



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

### HOME PRAYER PACK FOR JULY 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.

**July 3, 2022**

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

It is appropriate this week, in Ordinary Time, that the readings focus on the transforming power of the ordinary. In a world of celebrity, of "Reality TV", and of value given only to winners and to those who are larger than life, it can be tempting to think that the ordinary has no contribution to make, that "vanilla" people can make no difference. But, the Gospel does not despise small things. God's Reign is a reality in which the least, the child and the marginalised all have significant value to offer.

May you celebrate the small and the ordinary in your worship this week.

**READINGS:**

**2 Kings 5:1-14**: Elisha is visited by Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, who has a serious skin disease. He instructs him through a messenger to wash himself seven times in the Jordan, which, after some complaining, Naaman does, and he is healed.

OR **Isaiah 66:10-14**: A prophecy of restoration and comfort, like being nursed and cared for by a mother, for Jerusalem and her people.

**Psalms 30**: David celebrates God's deliverance, healing and mercy, and that God has turned his mourning into dancing, as he commits to a life of praise.

OR **Psalms 66:1-9**: A psalm in praise of God who is glorious and who saves God's people in miraculous ways.

**Galatians 6:(1-6), 7-14**: Paul instructs the Galatians to give themselves in bringing goodness into the world – correcting one another, working faithfully, providing for their teachers, and doing good (justice) at every opportunity.

**Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**: Jesus sends the seventy two disciples out to preach the Kingdom, instructing them to bless the homes where they stay and to accept the hospitality they are offered. On their return he celebrates with them, but stresses that the best thing is to have "names written in heaven".

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

The central message this week is simple but significant – do not despise the saving power of small things. God's commitment to justice, restoration and healing is proclaimed strongly through the Psalms and Isaiah's song, but the way God's saving work comes into being is often through small, ordinary people and actions. Naaman complains because Elisha speaks to him through a servant and asks him to wash in an ordinary river in Israel – yet he can only be healed by

changing his attitude, and embracing this ordinary way to healing. The picture of God's care and comfort in Isaiah is that of an ordinary, familiar domestic scene – a child being nursed by its mother. Galatians speaks about the work of following Christ in the every day terms of our relationships with one another (correcting each other and sharing burdens), taking responsibility and doing good for all. And Jesus sends his disciples out to share the message of God's reign, while accepting hospitality along the way – a very ordinary practice for travelers. Even when they celebrate overcoming demons, Jesus downplays it. [Psalm 30](#) recounts an ordinary journey from joy to pain and back again, relying on God's mercy and grace – a common human experience. The one reading that appears to be out of place is the alternative Psalm (66) – but here the focus is on the Exodus, which, although proclaimed through retelling the miraculous story, is about the very ordinary human longing for liberation and salvation – which is, of course, the essence of the message that Jesus' disciples would have preached.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** It is important that the work of celebrities and high profile leaders in the struggle for justice is recognised and celebrated, but justice is not really achieved by these few. Justice is the result of millions of small acts by millions of ordinary people. The power of Jesus' message was not in his riveting preaching or his miraculous acts, it was in the ordinary lives that were changed. So, too, the impact of the disciples' ministry would have been felt through the changed lives of the people they left behind when they had moved on. The power of the church to bring wholeness to society is in the grace, kindness and mutual encouragement that comes from living as the letter to the Galatians instructs. And, in every individual, the willingness to receive God's grace and healing through ordinary means (like Naaman) frees us to become channels of the "ordinary" work of God in the lives of those around us. In practical terms, this move toward "ordinary justice" has very significant implications. If we are to reverse the impact of climate change, it will take small but significant shifts in the habits of many ordinary people. If our world is to become more peaceful, it will mean ordinary people must learn to understand and respect one another, recognising our common humanity. If wealth is to be equitably distributed, it will mean changing the values by which ordinary individuals live from consumerism to simplicity and from accumulating to giving. If these shifts were just taken seriously by Christ-followers alone, the impact would be nothing short of miraculous. As Christians around the world join together in peace-making, hospitality, taking responsibility for the change we can bring and doing small acts of goodness, the Gospel message is preached clearly and powerfully, with very few words necessary.

