



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

### HOME PRAYER PACK FOR APRIL 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.

**April 3, 2022**

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

Lent moves toward its conclusion, and this week, offers us a surprising invitation – to extravagant, celebratory adoration of the Incarnate One. In the midst of this sacrificial journey, this week is both refreshing, and deeply challenging, refusing to allow us the luxury of depression, cynicism or hopelessness.

May you know the joy of celebration in the midst of your Lenten fast this week.

**READINGS:**

**Isaiah 43:16-21**: The God who has saved Israel in the past invites God's people to believe that a new salvation is coming for them in their exile.

**Psalms 126**: A psalm celebrating the return of exiles to Jerusalem, and asking for God's grace as they seek to rebuild their lives and their homeland.

**Philippians 3:4b-14**: Paul, who has every reason to trust in his goodness under the law, explains why he chooses rather to trust in Christ for his righteousness, and how he commits to continually striving to reach the reward that is promised in Christ.

**John 12:1-8**: In Bethany, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Judas, however is unimpressed.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

In a rather startling turn, right before Jesus' enters his period of suffering, the Lenten readings move us to a place of joy and celebration. Isaiah promises the exiles a new salvation of God; the psalm celebrates this salvation as it is realised; Paul celebrates the righteousness he has found in Christ, which far surpasses the value of the "goodness" he enjoyed under the law; and Mary celebrates Jesus and her extravagant love for him through this almost embarrassing public display. This can be quite shocking in the midst of the discipline and confession that usually characterises the Lenten period. But, the message is clear – the journey through the desert is a journey toward life and joy, for it leads us to recognise, and own for ourselves, the truth that Christ brings us salvation – life in all its fullness. Mary, Paul and the people of Israel all received this gift with tremendous joy, and wild expressions of love. This passionate worship of the Saviour, is a challenge to us to allow our faith to be not just of the head, but of the heart, and not just of the way of justice, judgment or righteousness, but also of the way of joy, celebration and appreciation. And, although Jesus proclaims Mary's act as a preparation for his burial – with the shadow of the cross looming over this scene – the promise of God's life, and the demonstration that neither evil nor death can extinguish the love of Christ, give cause for celebration even as we prepare to remember the sacrifice.

**CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

*"All [people] will be called to give an account for everything good thing they beheld in life and did not enjoy." – The Jerusalem Talmud.*

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** Two characteristics of our current world that contribute to injustice and suffering: 1) Inappropriate or extravagant celebration that ignores the cries of the poor, while squandering resources on frivolous and selfish pleasure. This injustice is rife throughout the world. 2) Judgemental asceticism that frowns on all light-hearted, fun and pleasurable experiences. This, too, is rife. However, authentic Celebration is a necessary discipline in following Christ, and in the fight against injustice. Poor and suffering communities often use singing, dancing and celebration as a way to rise above their circumstances, as did the slaves, the Civil Rights activists, and the anti-apartheid strugglers. As followers of Christ, our witness and work in the world is strengthened when we find ways to celebrate in inclusive, appropriate and life-affirming ways. One of the great challenges of Lent, and of this week's Lectionary, is the call to ensure that our ability to celebrate is not hindered by difficult circumstances or by suffering and sacrifice. When, like Christ, we can embrace celebration and joy as "disciplines" even in the worst of times, we become truly life-giving reflections of God's Reign. What might it mean for our world if we took the call to celebration more seriously?

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** The message of Jesus is good news indeed, but unfortunately this truth is all too often obscured by those who seek to follow it. Through failure to celebrate – while frowning on the joy and play of others – and claiming a joy that we restrict only to those who look or believe like we do, we have left the impression that following Christ is about judgment, hatred, displeasure and legalism. As so many people seek to pour out the perfume of their lives at the feet of Christ, we stand by, like Judas, and judge, while hypocritically keeping life's abundance for ourselves. Is it possible that this Lent we are being called to true celebration, allowing ourselves to be surprised and moved to passionate joy by the truth of the reign of God, while inviting all who will to join us in true celebration wherever and however we may find it? On the other hand, it is tempting to view celebration and praise as something that is linked to our circumstances "going right". It is often our suffering that creates crises of faith, and that rob us of sustaining joy. But, when we have learned to celebrate as a true Kingdom "discipline" we find the strength to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, while uplifting and strengthening them, and we also find the courage and hope to love, share, include and forgive without feeling the need to stand apart and judge.

