



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR MAY 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.

May 1, 2022

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

The Resurrection of Jesus is not just a historical event, or a source of praise and adoration. It is also the centre of God's calling on each of us. We do not just receive God's resurrection life, we live it. And we don't just live Christ's resurrection life, we also pass it on by embracing others with the love, grace, healing and compassion of Christ.

May God renew our sense of call as we worship, this week.

READINGS:

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20): Saul travels to Damascus with the intention of arresting any followers of Jesus, but on the road, he is confronted with a vision of Christ that changes him into a disciple.

Psalms 30: The Psalmist experiences a time of great suffering, but experiences God's deliverance, and commits to a life of praise and thanksgiving.

Revelation 5:11-14: The Lamb is worshipped by the creatures and elders around God's throne, because he was slain, was victorious, and is worthy.

John 21:1-19: Peter is restored by Jesus at the breakfast on the beach, and then called, once again, to leadership and to follow Christ – even to death.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week the lectionary takes us from last week's simple, but profound, proclamation of worship, as reflected in Thomas's encounter with the Risen Christ, to the challenge of Easter, as reflected in Peter's restoration and calling. Calling is, perhaps, the word that most clearly reflects what the Scriptures seek to tell us this week – Saul's conversion and call to be a follower (ultimately apostle) of Jesus, the psalmist's rescue and commitment (calling) to live as a worshipper, the worship of the heavenly beings offered to the Lamb who faithfully fulfilled his calling to be slain and to conquer death and evil, and of course, Peter, forgiven for his denial, restored to leadership of the apostles, and called to follow Christ even to his death. In response to this, the Lectionary invites us to hear the call which comes to us and our communities in Christ's name – the call to worship, the call to be transformed into true followers of Jesus, and the call to minister to others in Christ's name even to death. The resurrection life of Jesus, then, is not just a gift we receive, but is a gift which shapes how we live, and it is a gift we share with others as we seek to proclaim the Reign of God to the world.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

A sense of calling can be a double-edged sword on the level of global politics. From the ancient "divine right of kings" to the current sense among some nations and leaders that they are appointed by God as God's special agents, much injustice and harm is done in the name of a divine calling. However, when the calling of Christ – to sacrificial, other-centred living – is recognised, the result is a powerful contribution to the world, and the increase of

justice. Often this calling leads us into conflict with the powers-that-be and their own sense of entitlement – think of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela – and this is where the sacrifice comes in. But, as more and more followers of Christ take up their place in challenging the wrong use of power, so the world is slowly transformed. Where can you identify abuse of power in your world, nation or community? What can you do to stand for the values of Christ and challenge this abuse? So, at its heart, our call is not to Christian exceptionalism or domination, but to being part of the immune system of the world in which, in our own small way, we stand against and challenge the diseases of our world, and we bring health and strength through living an alternative, Christ-centred life.

Local Application:

Two struggles that plague our world, and contribute to the pain and cruelty that we inflict on each other, are a sense of meaninglessness and a focus on self-interest. The first leaves us in despair and apathy, without motivation to reach for our best – God-created – selves. The second drives us into the endless tyranny of our own appetites and addictions, and leaves us unable to connect effectively with others and with our world. The results of both are anger, aggression, and a lack of compassion. The Gospel's clear call to a different, higher, God- and other-loving life is an antidote to these plagues, and offers us both a personal sense of purpose, and a commitment to the well being of others and to the world in general. As we are impacted by the life of Christ, as we commit ourselves to follow Christ, we find ourselves in a similar position to that of Peter. Like him we have failed Jesus and ourselves. Like him, we may want to forget about trying again – to just go back to our 'normal' lives, and not risk failing so publicly again. Like him, we may see others who we feel are more faithful, more equipped, more 'spiritual' and wonder why God doesn't call them. But, like Peter, God does not let us off the hook, and calls us anyway – so that God's grace and glory may be seen in and through us, and so that God's life may touch others through us. When we hear and answer God's call, we find ourselves connected with the universal activity of God's reign, but we live and work it out locally in our own neighbourhood. What specific calling has God given you and your church community? How can you re-affirm that calling today?

May 8th, 2022

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

The celebration of life continues, this week with a story from the early church of Tabitha being raised from death, and with Jesus proclaiming himself as the Shepherd whose sheep know his voice and who find life in him. There is comfort here for all who are wrestling with the forces of death, however big or small, in their lives.

