



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR AUGUST 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.

August 7, 2022

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

07 August 2022

It may come as a surprising thought that the 'blessings' we receive and enjoy have the potential to make us less Christ-like, but, depending on how we understand God's promises and the goodness God gives, this can be the case. When we view wealth, success or power as unquestionable signs of God's blessing, we are in danger of departing from the Gospel's call to align ourselves with the least, and to find God's blessing in community and sharing. This is the challenge of the readings this week in the Revised Common Lectionary.

May your worship this week lead you into a new sense of connectedness with others, and a new generosity in sharing the grace and mercy of God.

READINGS:

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20: Isaiah prophesies against God's people, expressing God's displeasure at their worship and sacrifices while injustice remains among them. God invites the people to repent and confess, and if they do, God promises to cleanse and restore them.

OR **Genesis 15:1-6:** God promises that Abram will have descendants as numerous as the stars. Abram's faith in this promise is considered to be the basis for his relationship with God (or is counted as righteousness).

Psalms 50:1-8, 22-23: God comes in judgement on God's people, inviting them to offer genuine sacrifices of thanksgiving, and promising God's salvation if they will do this.

OR **Psalms 33:12-22:** Strength, military might, magnificent horses cannot save people. Only waiting on God and trusting in God's mercy is a safe refuge.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16: Abraham is an example of faith, giving up his homeland and living as a foreigner in a strange land for the sake of a God-given inheritance.

Luke 12:32-40: Jesus promises God's kingdom to those who follow Christ, inviting them to give up temporary, material security and wealth for heavenly security and riches. He encourages them to stay awake and be aware of God's coming.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

Much is made of the promises of God in some circles, but little is said about the 'cost' of receiving God's promises. Essentially this cost arises because God's promises are always offered to the community, not just to the individual. And so, Abram is promised innumerable descendants, but must give up his homeland to live among foreigners (as the Hebrews readings explains). In Isaiah's prophecy, God's people can be cleansed and restored, but they must embrace justice and mercy. In the Psalms, God's salvation is offered to those who, like Abram, will trust in God's mercy. Finally, Jesus promises the Kingdom to his followers, but they have to release their faith in human or material resources, and commit to remaining always awake and aware to God's coming – which, if we read the verses following the set section, is strongly linked with how we view and treat others. A great 'hook' for this week is the phrase "descendants of Abram", for Abram's story is the

model for the faith we are called to this week – a commitment to trust in God and a willingness to discover & share God’s promises of grace and mercy in and with the “other”, the foreigner, the ones who seek justice, the ones we are called to serve.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: There are so many ways that the idea of God’s promises and blessings intersect with the realities of our world. When we embrace a view (as so many do) that God’s blessings are given primarily to individuals, and that wealth, power and beauty are signs of God’s blessing, we will inevitably begin to strive for these “manifestations of blessing” for ourselves. The result, all too often, is that we grow selfish, self-centred, uncommitted to justice, and may even view poverty or suffering as signs of God’s judgement. When, however, we realise that God’s blessings are always given to communities, and that they are to be shared with the least – that the reality is that we have never really known God’s blessing unless it brings justice, mercy and provision to all, especially the poor and weak – our striving becomes sacrificial and generous. We begin to find our place among the “foreigners”, the impoverished and the marginalised, and we discover the richness of God’s reign within and among us as we share the blessings that come through us with all. How does this idea of “communal blessing” speak to the distribution of resources in our world? In what way can our commitment to receive God’s blessing in this way guide us as we vote, as we participate in civil processes, as we contemplate and petition the meetings of the powerful in our government, in groups like the G8, the G20, and the BRICS member states, and in the United Nations?