**April 10th, 2022**

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

There is no question that the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is one of the most profound depictions of God's Reign in the New Testament. In contrast to the usual displays of military might, and the pomp and ceremony with which conquering monarchs entered the cities of their captors (as Pilate may well have on the same day from the other side of town), Jesus enters with humility, festivity, and peace, demonstrating the "upside-down" nature of God's Reign. Nevertheless, this subversive realm is not easily stopped, as the Pharisees discovered.

May our Palm Sunday worship confront us with the challenging call of God's subversive Reign.

**READINGS:**

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29:** A celebration of God's goodness and faithful love, answering prayer, turning the rejected stone into the capstone, and inviting people into God's presence.

**Luke 19:28-40:** Jesus rides into Jerusalem as the people offer praises. The Pharisees though are unimpressed, calling on Jesus to silence the crowd.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

The heart of the Palm Sunday celebration this year is God coming to God's people in faithfulness and love. Jesus enters Jerusalem as the one who will suffer – this is the doorway to his passion – and in his suffering invites people into God's grace and presence. And this arrival of God will not be resisted or stopped. It can only be received and enjoyed. It is interesting to note that only Luke includes the Pharisees' plea for Jesus to ask the crowds to be silent, and Jesus' response that if the people were to stop singing, the stones would cry out. It is most likely that the Pharisees were concerned for how Rome would interpret this procession and the songs the people were singing. The last thing they wanted was a revolution – for both personal and national reasons. But, Jesus' response demonstrates Luke's understanding of God's salvation that comes in Christ. God's Reign, which for Luke is the expression of God's salvation, and the reality into which the saved are brought, is unstoppable. It is personal and social, and is as concerned with justice as it is with personal restoration and forgiveness. In proclaiming that even the stones would cry out, Jesus declares that God's Reign will not be silenced by the powers that be, and that it includes and impacts the whole of creation. When God's Sent One comes, the entire created order knows it and responds to it. In a similar way, we who witness this event again at Palm Sunday, are called to know and respond to the One who brings God's irresistible Reign into our world.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** This week we are startled into seeing God's Reign afresh, as the subversive, empire-challenging reality that it is. Even as the Pharisees try to silence the praises, and as the people fail to understand what they're celebrating, Jesus just keeps coming, embracing the suffering to come, and manifesting God's new way of being and reigning. The Reign of God continues to infiltrate our world; its message still being proclaimed and revealed; and the powers-that-be still try to silence it – with death if necessary. But, our call, as followers of Christ, is to refuse to be silenced. To continue to challenge unjust empires and to hold open the door to God's Reign to all who will come, refusing to bow to the threats of factions, religious exclusivity or political expediency.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** In every life and community, the Reign of God enters as a disruptive and invitational influence. It subverts every petty power-struggle, turf-war and personal empire that we might set up, and calls us to embrace this new self-giving, inclusive, God-connected way of being. The challenge for us is to take this message seriously, and strive, daily, to embody God's Reign in every interaction, every decision, and in how we live together in community. When we allow our faith to be drawn into the service of political, economic, or even religious agendas other than God's Reign, we are guilty of trying to silence the praise, and we find ourselves outside of God's transforming purposes. The work of justice is done as much in the small unseen conversations and justice-supporting actions as in the big moments.

### **April 15, 2022 GOOD FRIDAY**

The readings for Good Friday do not change from year to year, but the challenge of the Lectionary is to allow the Gospel of the year to add its particular emphasis to this meditation. This means that, while we remember Jesus' death, we do so through the lens of Luke's understanding of Jesus as Saviour, of the salvation Jesus offers, and of the universality of God's grace and justice.

May our meditations this year, and the voice of Luke which informs them, lead us deeper into the holistic salvation that Jesus the saviour offers to us through his death.

### **READINGS:**

**Isaiah 52:13-53:12:** A song of the suffering servant, who is persecuted and dies for the sake of others ("us").

**Psalms 22:** A Psalm of lament, grieving the suffering and abandonment of the writer, but celebrating the inevitable rescue that will come, and praising the God who brings this salvation.

**Hebrews 10:16-25:** We have confidence to approach God, because of Christ's sacrifice for us, and can now live in hope, in intimacy with God, and in love-in-action.