May you continue to know the life of Easter in your worship this week.

READINGS:

Acts 9:36-43: Peter raises Tabitha of Joppa, which brings many people to faith.

Psalms 23: David's famous Psalm of thanksgiving, praise and confidence in God for the gift of life.

Revelation 7:9-17: The hosts of heaven praise God, and the martyrs rejoice in the God who is their Shepherd.

John 10:22-30: Jesus speaks of himself as the Shepherd of his followers who are the sheep he cares for, and who know his voice.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The season of resurrection continues, and this week is brought together with the 'Shepherd' metaphor, which appears in three of the four readings. The two underlying messages that emerge appear to be: 1) In Christ life is to be found even in the face of death – from Peter's raising of Tabitha, to the Psalmist's confidence of travelling through the valley of the shadow of death to finally dwell in God's house, to the heavenly gathering of those who have died as martyrs in the persecution of the church, to Jesus' promise that his sheep receive eternal life from him, this message is clear. 2) The Shepherd is also a messianic, and a subversive, image. Where the leaders of Israel had failed to be faithful shepherds, and where the Roman Empire had slaughtered followers (sheep) of Christ, Jesus stands as the one who has died but has risen – defying the death-dealing powers that be, and winning life and security for his sheep. This week, then, we are called to embrace the life of Christ which defies death, and which subverts all the forces of evil and Empire that robs us of life, and we are called to be "good shepherds" in the way of Jesus who bring life to those under our care.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

In the midst of all of the bad news that the world brings us of war, violence, crime, climate change, and death, the message of resurrection is both a comfort and a call to remain strong and courageous in working for a more just and peaceful world. In addition, this week's readings speak a prophetic message to those in any kind of leadership, challenging them to be true, life-giving shepherds, and calling us to hold them accountable, while retaining our primary allegiance to Jesus as the one true Shepherd. On a global level this means that we must actively oppose unjust laws and structures that rob people of life.

Wherever there is poverty and need, we can oppose international debt structures and unjust trade practices that make such poverty worse. Wherever power is abused and there is corruption, we can support organisations and initiatives that call for transparency and we can blow the whistle on those who are corrupt whenever we encounter them. Wherever there is war and violence, we can work for peace and support any initiatives that contribute to peaceful resolution of conflict and to regulation on the trade and ownership of firearms. In any way that we oppose the forces of death in our world, we contribute to the growth and celebration of life. In addition, in whatever situations we exercise leadership, we can follow in the serving and sacrificial footsteps of Jesus, seeking to be good shepherds in bringing life to those for whom we care. In all of these ways we embrace the resurrection as a daily, lived and life-giving reality.

Local Application:

The dual theme of this week is an invitation to Christian communities and individuals to enter more fully, and more practically, into the Easter journey. On the one hand, we all face the threat of death – the big deaths of loss of loved ones or personal tragedy, and the small ones of broken relationships or difficult life circumstances – and we need to be reminded that life is found in the midst of death. The comfort this message offers is also a call to keep faith, to continue to strive to live in compassionate and life-giving ways, and to live our own leadership – as parents, educators, business or community leaders – as good shepherds, providing, protecting and guiding those under our care. Ultimately, when justice fails in any community, it is both a crisis of leadership and a crisis of faith. The resurrection addresses both needs, and gives us the resources we need to engage the hurting places in our world. If each individual sought to bring life to each person he or she encountered each day, and if each person sought to be a good shepherd to others, our communities would be places of equality, sufficiency, peace, justice and celebration. May we learn to be life-giving shepherds like this!

May 15, 2022

The power of Easter lies not just in the life it offers us, but also in the way we are recruited to be life-bringers. This week, the role of love in leading us to life – and enabling us to bring life to others – stands out in the Lectionary. Love is never easy, it is always messy, unpredictable and scandalously inclusive. But, if we seek to follow Christ, we cannot avoid the privilege and the responsibility we have to be people of love.

May your worship lead into this love of Christ, and into his life, a little more this week.

READINGS:

Acts 11:1-18: Peter explains to the believers in Jerusalem how the Holy Spirit was received by Gentiles in Caesaria.

Psalms 148: A psalm exhorting all of creation and all peoples to praise God.

