



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR MARCH 2022

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>

Stay safe. God bless.

March 6, 2021

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

As we move into Lent, it is tempting to make services solemn and dark, to preach hellfire and brimstone and to focus on all the evil in the world that we must oppose. This is certainly necessary, and the first week in Lent gives much to support this approach. However, there is also a lot to inspire celebration and joy. This first week in Lent offers us an invitation to a life of abundance – found in the practice of spiritual disciplines and in the freedom of taking responsibility for our own light and darkness. And it assures us of God's care and protection throughout.

May our worship teach us to confront the darkness within and without by becoming those who shine the light of Christ.

READINGS:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11: Instructions to bring the first produce from each crop as a thanksgiving offering to God, and a recognition of God's care, provision and liberation of God's people in the past and the present.

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16: A psalm celebrating God's care and protection of those who dwell in God, and make God's presence their safe refuge.

Romans 10:8b-13: The message of faith in Christ that ensures that we will never be disgraced, because all who call on God's name are saved.

Luke 4:1-13: Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He is challenged to turn stones into food, to jump from the top of the temple, and to gain all the world's wealth and glory by bowing to the tempter. But, he resists, using God's word as his guide.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

What is interesting about the readings for this week is that the focus, rather than being on Jesus' temptation, is on God's care, protection and provision for God's people. When the temptation narrative is placed in that context, our focus shifts dramatically – and importantly – away from fear of failure or succumbing to evil, and on to God's resources that are at our disposal to keep us strong and faithful. Perhaps the great temptation of this week in the lectionary is to make it all about evil and its attack on us and our world. The Lectionary, however, rightly calls us to make this week about God – God's care, God's Word, God's protection, God's provision – which means that we can rest assured that whatever we may face, "the best of all is 'God is with us'" as Wesley said.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: With little scratching of the surface, the three temptations of Jesus are no different than the ones we wrestle with in the world today – power and influence, wealth and consumption, personal appetites and greed. Are there any of the big justice issues that don't fall into one of these general categories? But, it is important for us to focus on God's care and protection, or we can easily fall into the trap of fighting this evil on its own terms. Jesus refuses to do so. Trusting in God, and immersing himself in God's word, Jesus simply embraces a different set of values – self-giving, humility and servanthood, fasting and self-control. Even in the big global issues, simply working to create communities of trust in God's ways that live out these alternative values is a significant way to contribute and to push back the forces of evil. How can your community embody the values of Christ more visibly and publicly?

LOCAL APPLICATION: There are so many things at issue in this week's readings, and similarly in our lives today: issues of identity; issues of security; issues of power; issues of appetite and consumption. It is out of these issues – and the knowledge that it is only "under the shadow of God's wing" that we can hope to face them satisfactorily – that the three Lenten disciplines emerge – fasting (to confront our consumption and appetites); giving of time, abilities and resources (to confront our love of power and pride); prayer (to confront our self-dependence and security issues). As individuals, and as faith communities, embracing these practices – not just in Lent – is the easiest way to confront the evil within and without. As Mother Teresa famously said: "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

March 13th, 2021

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

To what extent does faith offers us blessing and protection, and to what extent is it a call to suffer for the higher cause of God's justice, peace and liberation? Can both of these aspects of faith be true at the same time? These are the challenges posed by this week's Lectionary, and the answer, reflected in Jesus, is a resounding "yes"! We can know the pain of persecution and suffering even as we rest in God's protective presence.

May our worship give us the strength and wisdom to embrace and live these two seemingly contradictory truths.

READINGS:

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18: Abram's faith leads him into relationship with God (righteousness) & God makes a covenant with Abram, promising him that he will have a son to be his heir, and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Psalm 27: A song of assurance for God's protection and care, expressing the longing to live in God's sanctuary and find refuge there. In addition, the psalmist asks for God's mercy and rescue from his enemies.

Philippians 3:17-4:1: Paul's encouragement for believers to stay true for the sake of Christ, and to remember their heavenly priorities, following his example of faithfulness.