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** It is often tempting as we seek to share Christ's message in the Church and into our communities to think about making big changes and

attempting big, attention grabbing projects. However, our impact is often less about how we structure our services or what kind of music we use or how “prominent” we are in our community. Often it is in the quiet work of nurturing care and service within our community, and in doing the slow, transformative work of growing into caring, serving Christ-followers in our homes, workplaces and sports clubs (as Galatians calls us) that ultimately determines how effective our ministry is. When, instead of pointing fingers at “the world” we are willing to accept its “hospitality” speaking blessing, and offering grace and mercy and justice in every situation and with every person (as the disciples were called to do), then people begin coming to us to learn more about our faith and the One we follow. But, if we fail to do this, then no amount of words or programs will be enough to compensate for our lack of grace and goodness. It’s significant that, even when the disciples were told to “shake the dust off their feet” when they were not received in a village, they were, nevertheless instructed to tell the people that God’s Reign had come to them. It was not that they were “judging” the people, so much as using a graphic and powerful image to challenge them about what they had rejected. God’s love and grace remained available to the people. In the same way, we can confront the small injustices in our communities, while still offering grace. And, in the end, what is important is not the dramatic confrontations, but the people whose names are “written in heaven” – who have discovered life in the dream of God.

**July 10th, 2022**

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

In the lectionary this week we find the powerful metaphor in Amos of God’s plumb line – the measure of God’s people and their faithfulness to God’s purposes. Then, alongside this\*, the Gospel places the parable of the Good Samaritan – clearly the plumb line measures things differently from how we normally would! So, the question is how do we measure our spirituality, our faithfulness to Christ and our living of God’s Kingdom principles and values? Once again, we are reminded that God measures not by success, or power or money, but by compassion, service and sacrifice.

May your worship be uncomfortable this week, as you invite God to measure you against God's standards of grace and mercy.

*\* I recognise that the Amos reading is from the semi-continuous readings and the Gospel is the heart of the related readings, which means that the Lectionary would not usually place these readings together. However, there can be tremendous value in wrestling with all the readings in the Lectionary each week, even though only one of these "tracks" may be followed in Sunday worship.*

### **READINGS:**

**Amos 7:7-17:** God gives Amos a vision of a plumb line, and prophesies that Israel is to be destroyed. When the high priest, Amaziah, tells Amos to go home and stop prophesying, Amos (the 'unprophet' – shepherd and farmer) speaks judgment on him as well.

OR **Deuteronomy 30:9-14:** Prosperity and blessing is promised for those who obey God's commands, which are not far off or distant. They are as close as our own lips and hearts.

**Psalms 82:** A prayer for God to judge oppressive rulers, because all nations belong to God.

OR **Psalms 25:1-10:** A psalm in which David prays to be protected and guided into right ways of living by God, and affirming the promise of God's goodness for those who follow God's guidance and commands.

**Colossians 1:1-14:** Paul's prayer for the Colossians to continue to grow in wisdom, strength and joy, and to enjoy the inheritance of freedom that God has made available through Christ.

**Luke 10:25-37:** In response to the question of how eternal life can be inherited, Jesus offers the Great Commandment, and then explains the practical outworking of this through the story of the Samaritan who helped the man beaten by robbers on the road to Jericho.

### **REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

It is a challenging exercise to hold the prophecy of Amos alongside the parable of the Good Samaritan, but this is what the Lectionary may call us to do this week (if we accept the challenge of wrestling with all of the readings). On the one hand we find God's judgment expressed against God's unfaithful people who, as we know from biblical history and from other parts of Amos' prophecy, had neglected justice and mercy. The Deuteronomy reading is simply a contrast to this – blessing and prosperity is found when God's commands (to love and to live justly and compassionately) are obeyed. The Psalms echo these words in contrasting songs as well – judgment on oppressive and unjust rulers; blessing

on the one who prays for God's guidance and the strength to follow God's commands. On the other hand, we have the way to life explained clearly and powerfully through the association of the Great Commandment with the parable. The message is strong and clear – God asks one thing from God's people: to be people of love, mercy and justice. And, when we embrace this call, we will, inevitably, know better relationships, and more peaceful and prosperous societies – not so much as a reward, but as a simple consequence of the work of love and justice that we have done in God's strength. Essentially, in his prayer, Paul celebrates the way this has already happened for people who have responded to the Gospel, and prays for ongoing strength for the Colossian Church to continue to live this way and enjoy the fruit that such a life brings. If the plumb line is the sign of God's measurement of God's people, the Good Samaritan is the picture of what the plumb line is actually measuring.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

