing to the Lord; he was not always the model citizen who radiated like the sun on a cloudless day. David's image will always be tainted by his murderous affair with Bethsheba (2 Samuel 11), and the complacency with which he handled the rape of his daughter Tamar by his son Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-22). These incidents would hurt David and would nearly end his reign in shame (2 Samuel 15). Perhaps, it for these reasons that David paints a picture of what justice should look like, or more specifically what his house should be with God (2 Samuel 23:5). It is probably why, on his death bed, he challenged the Israelites to a better way of being as people who fear God and who seek to maintain an everlasting covenant with God.

David's life is a vista of many possibilities – of a just world where the fear of God enables justice and dignity for all. How is a just world possible? How might we ensure that our homes, churches, and nations live in the fear of God? To what extent can we overcome the mistakes of our past to envision and live out a better future? Perhaps we can imagine the sun on a cloudless day in Scotland and imagine the beauty of justice for all.

Psalm 132:1-12

This passage provides a good sequel to our reading and reflection in 2 Samuel. In the opening prayer, we find here what could be interpreted as a close relationship between David and God. David asks the Lord to remember "all the hardships he endured." We recall that the road to the throne was not a particularly easy one for David. From being a fugitive on account of Saul's pursuit of him, to battles with his enemies, within and without his kingdom, to almost being deposed by his son, Absalom.

Amid these difficulties, there is an urgency in David to do something for the Lord, because of which, he would not sleep. "To find a place for the LORD," referred to in verse 5a, could be either David's desire to build a house for the Lord (2 Samuel 7) or the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6/1 Chronicles 15). Whichever is being referred to here, it was to be an act of worship in righteousness and joy as stated in verse 9, "Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your faithful shout for joy." Righteousness is regarded as integral to justice (Amos 5:24). To live righteously is to act justly to God's people everywhere. Put conversely, acts of justice to God's creation are acts of worship to God.

More importantly, relevant to today's theme, is the reaffirmation of God's covenantal promise with David that his descendants would be kings of Israel. This is expressed in verse 11, "The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.'" Starting with Matthew's gospel, the New Testament is filled with confirmations of Jesus as descendant of David, in fulfilment of God's promise. Matthew 1:1 reads "an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Luke 1:32:31-33 provides more information about the kingship of Jesus, linking it appropriately to David as the ancestor of Jesus. The Angel said to Mary:

"And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

Jesus is a worthy king. He fulfilled the condition set in Psalm 132:12, to keep God's covenant. The gospels are replete with the stories of Jesus's drive for justice for the oppressed, restoration of dignity for the abused, and healing for the sick. Jesus, as king and saviour, fulfilled the prophesy in Isaiah 61:1-2:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, [...] he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; [...] to comfort all who mourn."

The challenge for us is how we might carry on the legacy that David longed for, a world of justice and righteousness in which Christ reigns as King.

Revelation 1:4b-8

Revelation 1:4b-8 appears to be the peak of our passages for this Sunday's reflection on Christ as the Eternal King. While we read the book of Revelations as an apocalyptic book (considering the future), we cannot miss the uniqueness of these verses for the present. For not only does the writer refer to historical facts, but there is also a confirmation of prophesies concerning the work of Jesus Christ as King and Saviour. It focuses on who Jesus is, what Jesus has accomplished on behalf of the believer, and what Jesus will do in the future. Added to this is the identity and role(s) for the Christian believer.

In verse 5a, Jesus Christ is introduced as the "faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." Verse 5b clearly states what Christ has done for the world as Christ is described as the "one who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood", while verse 6 expresses what the believer is by virtue of the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ: "made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

To what extent should our 'priesthood' be informed by the fact that the one who is our King and Chief Priest was 'pierced' yet loves and frees by the shedding of blood (the testimony of suffering)? How does the piercing (suffering) of Christ resonate with the suffering of many in the world, especially the abuse of women and girls? What hope does it give the believer that in verse 8, Christ self-identifies as "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Until Christ returns (verse 7), Christ demonstrates that all things from the beginning (alpha) to the end (omega) are under the control of Christ the King. What sort of service is Christ asking of or giving to the believer, who has become a member of Christ's kingdom? (Verse 6b).