**John 18:1 – 19:42:** Jesus is arrested, tried, crucified and buried – and through it all, reveals the brokenness and lack of integrity of those who face him, while revealing his own truth, integrity and divine character.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

Although the Good Friday readings are the same every year, this year (Year C) the Gospel of Luke adds a unique voice to the service – in spite of the fact that there is no reading from Luke. For Luke, Jesus is uniquely viewed as the “Saviour” who brings God’s salvation to women and men. Also, salvation, for Luke, is a holistic gift that includes forgiveness, social restoration and reconciliation, justice and peace. With this in mind, the usual questions of Good Friday can challenge us in a new and transforming way. Did Jesus live to die, or did he die in order to live and bring life to all? This is more than semantics. It opens up our faith to the reality that what Jesus came to do was not about death so much as it is about life in all its forms and possibilities. Jesus died because he refused to allow a lesser life – evil, compromise, expediency – take him over. He died because he embraced a life of love fully and completely, and would not be moved from it. And in so doing, he lived fully, and gave an example for us to follow and a way for us to enter life. In addition, Luke’s Gospel (and the Good Friday readings) calls for a response. What Jesus did was not simply to give us a ticket to bliss in heaven. Rather he opened the door for us to be forgiven – which requires us to face our darkness and brokenness – and to live fully, as he did, if we will also die to everything that keeps us from real, abundant life, and embrace a life of love. Good Friday, then, confronts us with what life is really meant to be, and with the price we must pay to find it – which, in the end, turns out to be much smaller than it may at first appear.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** In so many ways religion has come to be irrelevant to the big issues of our world. However, what Jesus did in his death goes to the heart of the crises we face. In a world of war, Jesus refuses to take up arms, and gives himself to death. In a world of corruption in the halls of power, Jesus exposes expediency and manipulation, and dies with his integrity intact. In a world of poverty, Jesus gives up everything in order to offer life to others. Jesus makes it clear, whatever the situation, practical, sacrificial, cross-bearing love, is the greatest confrontation and challenge to the broken systems of our world. And, while some view love as ‘wimpy’, the Sunday that is coming reveals it’s true, death-defeating power. What does this say to us about being Easter people in our world today?

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** A Christianity that is about nothing more than a guarantee of personal forgiveness and a life of eternal bliss is the antithesis of what Christ came to do – it is selfish, escapist and unloving. It removes us from any cost, and deceives us into believing that all we have to do is agree to a set of ideas and sit back until we get to heaven. Good Friday does not leave us with this delusion, however. Jesus confronts selfishness and self-protectiveness at every turn. He challenges us with his willingness to give his life in order to practically love even his enemies. He disrupts our comfort by mirroring back to us the extent of our depravity and collusion in the evil systems of our world. But, he also opens a way for us to find a new life now. He leads us into the abundant life that comes when we embrace the cross, commit to love, and refuse to settle for less than true, authentic, generous living.

## **April 17th, 2022 EASTER SUNDAY**

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

What does Easter Sunday have to say to a world of injustice? Everything! When life triumphs over death, when insignificant women are the first witnesses, when the powers of empire cannot silence a ragtag band of ordinary people, something different is at work in the world. This is our hope, our inspiration and our challenge.

May your Easter be a moment, not just of celebration, but of awakening and of mobilisation to find life, bring life, create life in every place of death in your world. He is risen! Alleluia!

### **READINGS:**

**Acts 10:34-43:** Peter preaches that God shows no favouritism, but that anyone who believes in Jesus, who did good and healed those oppressed by the devil, was crucified, and was raised, receives life and forgiveness.

**Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24:** A song celebrating God’s mercy and strength, and celebrating the restoration of God after struggle – foreshadowing “the stone that the builders rejected” who “became the cornerstone”.

**1 Corinthians 15:19-26:** Christ is the one who died and came back to life in order to bring all people to life. Finally, death itself is destroyed.

**John 20:1-18:** Mary finds the empty tomb and reports it to the disciples. Peter and John investigate and witness the empty tomb, but Mary remains and becomes the first to meet, and witness to, the Risen Christ.