**GLOBAL APPLICATION:** It is popular to speak of nations, governments, companies and prominent individuals as "great". Usually what we mean by this word relates to dominance over others, a unique ability to wield power, the accumulation of wealth beyond the highest levels of 'normal' or in some other way becoming 'bigger and better' than others. And the way we measure this 'greatness' is in quarterly performance reviews, award ceremonies, and financial statements. The Scriptures, however, define 'greatness' very differently, and measure it against an eternal time frame. Israel's prosperity means nothing if they fail to follow God's command to uphold justice, mercy and love. Oppressive rulers are not 'great', according to the Psalmists, they are to be humbled by God, while those who humble themselves and pray for God's strength to follow the law of love are honourable. The 'great' religious leaders in Jesus' parable are shown with far less than true greatness, while a hated outsider is used to demonstrate the true greatness of service. Perhaps it would be good if we began to measure our governments, companies and communities not so much by economic growth, military dominance or political influence, but by self-giving, service and contribution to the greater good. What might our world be like if we started to hold our nations and leaders to this standard of greatness, if we measured our policies and successes by God's plumb line of love?

**LOCAL APPLICATION:** The power of the Gospel is revealed in Paul's prayer – that those who embrace it find joy, strength and vibrant life in love for, and service of, others, in the fruit they bear for God's Kingdom, and in the benefit people experience through this loving, serving community. What a pity that the Church is so often seen by those outside as hypocritical, judgmental and self-serving. What a pity that we have fallen into the trap of measuring spirituality and godliness by the same standards that society uses to measure worldly success – wealth and power. How different might our impact on the world be if we learned to assess ourselves not against the latest 'technique' or formula, but

against God's standard of love, compassion, justice and service? How different might our communities feel about us as Church if we were more other-centred, more willing to sacrifice not just money, but time and energy in making our communities more peaceful, equitable and whole? How attractive might communities of faith be if we actually lived what we proclaimed and sang? How would we measure up as a local church if we honestly and ruthlessly measured ourselves against God's plumb line?

**July 17th, 2022**

Sally Fraser, Edinburgh City Centre, Chaplain, Church of Scotland

There are some incredibly challenging readings this week, indeed, it's the kind of week you might be horrified to have to preach on. The immediate challenge comes from the harsh words of the Old Testament reading and the psalm. This is not the loving, kind image of God we usually try to convey either from the pulpit or in any kind of pastoral ministry today. However, these are images of God which do form part of our story, as a people and a church, and they are, mysteriously, part of God too. There will be people in our communities who have grown up much more familiar with the harsher side of God, and there will be people living through the dark emotions of these passages right now. Somehow, we must always find a way of holding this darkness and pain. And today we are given the clear message about how to do so in the Gospel reading. There is only one response to this challenge: to sit at Jesus' feet.

But I suspect this might be the biggest challenge, because my observation is that people don't like the idea of sitting still; or find the suggestion that they might have time to do so a little irritating. After all, in daily life we need Marthas as well as Marys. Moreover, there is also a sense that in sitting still we also often feel more of the uncomfortable and painful things we might distract ourselves from in our busyness. As people of faith, we are called to find ways to draw together in our discomfort and challenge ourselves and each other to stay with the difficult feelings, the difficulties and darkneses which are part of our humanity, and also, as today's readings show, part of God.

There is also a wonderful combination of the mysterious and the mundane here, the domestic scenes, baskets of fruit. We are reminded that even when the topics are huge, God communicates with us through the everyday, familiar things and personal encounters. And so much nature, birth, green olive trees. Perhaps there might be an opportunity to use something from the natural world to help encourage the stillness that today's gospel demands? These readings, after all, all point to the incredible creativity of God. Perhaps a little creativity in leading to that sense of awe might be appropriate here.

## Amos 8:1-12

This reading contains really distressing imagery. I am not sure it is possible to hear the words "the dead bodies shall be many" and not think of news headlines from the last two years, both because of Covid and the war in Ukraine. Those who "wander from sea to sea" reminds us of refugees unable to find places of welcome, and the rising rivers remind us of the floods which are increasingly part of life in some regions. Even the cost-of-living crisis seems to be reflected here, and the grain shortages we currently face. The detail of Amos' prophecy shows God was concerned with the details of people's lives then, just as God is concerned with the details of our lives now.

There is something chilling, though, about the inversions here, rather than a God who turns our tears into dancing, we hear of one who will turn songs to lamentations. We hear that those who seek will not find. This darkening is terrifying, and we are told not of simply a material hunger and suffering, but a kind of spiritual drought, a thirst for hearing God's word.