Revelation 21:1-6: John sees a vision of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, and a voice that proclaims that God's dwelling place is now among people on earth.

John 13:31-35: Jesus' new commandment – to love one another.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The Easter message shifts this week from Jesus' offer of life to us, to the way we seek to live out that life as we follow him – and it's a startling message of inclusivity and love. Jesus' new commandment is frequently sung and quoted, but the "one another" that Jesus' calls us to love is often limited to Christian believers. Now, in the lectionary, as the Gospel is laid aside the other readings, we realise that this "one another" goes much further. In Acts, we discover that the previously excluded Gentiles are now included in God's Kingdom. In the Psalm, all of creation is included in this "one another" as the entire creation is exhorted to offer praise. And in John's Revelation vision, we discover that God so includes all, that God moves God's dwelling place ("heaven") into our earthly neighbourhood. There can be no greater, all-encompassing statement of love for all from God. We have no more excuses for turning the Gospel into an exclusive message!

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application: One of the big questions of our generation is "who is in and who is out?". Global economic and trade regulations are designed to favour some (who tend to be the wealthy) and disempower others (who tend to live in third world countries). Political conversations are always being drawn in partisan ways with clear lines indicating who is on which side – and woe betide those who try to cross those lines. Religious communities and power structures, equally, have tended to focus on who is with us and who is against us. From geographical to economic to political to religious to racial to sexual to generational lines, our world is built on defining who is in and who is out. The prophetic Church, the Church of the resurrection, of love, of the God who lives among us, must be a Church that blurs every line, and invites everyone into the grace and love of God – and a Church that challenges the lines that exclude and oppress. This is what Jesus calls us to when he instructs us to love one another, and it is what is demonstrated in Peter's willingness to minister to the Gentiles in Cornelius' house, and in God's gift of the Spirit to these "outsiders". In practical terms, then, we are called to be those who will reach across the lines to welcome and embrace those who believe, think, dress, behave and live in ways that we would consider different.

Local Application:

In recent years the worship of the Church has been strongly divided along stylistic and generational lines. More and more churches are discovering, though, that any church or service that is built on division or exclusivity is bound to fail. Increasingly we are witnessing that the most healthy, vibrant and growing communities are those that include – that bring diverse people together to worship, to learn from each other and to learn to love one another. This is not easy, but if we seek to reach people who are not part of any church, if we seek to make an impact on our wider community, then we need to demonstrate that we can live the message we preach, and that those we seek to reach will be included and loved and brought into contact with a loving and inclusive God – not judged or condemned in the hopes that the fear of hell or God's rejection will scare them into the Kingdom. It also means

that, as the people of God, we need to learn to love one another across denominational, theological and practical boundaries. Furthermore, this love must extend out from the church to include those of other faiths and cultures. This is the challenge we must face in our worship this week.

May 22nd, 2022

Rev Iain Greenshields, Church of Scotland

The theme of my whole service would revolve around the encounter in John 5:1-9.

The encounter has at its heart the words of our Lord, "Do you want to get well?" – a profound question that encourages us to think about a response on a number of different levels.

Why would Jesus ask this question, given this is unique to His encounters in the gospels? What does this tell us about the disabled man, his attitude and circumstances?

Try and feel your way into the passage by reading it several times; then imagine yourself there, either as Jesus, the man or a member of the crowd witnessing this event. What is it that jumps out at you?

Imagine your response to Jesus if, when asked this question, you are suffering from an immediate, life-threatening illness. Remember, you have not approached Him, but He, as in this passage, approaches you – how would you respond?

Now imagine, that you have been living with a debilitating illness for many years – maybe even decades – and a stranger comes along and asks the question Jesus does – again, how might you respond?

There is no doubt that people who had encounters with Jesus ended up with changed lives – this being true even in the case of His opponents. Do we really want an encounter with Jesus? What impact will this have on our lives?

Acts 16:9-15

The passage begins with a call through a vision. Visions were seen as part of how God communicated – has this disappeared from our spiritual experience? Evidence of this is re-emerging on a significant scale in the Middle East and North Africa, where there are many stories of people 'meeting Jesus' in visions. Is this a matter of expectation or culture?

Philippi was a Roman colony – a settlement for veteran Roman soldiers.