OR Luke 24:1-12: The women find the tomb empty and meet two angels who report that Jesus is risen. They return and report the event to the disciples, who are initially sceptical.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME**

This Easter the focus is, of course, on the resurrection, but the particular emphasis is on the liberation that Jesus brings. It is notable that the Acts reading is included, reminding us of that great moment of inclusion in the church's history, where Peter proclaims, "But God has shown me that I should no longer call anyone impure or unclean." In addition, both Gospel readings focus on the women's role in the great resurrection drama, especially Mary Magdalene – another great moment of inclusion in the history of God's people. The message is clear – the resurrection is not just about finding life for after we die. It is a doorway to life now for all who are denied life through exclusion, oppression or judgment. The challenge, then, is to embrace this life each day – to learn to become both those who are enlivened by God's resurrection life, in the face of the violence, oppression, injustice and death of our world, and to become those who bring resurrection to those around us, through service, welcome, generosity, compassion, solidarity, dignity and love. As long as the resurrection is only an anomaly in history, it has no real value for us. But, when it becomes a reality that infiltrates our lives and our beings, it transforms us into those whose every thought, word, action, value and attitude celebrates and releases life into our world.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** Easter is celebrated the world over for the life that Jesus brings to us all. Unfortunately, though, the Easter message of inclusion, liberation and life is often subverted by versions of faith that project Christ's life only into the heavenly future, and only for a select few. In the name of this Gospel, people of other faiths and nations have been exploited, oppressed and even killed. Many of the global inequalities in the world today are the product of this distortion of Christ's message and purpose. In the light of this, it may be appropriate to spend some time in repentance, and in renewing our commitment to share Christ's inclusive liberating life with all people. This commitment applies to issues like immigration, poverty, war, people of other cultures, religions, races, genders and even sexual orientations. The message of this year's Easter celebration is this: as long as we deny life to others, we have failed to embrace and experience resurrection for ourselves. What specific places of oppression may God be calling you to reach out to with resurrection life?

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** Every community wrestles with the forces of death both within and without. Within, we must confront the temptation to exclude those who disagree with us, the temptation to form closed, and critical cliques, and the temptation to keep Christ's life to ourselves, and as a future hope only. In addition, the power struggles that beset every group of people are not absent in the Church, which always leaves some among us feeling silenced, sidelined and wounded.

Without, we face the temptation to turn a blind eye to the dark places in our communities, to stand on the sidelines and judge those who are suffering, or to blame them for their own pain, and to close our doors to those who don't fit our profile of a Christian. But, if we are to embrace the true power of resurrection life, we must turn our backs on our fears and prejudices, release our hold on power, and invite the hurting, the different, the marginalised into Christ's liberating life. Who are the people in your community who need to hear this invitation in your community this week? How can you be a community that leads others into a liberating encounter with the Risen Christ?

**April 24th, 2022**

Rev Dr Karen Campbell, Church of Scotland

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

We celebrate Easter as a powerful, life-altering moment which changed the course of world history and set the disciples upon paths that they could never have imagined. We celebrate with the Sacrament of Holy Communion and lilies and joyous Alleluias. The world now celebrates with chocolate eggs and bunny rabbits, reflecting some of the traditions throughout the world, where this time of year has always been about new life. However, let's remember that the first day was mired in the after-effects of death, of grief, of fear, of paralysis for what was and what might be. The disciples who would be the force to bring Christianity to the world, still had not fully processed the Message. They closed the doors and stopped, much like every family after a death.

The events of Easter slowly peel away the after-effects of grief and loss, until they find themselves in a new place, with a different dawn to look towards. The encounter in St John moves them from grief to hope and the singing of Alleluias. That is the place we want to place ourselves into today, just before the Alleluias fully begin.

### **Acts 5:27-32**

The background to the Acts of the Apostles is conflict. The account of Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem is one of challenge and like the background to the Gospel lesson, later events in the history of Israel inform the writing of Acts. The Apostles were clearly gaining a following and people were listening to the message of Christ Crucified and the Sanhedrin were less than happy.

The Acts of the Apostles continues the powerful message of St Luke's Gospel, and the variety of people God calls into service in surprising ways to show the Spirit at work in the world and to inspire faith in others. The early Christian community are called to remember the surprising ways in which the Spirit calls people into action and faith. From Elizabeth and Zechariah at the beginning of Luke, to these disciples

in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Christian Church, new things are afoot and what was required was strength of character and a resolute decision to preach Christ Crucified as Messiah. It is not too late to follow Christ and His message will give strength to proclaim the Good News.

Arrest and imprisonment by the authorities will not hamper their preaching. The powers of the world cannot overpower the redemptive power of Christ. When they preach "in His name" they will have authority, even though they are uneducated men.

### **Psalm 118:14-29 (or Psalm 150)**

The psalm is a psalm of praise for a glorious day and in the true fashion of the Psalms, we are called to sing of God's glory. The psalm again and again uses the name of God, and we are to see God's name in relation to the number of times which we have been saved from dark days.