It might be tempting to surrender to despair here, perhaps to see declining church numbers and increasing secularisation as symptoms of this spiritual drought. But it might be more fruitful to focus on looking for evidence of thirsting for God. For example, it was noted that near the beginning of the pandemic, huge numbers of people were typing 'how to pray' into Google. How as communities can we respond to this thirst?

## Psalms 52

The Psalms, as always, remind us of the breadth of human emotions that can be felt in our relationships with God, and that all our feelings can be found in scripture. This is not the sort of psalm we might choose for a wedding or a funeral, or set to music, but, as with the Amos reading, it shows a passionate voice responding to part of God's story in our lives.

The Psalmist can be grateful that they are planted firmly, they can grow despite their anger at the injustice and dishonesty they have experienced. The Psalmist can express their anger, lament and release it, and ultimately still flourish because of their relationship with God, as if in God's house, living in God. An olive tree may ultimately be fruitful, or provide shade and shelter as well as nourishment, showing how those who, despite pain, can live trusting that God can be a source of sustenance or comfort to others.

And as we live in times of continued turbulence, leaning into God's steadfastness, we can allow ourselves to feel the uncomfortable things, we can lament. Indeed, if we think of what we as a Church have to offer our wider communities at difficult times, I would suggest that offering a language of suffering and the practice of lament, and meaningfully practising lament might be among our greatest resources. We can offer to our communities that God's house is a place where strong feelings can be felt and can find expression through our ritual and liturgy.

### Colossians 1:15-28

This is a beautifully encouraging reading. We may take comfort in the immensity of God, the invisible and the mysterious, guiding and governing all that we cannot understand. Those estranged and hostile, as in our first reading and psalm, are now reconciled. The idea of the fullness of God is important and encouraging too: that all the different and mysterious parts of God we have struggled with across the readings are necessary parts of the whole.

We hear many echoes of the other readings; the steadfastness from the psalm, and the idea that Paul will make God fully known, a sort of antidote to the fear of spiritual drought foretold by Amos.

The idea of nature and creation is powerful here, as we are told that everything is created both through Christ and for Christ. If we don't always think of Jesus as so powerfully connected with Creation, this can help us to do so, this is an excellent reading for Eco groups and Creation services.

There is also a strong call to think about our role as Church, with Christ at our head and holding everything together, educating with wisdom and helping people be 'mature'. It would be good to reflect on what this might look like in our faith communities today.

### Luke 10:38-42

Today we find Jesus in a domestic setting, in the home of His friends. I have many connections with the L'Arche community and I have heard the suggestion there that it was unusual for Lazarus to live with his sisters, and that perhaps he had a learning disability and they cared for him. This idea always shapes my imagining of this setting.

Many people struggle with the harshness of Jesus' words to Martha, while some interpret it as affectionate teasing. It is significant of course, that while Martha seems to not understand the importance of being close to Jesus here, she is the one who will express exactly who He is, and state that He is the Messiah. There is a challenge here, does she know Jesus so well that she can handle His teasing? Or does she know so deeply who Jesus is because He has been firm with her?

Mary is assured of what is eternal, that which will not leave her, and so there is a call here for all of us to see our present struggles in the light of what is to come, as in our other readings today. But there is a mystery here, neither Martha nor Mary could have understood what these words meant at the time. We too must often obey the invitation to stillness before God without any clear idea of exactly why.

Our responses to this story are very dependent on our own temperament, and also perhaps the stage we are at in our lives. It is good to pay attention to the parts of this story which provoke uncomfortable feelings, as they may lead us to insights about what God is trying to show us.

It might be worth asking people if they identify more as a Martha or a Mary. Has this changed throughout their life?

Or whether, growing up, the image of God in the Old Testament reading was more familiar to them than the loving father we often focus on, or has their image changed throughout their life?

This Gospel passage would work incredibly well as an imaginative contemplation. The congregation could be led in a simple stilling, perhaps with awareness of their bodies on their seats, and then awareness of sounds in the room and beyond the room. Finally, an invitation to try to listen to the silence between and behind the silence. The silence between the ticking of the clock, behind the traffic noise.

Then an invitation to imagine being at Martha and Mary's house. What time of day is it? What is the furniture like? What does it smell like? Is it warm or cool?

Who might you be in this scene? Do you find yourself observing from afar or close to the action? Are you Martha, Mary, Jesus or someone else? How do Jesus' words make you feel? Angry, resentful, encouraged, frustrated, joyful, or something else?