Paul's normal practice was to go to the local synagogue: a synagogue would only be established if there were at least 10 men – this does not seem to be the case here, but there appears to be a place where it was known that women met to pray.

Lydia is the main character and Acts throws up for us a beautiful cameo of the gospel – her conversion to Christianity is described in the NLT : "as she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart." Conversion to faith is clearly seen as first and foremost a Divine act, followed by a human response.

Psalm 67

A prayer of confident thanksgiving.

Verse 1 very obviously resonates with Numbers 6:24 and following.

There is a strong desire for harmony throughout this short psalm – something that the Psalmist desires to see embracing the whole world. As I am writing, we enter the 20th day of conflict in Ukraine and this makes the aspirations of this psalm so apt for the Church at prayer – however, we must not forget the significant other conflicts throughout the world when we use this psalm as a basis for prayer. "God's face", is a strong metaphor for God's presence and is associated both with life and majesty.

The Psalmist wants Israel to be a source of blessing for the world and of course in new covenant terms we desire the same for the Church. In this sense the psalm is inherently missional in its aspirations; a psalm with a strong sense of intercession for the salvation of the world.

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

The New Jerusalem is now at the heart of John's vision – it might be fair to say that this vision is strongly influenced by Ezekiel. One possible significant difference is that in verse 10 there is simply a reference to "Jerusalem" and not "New Jerusalem" – though this may not be important.

The great, high mountain has a reflection of Psalm 48:1-2 and Isaiah 2:3.

What is missing from this new, great city in John's vision?... a Temple! There is no restored temple, nor is there the need for one, because God is the temple – is this a reflection of what John records Jesus as saying in John 4:23?

In chapter 22 verse 5 we are told that there will be no more night – the metaphor encourages the reader to realise the safety and security of the city whose gates are always open with nothing to fear.

John 14:23-29

On His final night with the disciples, Jesus promises them the gift of the Spirit. Here the gulf between Creator and creature is bridged. The Spirit is the abiding presence of the triune

God in the life and experience of the Church. However, Jesus does create what we might call conditional responses before people will be given the gift of the Spirit: we have to love Him; and do what He says.

How do we know we love Him? We do what He says! Love is not descriptive of an emotional feeling towards someone, but an obedient action! Jesus reminds His disciples of the origin of His teaching as coming from the Father – something He does frequently throughout the Gospels. The role of the Spirit is to affirm to and in us the authenticity and origin of the words of Jesus – for those of us who were not there to hear Jesus speak, the Spirit convinces us of the truth of what we hear in the Gospels.

John 5:1-9

This is the "Third Sign" in John's Gospel – the first being the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) and the second, the healing of the official's son (John 4:43-54). Secondary to the story is that the healing takes place on the Sabbath – this makes Jesus' opponents more determined to somehow get rid of Him. The feast / festival is not named – presumably because it is of little or no significance to the story.

Archaeologists identify the pool concerned as being located in the north of Jerusalem.

The latter part of verse 3 and the whole of verse 4 are omitted by the ESV, NIV, NLT, CEV, whereas JB Phillips and the AV versions among others include the part about the angel of the Lord stirring the waters. It might be helpful to explain that the reason for this is that this insertion is not found in the earliest texts. Nothing in the passage describes why Jesus came to the pool unless He was there because He knew people might need healing. Why did He choose this particular person? For 38 years this man may have made a good living as a beggar. The man is interesting – he is not particularly interested in healing initially, was he trying to get Jesus into trouble (v15)? "Get up" – verse 8, is the same word that Jesus will use in verses 28-29 about His call to people on the final day of resurrection.

The conflict over the Sabbath is interesting – was Jesus deliberately instigating a confrontation? There is nothing in Exodus 20:8-11 to suggest that the man was doing anything wrong by carrying the mat. This is one of the 39 categories of 'tradition' rather than 'law' that had evolved. Jesus perhaps wants to confront this anomaly. It is worth noting that the opponents of Jesus are so taken by the breach of the Sabbath that they seem to have missed the glory of the healing.

May 29th, 2022

Rev Fraser Macnaughton, Church of Scotland

There are huge, sweeping themes of God's presence in this week's readings. Thus the readings can be used in ways that lift up and support courageous things that the church does for the community, and for the world, in Christ's name.