LOCAL APPLICATION: In so many ways we have developed a spirituality that hoards blessings, and keeps God’s promises to ourselves. Even the way we view salvation – as a personal escape from hell that requires no engagement with, or responsibility for, others, and that recognises no other possible avenues of grace – is a hoarding of God’s goodness and mercy for ourselves. And so, even within the church, we too easily hoard material wealth, facilities, people and opportunities, allowing our brothers and sisters in other communities, or other parts of our cities, to go without, to struggle and to suffer. How might our view and practice of Church change if we began to recognise that God’s blessings are given to be shared, that we are called to live “among the foreigners” and that it is here that God’s promises are fulfilled? How differently might we live if we chose to be “descendants of Abram” trusting God’s Kingdom promises whole-heartedly, and laying aside our usual human structures of security and comfort in order to recognise God’s coming through the least, the ‘other’, the ones who cry for justice?

August 14, 2022

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

It's not a comfortable week, this week, but it is a significant one. This week we really have an opportunity to be confronted with the powerful implications of living a Gospel-centred life in the real world. The essential challenge this week has to do with seeing the world truly – seeing the signs, as Jesus put it – and refusing to 'prophesy lies' or pretend everything's alright when injustice is being done. Being a "whistle-blower" on the world's brokenness is never fun, and it won't win us any popularity contests, but it is the cross-bearing work of God's reign – if we have the courage to choose to do it.

May your worship this week inspire you to see clearly and live with ruthless clarity and honesty.

READINGS:

Isaiah 5:1-7: A metaphorical prophecy of judgement against Israel and Judah, pictured as God's vineyard, for their lack of justice.

OR **Jeremiah 23:23-29**: A prophecy against false prophets who make up lies in God's name, compared to God's true word which burns like fire and smashes rock like a hammer.

Psalms 80:1-2, 8-19: A Psalm of repentance for abandoning God, and praying for God to once again tend and protect God's people as a vineyard that is well cared for.

OR **Psalms 82**: This Psalm, picturing a 'council of the gods', has God speaking judgement over the gods of nations who oppress the poor and allow injustice to continue unchecked.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2: A reminder of the "great cloud of witnesses" – people of faith who suffered for their message and stayed committed to God through great trial and heartache – who surround us. They encourage us to stay firm, and follow Christ – the one who endured the cross – faithfully.

Luke 12:49-56: Jesus grieves his coming suffering, recognising the conflict that will arise over his message, and challenging people to discern the true nature of the time they live in, in the same way that they interpret the weather.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The Gospel reading this week is a difficult one, a deeply uncomfortable one, but a very significant one. The key is in Jesus' call to discern the times, which in the Gospel refers to the growing frustration with Rome's rule over Israel, and the inevitable destruction that would result if the people choose to try and resist Rome (which is, of course, exactly what happened). The division that Jesus speaks about flows from our responses to the times we live in, whether we will do the work of discernment or not, and whether we will choose the way of God's Reign – the way of the cross – or not. When justice is ignored, and the poor and vulnerable are oppressed, God is angered, and, as indicated in both Isaiah's prophecy and **Psalms 82**, judgement is prophesied. The image of the well-tended vineyard that is allowed to be destroyed for failing to produce good fruit is a powerful metaphor for this

judgement. In the face of such injustice, there will always be those who refuse to do the work of discerning the times that Jesus called for, and who will prophecy what is untrue (as in Jeremiah), comfortable and expedient. However, there will also always be those who will repent, as in Psalm 80, and who will embrace the sacrifice and rejection that comes from speaking the truth, confronting injustice and working for a more compassionate, peaceful world. Unfortunately, there will always be division between truth speakers and truth deniers, between defenders of justice and defenders of the status quo. This is the cross we are called to carry.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The Gospel call of justice is bringing division to our world and even to the Church, as Jesus predicted it would. In the face of economic struggle, there are those who are eager to 'prophecy' prosperity, without the need to change the underlying systemic flaws that bring about inequality and injustice. Those who insist on pointing this out, are rejected and scoffed at. In the face of climate change, there are those who are eager to 'prophecy' that there is no problem, and that the world is to be destroyed by God anyway. But, those who insist on challenging oil companies, energy companies and government, those who insist on calling attention to the danger of our consumption, are scoffed at, questioned or ignored. There are many voices in our world that want to 'prophecy' lies – to ignore the signs of injustice, poverty, excessive consumption, and health care and education failure. And those who insist on proclaiming the Gospel message of repentance, justice and simplicity will need to embrace the cross, for they will not avoid it in the divisive responses that result. The big challenge we face is whether we are willing to embrace the suffering of living out the Gospel message that we preach, while also embracing the suffering of the mocking, accusations and rejection that will come from those who refuse to live differently or to acknowledge the brokenness of our economic, political, healthcare, education, immigration, security and justice systems.