Revelations reiterates what we shall see in our passage of John 18:33-37; that the kingdom and dominion of Jesus Christ is not given by this world, and that it is a kingdom that would endure for ever and ever. It is an eternal kingdom. Christ rules over the kings of this world. This calls us to be cautious of unjust dictates by the

systems of this world. We can look to Christ, the King who was pierced and who calls us to act justly so we can give good account on Christ's coming.

John 18:33-37

The aim of the gospel of John is clearly stated in the last verse of its last Chapter. John 20:31 states, "But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The question of Jesus' divinity, who Jesus was, what Jesus represented, and why Jesus was on earth fills the entire book. When Jesus appeared before Pilate, the first question was about the kingship of Jesus. Pilate asked Jesus in verse 33, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

In the preceding verses, Jesus had been arrested following the betrayal by Judas, one of the disciples. The Jewish religious leaders who ordered the arrest had questioned Jesus. Peter, one of Jesus' close disciples had denied Jesus. And now, Jesus was being quizzed by the Roman Governor. It is possible that Pilate had heard about the life and ministry of Jesus. It is possible that he had heard Jesus being called the 'king of the Jews.' Perhaps Pilate wanted to know what being king of the Jews meant and how that infringed on his authority as Governor under Caesar. Interestingly, Nathaniel, in John 1:49, had said to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel."

Pilate's second question, however, is the strange one. He asked Jesus, "What have you done?" Pilate had literally mocked Jesus, saying that the people who had betrayed, arrested, and handed Him over to be tried were Jesus's own people. 'What have you done?', is the question that victims can struggle to answer after they have been abused, raped, or violated. As with the first question, Jesus did not attempt to answer. Probably, Jesus knew that no victim ever got justice trying to vindicate themselves. Instead, Jesus points Pilate to the realm of His kingdom as one that has its origin and content from above. With Pilate's third question, "So you are a king?" Jesus answers in the positive. Jesus was a king and His role as King was to "testify to the truth." The truth is Jesus Christ, as stated in John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus points Pilate to the fact of His kingship, which is not just one of power, but of truth; the reign of one who had suffered abuse, pain, and death.

The passage demonstrates that we can come to Christ the King as one who endured injustice in both religious and political spaces. We can come to Christ whose trust was broken by those closest to Him, but who triumphed as the truth. The passage also challenges us to critique how we might be faithful to relationships and just to all people.

November 28, 2021

Church of Scotland

Advent is also a time when we reflect, above all, on light coming into the world, a light most fully understood in the person of Jesus Christ, the 'light of the world.' There are at least four metaphorical approaches to light which may help guide us through Advent along with the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.

First, there is **light in text**, scripture or stories, illuminated in the telling, the sharing, the reading, the studying. As we read, reflect, hold silence and reflect further, more light is shed on scripture or other inspiring texts or stories. Through our questions, our own insights and those of others the truths within the text are revealed. Karl Barth is said to have entreated his students to look at the world through the lens of scripture and daily news – we have God-given faculties of study and intellect to apply to theology, scripture and all media – part of our 'original blessing' is to apply these faculties shrewdly.

Second, we find **light in community**. On Iona in the summer of 2021 a theme ran through the conversations of many guests and staff, Community Members, and visitors, about identity, belonging and language. In the course of our summer living in community we have individually and collectively reached deeper clarity on the theme of binary and non-binary language. Greater truth and deeper understanding has been revealed through the art of compassionate listening, even when we don't all agree.

Third, there is a **revelatory light** that may surprise us. I regularly worship with Quakers. We meet for worship in stillness (We talk about this being 'silent worship', but in fact it's rarely silent, even if no one talks! 'Stillness' seems to capture that inner sense of quiet that descends when a group intentionally holds silence together). In this stillness, it is remarkable how occasionally, when someone does offer spoken ministry, there can be a sense of at-one-ness, a sense that we were all heading in the same direction. There's nothing odd about this – just a sense of deep connectedness. I choose to call this 'revelatory light'. George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community used to say of such moment: 'if you think that's a coincidence, I wish you a dull life.' My teenage children talk of moments like this as 'casual magic'. Others talk of 'God-moments'. The essence is the same: if we are open, we may come upon surprising times of deep connection that bind us to one another and reveal truths perhaps ordinarily hidden.