Luke 13:31-35: Jesus is warned that Herod wants to kill him, and dismisses this as his face is set toward Jerusalem. Then he laments over the city which fails to heed the prophets.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week's readings paint a picture of contrasts. On the one hand, there is the assurance of God's mercy and protection. Abraham receives promises from God of covenant relationships and descendants as numerous as the stars, and the psalmist affirms God's mercy and protection and the joy of living in God's presence and love. In the letter to the Philippians, Paul also indicates that those who follow faithfully are not headed for destruction, like godless people, but for glory. On the other hand the Gospel reading this week shows the persecution Jesus faced as he faithfully followed God's call. A striking feature of this reading is Jesus' refusal to be daunted by the threats against his life, and his determination to continue his mission in spite of the suffering he will face, like the prophets before him. So, the Lectionary, while it assures us that close, protective relationship with God is available to us, also reminds us that the call to live out God's mission does not mean a life free of pain and struggle. The protection we find in God, then, is not a guarantee that no harm will come to us, but a promise that, whatever we may face, we are ultimately destined for glory, and God's strength will sustain us and keep us faithful to the end. In a world of expediency the call to embrace the tough and challenging path of the Gospel can seem out of place, but, if we will trust it and embrace it, we will discover the life that endures through the worst times and that empowers us in the best times.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: In the quest for justice and to be faithful in following God's call, we can sometimes fall into cynical despair, or shallow optimism which leaves us naive about evil. If we believe our faith and our determination to do "what's right" in God's eyes is a guarantee of safety, we will be sorely disappointed. But, if we can view our relationship with God as a source of strength that enables us to endure the toughest challenges, struggles and conflicts, we will find it to be sufficient. In addition, if we think the world is easily fixed and evil is easily transformed, we delude ourselves. But, if we are able to remain hopeful and committed to transformation, even as we recognise the evil systems and structures that oppose us (as Jesus did) we will be able to face the struggles in our world wisely, optimistically, and creatively. In some sense, though, this commitment may include a call to release our "right to protect ourselves" and like Jesus risk crucifixion even as we seek to reach out to those who hate us.

LOCAL APPLICATION: There are two truths that we need to balance in our personal journey and as communities of faith. The first is that relationship with God, is a “protection” of sorts from the woes of the world. When we follow Christ, we learn ways to live well – we learn to love others and ourselves, which inevitably creates deeper and more stable relationships; we learn to devote ourselves to God and God’s purposes, which offer us meaning and fulfilment; we learn to refuse to play the games of greed, revenge and abuse of power, which controls our appetites and keeps us from self-destruction; we learn spiritual disciplines which increase our self-care and health. But, there is also a second truth – people who follow Christ are not “better” than others. God’s “blessing” is not a reward for goodness, and suffering and difficulty are not God’s judgment or curse for our sinfulness. The Gospel offers us doorways to life, while ensuring that we know that God has no favourites, and that our call is to invite all others to find life in Christ with us. How do we celebrate the gifts of following Christ, while avoiding the self-righteousness that so often characterizes people of faith? And how can we trust in God’s protection while remaining faithful and hopeful when we are persecuted or when we suffer? Perhaps you can explore that this week.

March 20th, 2021

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

The theme this week is a powerful follow on from last week. The issues of suffering, judgment, repentance, compassion, and justice all come together in ways that are both comforting and disturbing. One of the most challenging and important questions we must face today is how we are to respond to suffering. This week the Lectionary leaves us no option to answer Jesus’ call to compassion and justice.

May we be drawn deeper into the mystery of God’s infinite grace and all-embracing justice as we journey through Lent in worship.

READINGS:

Isaiah 55:1-9: An invitation from God for those who are hungry and thirsty to receive food and drink free of charge, to seek God while God may be found, and to recognise that God’s ways are much higher than the ways of human beings.

Psalms 63:1-8: A psalm of longing for God’s nourishing presence, and of thanksgiving for God’s satisfying care and life.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13: The disobedience and rebelliousness of the Israelites in the wilderness is a warning to us to resist the temptations we face. But, God provides, and strengthens us, if we will allow it.

Luke 13:1-9: Jesus confronts the idea that natural or human-initiated disasters only befall the sinful or the evil, and challenges the self-righteousness of his hearers, calling them to repentance, even as he reflects, in parable, on God's mercy that gently waits for us to wake up and start bearing fruit.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week the readings move us very powerfully from last week's theme, into a "next step". Last week, we were challenged to recognise that faith, on one level, is not a protection from the world's woes, but rather, it is a call to take up the cross, and embrace God's life even when we have to suffer to do so. On another level, though, we were invited to celebrate that faith does lead us into a life that is deeper, richer and more meaningful than one of faithlessness. This week, we are taken one step further – we are to reject the idea that suffering is God's punishment for sin, and blessing (or the avoidance of suffering) God's reward. Rather, we are called to recognise our own need of God's mercy and grace, and to respond by "bearing fruit" – manifesting the life of God's reign, and bringing grace and mercy into the world. This week we are shocked out of our complacency, and challenged to be more determined in our commitment to follow Christ, even as we are assured of the gifts of God's presence and God's provision to fulfil our calling.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. – C.S. Lewis

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The significance of this week's Gospel reading, in the light of the many natural disasters, acts of violence, and financial struggle in our world over the last few years, is nothing less than obvious. While much can be said – and has been said – about whether these things are God's punishment or not, Jesus closes the book on that discussion very firmly. But, he doesn't close the book on the significance of such tragic events for every person – it reminds us that we all need God's grace and mercy, and that we cannot stand off and debate the pain of others academically while ignoring the part our self-righteousness plays in their pain. There is a sense in the suffering of the poor and marginalised is not a judgement on the them – it is a judgment on those who have allowed the inequalities that made them vulnerable to such suffering. We cannot help but be challenged by the statistics that reveal that those who are the worst hit by climate change, war, and economic crises are the poorest and most vulnerable in our world. Nor can we be anything but challenged by Jesus call to bear fruit by serving and protecting these "least" ones.