Verse 22 is used five times in the New Testament: in Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7. It is used to show the work which God has achieved and completed in Jesus and the powerful foundation on which the Church is built. It also inextricably links Jesus of the Church to the ancient faith of His forebears.

The words in Verse 23 are the reportedly the words which Princess Elizabeth is said to have proclaimed when the horsemen arrived and informed her that her half sister Mary had died, and she was now Queen. It is a psalm of redemption from dark days and a celebration of the new possibilities which now lie before, all within the providence of God.

### **Revelation 1:4-8**

By the time John of Patmos was writing his Revelation, the early generation of Christians were nearing the end of their lives, if not already dead. It is highly unlikely that this is the same John as the person who wrote the Gospel. This view is ancient, with the Dionysius of Alexandria making this declaration circa AD250. The Gospel of St John and The Revelation of St John are not alike in language, thought, grammar or themes.

This was a new generation, with challenges which the first generation had not experienced. They were a recognised faith, and they were under attack by the Roman Empire. The Church had to face authorised persecution under Domitian and times were hard. He was the first Emperor, except for Caligula, who demanded Emperor worship and his persecutions were widespread and vicious.

This is the lens through which we read the Revelation.

John of Patmos likes the number seven. It is used 54 times in his Revelation about different things. In ancient times it was the perfect number and symbolised perfection. He writes to the seven churches in Asia, which is the Roman province, and was once the realm of Attalus the Third, who willed it to the Romans on his death, rather than the continent as we know it today. In talking of the seven churches, John of Patmos is (by meaning) speaking to the whole world as he knew it.

There are quite a few Roman and Greek allusions in Revelation which are not immediately obvious to us today. John declares Jesus as the "*firstborn of the dead*", and in doing so gives Him an eschatological role. Resurrection for John declared the new age. He also declares Jesus as the One "*who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*", another way of saying ruler of all. In Roman Empire terms, it was a way of calling Jesus, 'Caesar'. This was a very bold move. Caesar was the one to whom each Roman citizen and subject owed their obedience and in using this phrase John was challenging the very foundation of the Roman Empire. The Greeks also referred to Zeus in these terms and so there was no ambiguity of John's choice of words.

### **John 20:19-31**

In the aftermath of a death, we often look back to words we remember being said by the person we love. Words which bring comfort. But we also remember words which jar and can act as a counterpoint to the narrative we have in our memories. Today we read a story of memories from the evening when they first came to the tomb, bidden by the women.

Why are they hidden behind closed doors? The text talks about "for fear of the Jews". Which Jews? Surely from what we have read it is more the Romans of whom they should be scared? We must put ourselves into the situation of the first hearers of this story. Those who were followers of John, who wrote for their community about Christ, lived in a time when the Romans had overrun Israel and the Temple was destroyed. This destruction led to a separation between the Jews who had worshipped there, and the fledgling Jewish-Christian community, who had until AD70 shared in the worship of the Temple. The Temple worship was now re-sited at the coast and the Christians had to go it alone. This split led to tensions and conflict. The author of this Gospel reflected their own experience of persecution and separation from the Jewish community.

In this part of the Gospel Jesus appears to His disciples and Thomas is absent from the first encounter and is rightly sceptical before the second one. Does Thomas not represent each and every person who has pondered faith and how these things happened? It is all too easy to separate Thomas from the group rather than see that he represents all of us.

In His first encounter with the disciples, the resurrected Jesus breathes on them. In this breath, much like the *Ruach* of God at the very point of Creation, are they being offered God's Spirit as a blessing? Christ is offering the disciples, not only breath, but

life in this encounter. It is an important turning point in their grief. They are not only offered life but offered it in a way which requires them to exercise it with others. They are called to pass the baton on and bless others with life in Christ's fullness.

The next part of the discourse tells us of Jesus' encounter with Thomas when He invites Thomas to touch Him. He is making it real for those of us who come afterwards that Christ's resurrection is not some other-worldly event, but very much of skin and bone.

There is an interesting point to consider. When Jesus appears to Mary at the tomb, (verses which would have been read on Easter Day), Jesus tells her in verse 17: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Ten verses later Jesus is inviting Thomas to do just that – to touch Him. Is Ascension declared here? Is it recognised and celebrated in the spiritual upward movement and declaration by Thomas, "My Lord and My God."?

Sometimes in our grief Christ meets us in our locked rooms and our hearts to begin the process of encouraging us to unlock them, and see what's on the other side. This is what Thomas does in this encounter.