LOCAL APPLICATION: Every Christ-following community and individual is faced, daily, with a choice. We can choose to adopt an 'escapist' faith, ignoring the pain of the world while waiting for heavenly bliss after we die, or we can do the work of listening, watching and understanding our societies and neighbourhoods, and the times in which we live. We can prophecy what is easy, comfortable and expedient for us – what requires little sacrifice and work, what makes us feel good, but changes little – or we can draw attention to the signs of injustice among us, we can call out corruption and exploitation, and we can hold ourselves and our leaders accountable to care for the marginalised and vulnerable. Ultimately, if we take the latter course, we will face the suffering of getting involved, for we will have to actually do something about the issues we expose. We will also, inevitably, face the aggression and threats of those who are invested in the status quo. We will find ourselves upsetting the peace, and being labelled "divisive", "rabble-rousers" and other names. The question is whether we have the conviction and courage to follow the great cloud of witnesses in service of God's reign, or not. This is a choice we will face every single day.

August 21st, 2022

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

In today's readings two significant ideas come together: "Sabbath" and "God's Kingdom". A true understanding of Sabbath (which links, of course, with the idea of Jubilee), must lead us into the justice, mercy, equity and inclusivity of God's reign. In fact, one of the simplest ways to embrace a "Kingdom-lifestyle" is to begin to practice Sabbath well. That is the challenge the Lectionary offers us this week.

Perhaps I can support this with a quote from my book ***The Hour That Changes Everything – How worship forms us into the people God wants us to be:***

A significant part of the practice of Sabbath is aligning ourselves with God's rhythm. As rhythm organises a piece of music in time according to speed and pattern, so Sabbath organises our lives according to God's sense of time – God's tempo and pattern. This is more than simply giving ourselves a breather, or allowing ourselves time to rest so that we can launch back into our busyness with renewed vigour. Sabbath is about learning to recognise the significance of moments in time. It is about learning to recognise God's tempo and pattern for us, our community and our world, and it is about matching our pace with these eternal rhythms.

May worship lead you into a life of true Sabbath-keeping this week.

READINGS:

Jeremiah 1:4-10: Jeremiah is called by God to be a prophet, but protests that he is too young. God promises to put God's words into Jeremiah's mouth.

OR **Isaiah 58:9b-14:** God promises goodness and honour for God's people if they will act justly and honour the Sabbath.

Psalms 71:1-6: A prayer for God's protection and care.

OR **Psalms 103:1-8:** A song of praise and thanksgiving for God's forgiveness, healing and goodness.

Hebrews 12:18-29: Unlike the people of Israel who were afraid of God's appearing at the mountain, followers of Christ have been invited into God's grace and the joyous community of worship in Christ. We have received an unshakeable kingdom, and must be careful to listen to Christ's words, and worship God in thankfulness.