LOCAL APPLICATION: There is an unfortunate tendency in our world to turn away from pain – to stop looking, to avoid it and to distract ourselves. And when this doesn't work, we sometimes turn to judgement and self-righteousness. But suffering is, as C.S. Lewis says, God's megaphone to rouse us. It is not that God creates suffering, but that God speaks very loudly through pain. And it's not only our own pain that God speaks through. When others are in pain, God's voice is clear and challenging – calling us repent of our avoidance and self-protection, and challenging us to bear the fruit of caring, compassionate action on behalf of the suffering. While news shows bring the suffering of the world into our homes, it may be that God is speaking to you through these stories to be more aware of those who are suffering right on your doorstep. Who needs you to release your self-righteousness and complacency and offer them compassion and help right now in your community?

March 27th, 2021

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

The call to repentance continues this week. Although the focus shifts just a little bit, to themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Often these aspects of the spiritual life are viewed primarily from an individualist perspective. This week's readings, however, bring together the individual and the communal. Our reconciliation with God leads us into the "ministry of reconciliation". Our forgiveness brings wholeness, not just to ourselves, but to others through us. This connection between the "me" and the "we" is such an important theme of the Gospel, and a good place to linger in this week's worship, while also looking at the implications of the practice of forgiveness for justice in our world.

May you and your community know this forgiveness and reconciliation in this Lenten season.

READINGS:

Joshua 5:9-12: The Israelites celebrate the Passover, as God proclaims that the "disgrace of Egypt" is removed from them, and have their first meal in Canaan. The day after that the manna stops arriving.

Psalms 32: A celebration of the joy and healing that confession brings, and the restoration that God offers those who admit their sin. God's promise to instruct and guide those who trust in God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21: In Christ we are reconciled to God, and we are called to invite others into this reconciliation – both between people and God, and between people and people.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32: Jesus' parable of the loving and forgiving father who welcomes back his wasteful and repentant son, and seeks to reconcile him with his resentful elder brother.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The theme this week stands out very clearly in these readings – God removes disgrace; God forgives and restores; the prodigal is welcomed home and reconciled to his family; God reconciles us to God's Self, and to each other, and we are called to do the same. Forgiveness flows from God's infinite and unconditional grace, and is received through honest confession and repentance. But reconciliation with God, as much as it brings personal healing and restoration, is not only personal. It is also social, drawing us back into reconciliation with others, and into passing on to others the healing and grace we have received.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: Forgiveness and reconciliation are a global necessity, but are, unfortunately, a very scarce resource. Denial, projection, deflecting blame, and covering up appear to be the strategies of our age – in governments, in corporations, and even in the Church. The inevitable consequence of this is that those who are victimised and damaged, are generally left to bear their pain alone, with no hope of restitution, and no acknowledgement, apology or offer of help from those who have inflicted their suffering on them. We have seen this during the economic meltdown; we have seen it in third world countries, where exploitation by wealthy nations have left these countries bare of resources, and in deep debt (Haiti is a good example of this); we have seen it in the Church, where victims of abuse have been silenced or accused to protect the institution. As long as this remains the practice in our world, we will remain broken, and we will continue to break ourselves and others. Now is the time to proclaim that forgiveness is possible, is necessary and is the way to healing for us all. How can we call our world to honest confession, true, practical repentance, and into the life-giving way of forgiveness received and shared?

LOCAL APPLICATION: Our churches and communities are ripped apart by anger, hatred, vengeance and deceit. We know that when people live together – whether in a town or in a household – there will be disagreements, differences of belief and culture, and hurt inflicted on one another, whether intentional or not. We also know that maintaining the cycle of pain through broken relationships, grudges, judgment and paybacks only brings greater suffering. Jesus has offered us both the principle and the role model – in his teaching and in his actions Jesus demonstrated the healing and restoration that comes when we forgive and reconcile. It is a shame that we find it so hard to live this teaching out. But, if we, as followers of Christ can't learn to admit our sin, repent of wrong action, and reconcile with those we have hurt – or have hurt us – what hope is there for the world?