## **July 24th, 2022**

Rev Derek Browning, Minister of Morningside Parish Church, Edinburgh, Church of Scotland

You may be hard-pressed to work out if there is a theme that links these passages. Perhaps it has to do with relationships. The intimate relationship between spouses and partners, and the equally intimate relationship between believers and God. What are the natures of those relationships? Where is there 'give and take'? Where is the support to be found, or not found? What are the parameters and ground rules?

The motif of faithfulness is writ large throughout the Bible. Fidelity and trust form an inherent part of the life of faith: between God and humanity; between humanity and the rest of the created order; between humans. Where there is no faithfulness, where there is no trust, the fabric of society frays and unravels

## **Hosea 1:2-10**

One of the more difficult texts from the prophets who wrote before the Babylonian exile, this passage intrigues, baffles and dismays by turns. The point of this reading is fairly clear, nevertheless: the relationship between God and Israel is similar to a marriage or relationship that has been shattered by an unfaithful partner. God, Who has been loyal, true and supportive, has been set aside by the object that God loves. But a time of reckoning approaches. However, God's final word in v10 is not one of destruction, but of hope and salvation and future.

Hosea wrote in northern Israel around 750-740 BC in a time of turmoil and political intrigue and violence. It is unsettling to think of God being knocked hard by the chosen people's unfaithfulness, and how God appears to go from righteous anger to broken-hearted forgiveness. Hosea's imaginative use of the intimate relationship allows us to imagine God experiencing love's suffering. Hosea makes his relationship and family into one that reads like a parable of broken promise and the tawdriness of what God's chosen people have done to the God Who had given them everything. Having an affair, living unfaithfully, in human relationships, has a knock-on effect far beyond the couple involved. Their children, wider family and friends often get drawn into the hurt and the pain.

We don't know why Gomer, Hosea's ultimate wife, turned to prostitution. Had she grown up in a dysfunctional family with sexual abuse? Were there economic reasons behind her decision? In today's world of modern-day slavery women and men are sold into prostitution every year, or enter prostitution as the means to pay for a drug habit, or simply to earn enough to subsist. Some scholars suggest that Gomer was a 'sacred prostitute', associated with the 'cult' religion of Baal, and attached to a local shrine.

Hosea understands something about the essential nature of Israel's God. This God demands justice and faithfulness and will not tolerate a relationship where these are not front and centre. And yet, the God of judgment is also the God of mercy, and God's chosen people are connected to the Divine by ties that can never truly be dissolved. Hosea writes about the anguish of God Who cannot ultimately let go even of those who turn away. It is both a poignant and powerful image of a God Who goes beyond what humanity can manage. "God promises to do what human beings ought to do but cannot." (Elizabeth Achtemeier, 'Minor Prophets'.) Our relationship with God, our long-suffering God is not dependent on us. God holds, until we "turn, return, repent, relinquish, and come back." (William Willimon, Feasting on the Word, Year Volume 3.)

### Psalm 85

For a community, church, nation or world that are going through tough times, Psalm 85 looks with confidence to a God Who continues to encourage and embody incarnation. Some scholars suggest that there is an echo here in the Old Testament of what the angels sing in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!"

The writer of this psalm comes with the lament of the people but moves the song on to one of hope and blessing and the graciousness of God. This is an unequivocal word of peace spoken in God's own voice.

But before we get to that, we find something gritty and real in the psalm. How do we bridge the gulf between what many believe fundamentally about God and the often fractured reality of everyday life? Does suffering affect what we believe, and have an impact on what kind of relationship we have with God?

One of the healthy traits in the Psalms is the robust relationship the Psalmist has with God. Here is someone unafraid of asking God hard questions and expecting an answer. This is a

real faith in a real God and dealing with real issues. The psalm also addresses the issue that is often at the heart of everyday faith – it can grow stale and dry. Our faith, if we don't think about it and exercise it, can often feel like a muddling through. Our faith, if there is no discipline in it, and no intentionality about it, can soon become something that is very 'surface' and without deep roots.

The Psalmist wants the reassurance of hearing God's voice, that intimate, up-close-and-personal connection with the Almighty. How often, in the midst of our busy lives, and in the midst of our troubles, do we pause and make a quiet space to hear what God has to say to us? Particularly when the word of God to the people of Ancient Israel, and to us, is what we most need to hear: "Peace" (v8). Particularly important, when it accompanies God's promise of, "steadfast love" (v10).

Our waiting, of course, is not passive but active. When we call out to God in prayer, the call is to, "Restore us again" (v4). There is a slight sense of the same engagement with God that we enter into when we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come." God will act, but in God's action there is a built-in presumption that God's people will respond.