What ministries of your church – either your congregation or your denomination – suggest this kind of courage? What are some things that your church does that engender or could potentially engender public attacks for 'interfering' in other people's lives? How can the people in your congregation feel empowered to keep making a difference?

What thoughts or practices do group members fall back on to help them through challenging times? Consider the sources of support that they may seek from the faith community: friendships, past experiences of supportive relationships, verses from scripture, worship, hymns, prayers.

Acts 16:16-34

The scripture story one is drawn to most, opens with an encounter between Paul and a slave girl. Her regular outbursts bear ironic witness to Paul's proclamation. They unexplainably "annoy" Paul until he finally heals her. The passage also leaves unexplained how the healing changes this young girl's place in community. No longer 'marketable' for her owners, is the girl returned to the slave market? Does the welcome given to Paul and Silas by Lydia and her community find a way to embrace this girl? The story leaves open questions, perhaps to challenge how we offer welcome to those whose chains have been broken. What the story leaves no question about is the anger of her owners. They now act to ensure Paul and Silas pay for their action.

The city authorities charge Paul and the others with disturbing the city. They preface their accusation of promoting customs not lawful for Rome; they do not know Paul is a Roman citizen. That fact will come into embarrassing play in the close of this story in verses 35-40. This 'welcome' by the city leaders of Philippi strongly contrasts with the welcome provided by Lydia. The story testifies to the importance of ritual and tradition for Paul and Silas – and through them, for us. Prayer and song serve as the foundation for their response to imprisonment. Their actions support one another and give witness to those who listen. When an earthquake opens doors and breaks chains, Paul and Silas save the jailer from taking his life. The jailer tends the wounds of Paul and Silas. They baptise the jailer and his household. As with Lydia, Paul and Silas and the jailer engage in reciprocal ministry.

Psalm 97

Psalm 97 confesses God as the sovereign who rescues the faithful. The Psalmist affirms that God's throne, a symbol of power, is founded on justice. Such foundations will stand, in contrast to the unjust foundations of power shaken by the earthquake in Acts.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17 (20-21)

The power in this passage lifts up the vision of God's imminent action on behalf of martyrs, who now will have new life. They will be welcomed into the city of God. Verses 20-21 are an invitation to follow in this way of new life and freedom with the One who is the beginning and the end. We are offered the daring invitation to participate in the Spirit's new realm by drinking the water of life, offered as a gift. Despite the violence of the times of Revelation, [the invitation is to] come now and take that drink and show this new era in its dawning.

When the lectionary pointedly leaves out certain verses of the scripture, as in this text, I read those with particular interest. Here they've chopped out two verses that come down with both feet on the folks who disagree.

Like most of Revelation, these words strain forward, looking for the return of Christ. I don't have any problem with that, though I think we'll quickly assassinate the Christ if we haven't done so already.

In the developed world, there is an increased awareness of global warming and a heightened sense that the economic growth we have been experiencing can't be sustained, especially if folks in other parts of the world aspire to that same standard.

What if the promised Christ came and told us in the developed world that we had to cut our standard of living by half?

John 17:20-26

Today's Gospel reading invites us into the unity that comes from being with God, just as God is with us. This awareness of God in our lives and in all of creation, though understood in many ways by different cultures and religions, has one unifying outcome: shalom. As the former Presiding Bishop of the US Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori describes it, shalom "has to do with the restoration of all creation to right relationship with God."

By way of illustration, in March, 1984 there was a malfunction at the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in Northern California. It triggered a chain reaction of events that darkened the lights for millions of people in six Western states. The blackout occurred at rush hour and caused hundreds of traffic jams in all the major cities. The trouble originated in the Round Mountain, California sub-station, about 100 miles south of the Oregon border. A circuit breaker tripped and circuits all over the West automatically shut down to protect themselves.

One little circuit breaker, tripped in a remote rural area hundreds of miles away, changed the lives of millions of people. How dramatically that breakdown symbolises the interdependence of our country's power, transportation and even food production systems. We are one people in more ways than we think. What affects one, can affect all.

The unity of the Church is no different. The good one person does makes the task easier for us all. On the other hand, one bad example can set back the entire Church. God's people, wherever they live on earth, are linked into a grid of community interdependence from which we can never escape. The more we are one, the more we will be an effective Church in the world. This is what Jesus prayed for.