Fourth, there is an **inner light** that brings clarity and a sense of deep truth from within. These might be found in moments of wonder, perhaps, or insight through time alone, in quiet, in the outdoors. The invitation here is to weave these four sources of light together as we weave our way through Advent towards Christmas and Epiphany – be courageous in looking for light and hope from within as well as through scripture, tradition and community.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we reach towards the feasts and celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, we are reminded in this and in all our readings of that light, that hope, that promise which has been foretold in the Prophets. At the heart of this reading, and of the Psalm, is the invitation to trust in God who, in spite of our experience of desolation will indeed bring consolation. The promise will be fulfilled. Justice and righteousness will be the blanket that wraps around us. So prepare the way, for 'the days are surely coming' when this good, this love, this righteousness will come in the form of our saviour – the Christ who is both fully human and fully divine.

Psalm 25:1-10

This Psalm reminds me of Michael Leunig prayer (1), which includes the line: 'Across the difficult terrain of our existence we have attempted to build a highway and in so doing have lost our footpath.' When immersed in the enormity of life's tasks or burdens, it can be important to focus on the very next step, to remind ourselves of the strengths and support we have in one another, and in God in whom we trust.

As we set out on the path through Advent towards Christmas and Epiphany, there are movements in this Psalm that are offered to us as a guide, a focus. As we delve deeper into the rhythms of this Psalm of lament:

- Verses 1, 2, 5 and 8 the Psalmist focusses on this trust: 'I lift my soul' (v1), 'I trust' in You (v2). You, the 'God of my salvation' (v5) for whom 'I wait all day long' (v5), are a 'good and upright Lord' (v8).
- Verses 2 and 7 form the confession element of this Psalm, a lament outlining the times of turning from God.
- Verses 4, 5 and 9 offer a way forward – light on that path; for we know, in the midst of our lament that our God will teach, will lead us, to knowledge, to the right way, to right actions, to truth.
- Verses 6 and 10 lift our heads both to the highway of God's all-encompassing love: 'for they have been from old' (v6) and of the very next step we must take on the 'path of the Lord' (v10), which is a path of love and faithfulness.

[1] When I talk to You, by Michael Leunig, Harper Collins, 2014

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

This passage directs our attention to 'the coming of our Lord Jesus.' There are two movements in this passage. First, verses 9 and 10 indicate that part of this pathway towards preparation is to acknowledge joy, gratitude and the power of prayer. These attributes can be reflected in prayer later in the service. The second movement indicates that with these attributes as our bedrock, we will find a) direction, b) abundant love, c) strength of heart and d) be equipped and have positively-focussed

lives. These further attributes may be a focus of our prayers of thanksgiving.

The suggested closing hymn, 'Now go in peace' (CH4 789) echoes the sentiment of this reading.

Luke 21:25-36

In this passage we are challenged to be always reading the signs of the times. Unlike our forebears, we no longer believe that the shapes in the clouds foretell the future, or the patterns in the waves indicate our destiny. To what extent, however, are we alert to the signs of the times as the writer of Luke exhorts us to be here? Do we notice the rising sea levels, the increased number of extreme weather events, the raging forest fires and ask, with urgency: 'what is mine to do?'

As we listen to our politicians heap more taxes on the poorest, and talk about 'levelling up' while banishing refugees and migrants from our shores, and hiding the problem of homelessness, do we ask, with urgency: 'what is mine to do?'

As we read the signs of the times, we are not asked to debate, or to write, or to ponder – but we are asked by our Lord Jesus Christ to 'stand up and raise our heads.' In what ways do you, and your faith community both individually and collectively 'stand up and raise your heads'? What actions, rooted in reflection, can now be taken to bring deeper justice, wider peace to the world?

As we pursue the theme of 'light in the darkness' on this first Sunday in Advent, reflect on the image of the fig tree: read the signs of the times – in the sun, moon and stars; the distress on the earth; the roaring of sea and waves; people will faint – and then we will see the Son of Man. What does it mean notice these signs all around us? Reflect on the notion that this is not a far off time, but right now.