In any time of spiritual dryness and tiredness on our part, here is God's abundant and overflowing and gracious response. We come to God with our worries and woes, but they are not the last word. God will revitalise us and restore us. God's word to us in this psalm is to turn, and turn again, until at last we encounter God, and then walk with God.

### **Colossians 2:6-15**

Jesus is a gift, and the children of God receive Jesus as a gift from God. Jesus forms the basis of our lives of faith. Jesus is at the foundation of what we believe. Not only are we 'rooted' in Jesus, receiving nourishment from Him we are also 'built up' in Him – in other words receiving strength and stability.

There are many siren voices that seek to lure the unwary away from the basics of faith, and the essential relationship that we are to have with Jesus. If our relationship with Jesus is shallow, and not well-rooted, it often does not take much to rock the foundations. It is why Christian faith is not something that we receive merely as instruction in our youth, rather it should be part of an ongoing commitment to learning, and relating, and thinking and wondering. I wonder how many take the time to have a 'refresher course' in what they believe? Sadly, many seem to stop at Sunday School classes, and then are surprised that that basic teaching does not always see them through adult life, particularly when times are hard.

As humans, we have been shaped and created to make meaning out of life, and faith. The search for meaning, faith that is continually seeking understanding, shapes our basic identity. What do we stand for? What do we believe in? What difference does knowing these things in life make to the way in which we live our lives? Another reality, certainly within the Christian family of faith, is that none of us is completely self-made. All of us, at some point or other, need to acknowledge that our identity as an individual is shaped by

many contexts: family, education, economics, the society in which we live, the Church in which we continue to express our lived-out faith.

This is why baptism, the entry point into the Christian faith, is of such crucial importance. It is an event that touches the life of the individual, but it is embedded within the faith experience of the community of believers. There is something incredibly moving and powerful when the congregation is invited to welcome children and adults at baptism, and to live before them in a kindly and Christian way, sharing with them the knowledge and love of Jesus. It is a life and death matter, which is why living and dying and burying and rising again, continue to have that somewhat jarring pre-eminence in the words of a baptismal service. Baptism matters. It's where our faith journey finds its rooting and grounding. It is indeed a matter of life and death and new life again. We work at it, and we work with Christ and our fellow followers of Christ.

### **Luke 11:1-13**

One of the key ways in which we maintain our relationship with God, and include our fellow humans around us, is through prayers. Prayer can be intensely personal and publicly uplifting. Prayer is the essence of God's Spirit weaving Her way around and between and through us, encouraging us to speak, listen, engage, think, and act. Prayer tunes us in to the mind of God and the feelings of God and has nothing to do with us telling God what God must and must not do.

That being said, if there is only insipid obeisance in our prayer life, and none of the robust dialogue that we find, for example, in the Psalms, then we miss something out of the relationship we have with the Creator. We may be creatures, but we are not doormats when it comes to God's relationship with us.

The indispensability of prayer emerges from the fact that it puts those who pray in touch with God's incredible generosity and continuous presence. When we pray, we can be assured God always listens. When we pray, are we sure we listen as much as we speak?

Scholars suggest that the difference between the two versions of the Lord's Prayer we have in the gospels of Matthew and Luke are likely to stem from the various ways prayer evolved in the earliest churches' worship. Both versions offer 'corporate petitions', consistently speak in the first-person plural, reminding us that Jesus envisages communities together in prayer, as much as solitary individuals. We remember that it was the disciples as a group who came to Jesus with their request, "Lord, teach us to pray." It remains a request people make to this day, still finding it challenging to find the right words, and silences, in their prayer life. With the Lord's Prayer, our prayers need never be wordless.

There is nothing magical nor mysterious about good prayer. It is not the preserve of the 'professional' alone. It need not cover every topic under the sun, but may include thanksgiving, confession and intercession. Which is why the Lord's Prayer is so wonderfully refreshing and is why it's often the one prayer we all commit to memory. It is a deeply accessible prayer that lifts us to God in praise, in awareness of our needs, and in acceptance of the way in which our loving God meets our needs.

Prayer was an intrinsic part of Jesus' life. Jesus expects the same of all His followers. Its opening emphasises the intimacy of prayer, as it is addressed to "Our Father". God's power over all is undoubted, but never rush over the power of that simple and inclusive word, "Our." It is there for a reason and should, consistently, stop us in our tracks.

The prayer goes on, with admirable directness, with, "Give us...Forgive us...Lead us...Deliver us..." Confident in that place within God's family love, we are **bold** to pray. Being direct is not equated to being disrespectful. God can handle it.

The verses that follow the Lord's Prayer in this richest of lectionary texts serve only to reinforce the point that the prayers has made. "Ask...seek...knock..." Prayer is not merely a passive exercise of piety. It can have passion, it can have pointedness, it can have persistence.

Luke's writing invites us to reflect on the story and the reality of our prayer life. Who taught us, and when? It's a lesson we keep learning, we must always ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." In the asking, and the listening, is also the doing, and the sharing, and the putting into practice.

## **July 31st, 2022**

Rev Dr Will Stalder, Minister of Methlick Parish Church, Church of Scotland

I've been asked to reflect on today's readings through the lens of Stewardship, which is not a hard task, because both the readings and the events of today remind us that Stewardship matters. "Christian stewardship recognises that everything we have belongs to God and that we are called to care for all that God has given to us."(2) If ever there was a time to be grateful for the things we have and care for what God has given us and for those less fortunate, it is now.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there are times in life when we want to cry out, "All is vanity." We work hard, but it can be taken away in an instant. Plus, we can't take anything with us after this life. Psalms 49 echoes this hard truth, "Mortals cannot abide in their pomp"; Colossians 3 calls Christians to therefore put their hearts and minds on "things above"; and likewise, Jesus says in Luke 13, "Be rich towards God."

On 31 July 2022, the newspapers and the Bible are singing from the same hymn sheet. They're calling us to put the things of this world in their proper perspective, to value the things that really matter and to live our lives as stewards of the things God has given us.

### Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

There's a saying that the opening line of any piece of writing is the most important. It grabs the reader's attention and sets the tone for the rest of the book or story. Ecclesiastes has one of the best openings there is. It has me hooked.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I like how the NIV puts it:

'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher.  
'Utterly meaningless!  
Everything is meaningless.'

There are times in life when I want to throw my arms up in the air in hearty agreement. "Vanity!" "Meaningless!" and the author of Ecclesiastes seems to agree. They are the opening lines and the concluding lines in Ecclesiastes 12:8. The author of Ecclesiastes, therefore, seems to say, everything is hebel (breath, vapour, vanity or meaningless). But there is an epitaph (chapter 12:9-14), a second word, added either by the author themselves or a later editor or redactor: verses 13-14 say, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

The minister or preacher, therefore, has a choice. Do you allow your congregation the space to vent, cry out to God, lament the senseless and transitory aspects of life? Or do you fast forward to the end and remind your hearer that meaning can be found in a meaningless word?

Surely, there is scope for both.

One can feel the angst in Ecclesiastes 2:18-23. "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." Psalm 49 and Luke 12 certainly continue these themes.

So how should these passages from Ecclesiastes be read?

As Fee and Stuart say in *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, the book of Ecclesiastes is the "ponderings of a Wisdom teacher who wrestles with life's realities; what is to be gained by achieving wealth or wisdom when in the end death claims both rich and poor, wise and foolish; but specially set in a context of knowing the fear of God."

As the bulk of Ecclesiastes wrestles with "life's realities," it seems wise to give the congregation the permission to wrestle as well. Let the congregation wrestle with God, wrestle with questions, frustrations and anger and wrestle with aspects of stewardship and finance in light of life's injustices.

But, don't stop there, stuck in an eternal wrestling match with the questions of life. In chapter 12:13-14, the author of Ecclesiastes insists there's another story, another angle to look at things, another conclusion to be reached.

## Psalm 49:1-12

Ben Paterson writes, "Prayer is more than a tool for self-expression, a means to get God to give us what we want. It is a means he uses to give us what he wants, and to teach us to want what he wants. Holy Scripture in general, and the Psalms, teach us who God is and what he wants to give."

While it is true that every aspect of human emotion and experience are contained in the Psalms and that they can help express what we long to pray in times of anger, joy, sadness, grief, trauma, war, atrocity and peace, to name but a few – the Psalms do much more. A simple survey of the types of Psalm and the communal context in which they were sung underscore this fact. Prayer is more than self-expression. It is a means to broaden our awareness of others: of God and God's values, and of the needs of others...

Psalm 49 fits into this mould. It is a 'wisdom psalm' and invites the faith community to consider the true value of wealth and finance in light of the great leveller of death. Psalm 49:12 says, "Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish."

So, what place should wealth and finance have in this life? One can approach this question from a few different angles.

- **Introduction:** This so-called wisdom psalm emphasises the foolishness of a disordered trust in wealth, as if it were possible to use such wealth to avoid the death that inevitably faces each person. Ironically, this trust in wealth, far from making a person immortal, will make that person even more like animals that lack any spiritual dimension.
- **Reflect:** How much of my life is staked on illusions of self-sufficiency? Do I place more emphasis on things that I cannot take with me from this world, or on spiritual treasure that endures forever?
- **Pray:** Lord, You are my lasting treasure, and it is use that I want to possess even now.
- **Act:** I will practise a healthy detachment from the things that belong exclusively to this present world, and still more from those things that are sinful or that lead me into sin.

## Colossians 3:1-11

Colossians 3:1-2 says, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..."

Upon first reading, Paul seems to be setting up a dichotomy between the things of earth and the things of heaven. The things of Earth = bad; the things of heaven = good. Christians are, therefore, called to "seek the things that are above," heavenly things, good things.

And yet... A lyric keeps repeating in the background of my mind like a skipping LP. "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." It's a quote commonly

credited to Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. (d.1894), who was a physician, poet and father of an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, but it was popularised by the great Johnny Cash in his song, 'No Earthly Good' from his 1977 album, The Rambler.

Here are few lines of the song...

"Come heed me, my brothers, come heed, one and all  
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall  
You're shining your light and shine it you should  
But you're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good.

If you're holding heaven, then spread it around  
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground  
Move over and share the high ground where you stood  
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good.

The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread  
But how can you share it where you've got your head  
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would  
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good."

So, who's right? Paul or Johnny?

Both!

We misread Paul if we think he was setting up a dichotomy between heaven and earth, body and spirit. Paul was no Gnostic. Rather, he's trying to make a point: having been baptised with Christ in His death, we have been raised with Christ in His resurrection. As such, we, who call ourselves Christians, really are new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20), and our lives should be lived accordingly.

Among a number of unsavoury characteristics and behaviours Paul lists in verse 5-8, Paul says that greed should have no place in the lives of those who call themselves by Christ's name. So, one could make the case, that, according to Paul, the more heavenly minded we are, the better we are for the earth. We are kinder and more generous. We hold the things of this world lightly not because they have no value, but because we are stewards of the gifts God has given to us and want to share them with generous hearts.

Colossians 3 invites us to lift our gaze to heaven, and I like to think that when I do (I hope I'm not too heretical in saying this), I might just see Paul and Johnny singing together because heaven = good for the earth.

## Luke 12:13-21

Why does Jesus turn a deaf ear to a legitimate cry for justice?

This passage opens with someone in the crowd appealing to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (v13). And yet Jesus refuses to act as judge or arbiter. It seems harsh and unfeeling, uncharacteristic of what we know of Jesus. Before we look at the text in greater detail, we have to answer the question, "Why?"

Kenneth Bailey is helpful in this regard. In his book, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, he outlines a few key theological points, which help answer the question.

- A naked cry for justice, unqualified by any self-criticism, is not heeded by Jesus.
- In a case of a broken personal relationship Jesus refuses to answer a cry for justice when the answer contributes to a finalising of brokenness of that relationship. Jesus did not come as a divider.
- Jesus' parables often reflect a profound concern for justice for the poor. For him justice includes a concern for needs and not simply earnings (cf. Matt. 20:1-16). But here a self-centred cry for justice is understood by Jesus as a symptom of a sickness. Jesus refuses to answer the cry but rather addresses Himself to the healing of the sickness that produced the cry.

In other words, Jesus didn't ignore a legitimate cry for justice. Rather, like a master physician, consultant or GP, Jesus looked past the symptoms of the disease in order to ascertain its root cause and so prescribe a fitting remedy.

The disease – Greed. The remedy – Stewardship.

You can see this in the Parable of the Rich Fool, which is bookended by two important statements or principles and which provide a foil for the Rich Fool.

- Luke 12:15: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."
- Luke 12:21: "Be rich towards God."

The Rich Fool amassed a wealth of possessions, but was wealthy only in relation to himself. In contrast, true wealth, or rather 'fulfilling' wealth, to use the Aquinas' argument, is ordered according to a different end, not self but God. It's this perspective that lays the groundwork for Christian stewardship and a generous spirit. It's this perspective that underscores the quote, above, by Cardinal Francis George: "The only thing we take with us when we die is what we have given away." In other words, the richest people in this world are those who are rich towards God, who practise the principles of Christian stewardship and who generously share from the storehouses of heaven. These Christians are the merriest of all.