Luke 13:10-17: Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath, incurring the criticism of the synagogue leader. Jesus points out that everyone 'works' on the Sabbath, and that it is right and good that she should be freed.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

Although it is only specifically mentioned in two of the readings this week, the prominence of the Sabbath in the Gospel reading, and the underlying foundations of a “Sabbath way of life” provide exciting possibilities for worship. Closely aligned with this is the word “kingdom” which comes through in a number of the readings. These two biblical words are closely related. The Sabbath is a foundational element of the whole Jubilee system of justice and equity that God gave to Israel, ensuring sufficient rest, and – arising from the Manna story – discouraging hoarding and accumulation. The Kingdom, as best represented by the “mission statement” of Jesus in Luke 4, is also about Jubilee, about justice and equity, and about ensuring “shalom” (peace and well-being) for all. This is the unshakeable kingdom of the writer of Hebrews. This is the call of Isaiah’s prophecy, and the message of Jeremiah that will bring down unjust kingdoms and build up just ones. This is the prayer and the praise of the Psalms. In healing this crippled woman on the Sabbath, and teaching that mercy is a Sabbath-activity, Jesus embodies the justice, grace and welcome of God’s unshakeable kingdom. The theme, then, this week could be titled “God’s Sabbath Kingdom”.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: In our “time is money” world, Sabbath has lost its essential meaning. It has become nothing more than a “day off” to restore energy to get back into the fray as soon as possible. However, this is far from what the Sabbath was originally intended to be. Rather, the practice of Sabbath – both the Sabbath day, and the Sabbath Year/Jubilee – is about realignment. It is about taking ourselves out of the human system of accumulation, self-protection and self-aggrandisement, and placing ourselves under the influence of God’s rhythms, God’s priorities and God’s direction. It is not about getting back into the fray, but about living with a whole different value system – that of justice, mercy and equity. The call to live God’s Kingdom’s values is a call to live as Sabbath people, and it is this gracious kingdom alone that is unshakeable – unmoved by the temptation to benefit by exploiting others, by the threat of economic collapse, or by the ‘competition’ for resources. When we scratch the surface of our world’s economic systems, we cannot help but see the destructive results of a Sabbathless existence. Exploitation of foreign workers in order to ensure cheap labour for producing everything from chocolate and coffee to cell phones and computers, trade regulations and subsidies that favour the rich and powerful over poor farmers and labourers in third world countries, and political decision making that is more influenced by wealthy donors and lobbyists than by the needs of the most vulnerable all leave suffering in their wake. The drivenness and hyperactivity of those who chase wealth also wreaks havoc on marriages, families and individuals. If our world needs anything in order to become more just and peaceful, it’s a return to the Sabbath-rhythms of God’s reign. This alone will bring healing to the those who have been crippled by the Satan of our broken society.

LOCAL APPLICATION: Jesus spoke about his followers being “in the world but not of it”. This was not a call to “otherworldliness” or to check out of the world as we wait for heaven. It is a reflection of the reality that as individuals and churches we face the daily temptation to adopt the broken values and practices of the world around us. It is a call to live the values and practices of God’s Sabbath Kingdom within the societies and communities in which we find ourselves. It is all too easy for us to become driven by the same idols of success, wealth and convenience that the affluent sections of our global society embrace – and all too many churches and theological systems have done just this. But, if we are to be Sabbath/Kingdom

people, we are to step out of this system, embracing rather the rhythms of justice – meaningful work, joyful rest, compassionate service, generous sharing, and a commitment to equity and compassion. In small but powerful ways we can change the world by living these values in our communities – by worshipping in venues of simple reverence; by adopting technology, practices and programs for their usefulness, not their “sexiness” or fashionable-ness; by sharing what we have with the people around us, rather than using our wealth to aggrandise ourselves; by using our influence in society to ensure protection for the most vulnerable and needy among us; and by working for a more equitable society using all the tools at our disposal, from votes to prayer. Who are those who have been crippled by the weight of the world’s unjust and inequitable systems? How can we allow the Sabbath to become a healing and liberating experience for them and us?

August 28th, 2022

Rev Jonathan Fleming, Minister of Lyle Kirk, Greenock, Church of Scotland

This Sunday, a lot of congregations will be getting back into the swing of things after the summer holidays. Some will be returning refreshed from a summer break, while others are recovering from a week-long Holiday Club!

As everything from the Sunday School to the Guild begins a new syllabus, the readings for this week are a timely reminder of the importance of offering unconditional hospitality and generosity to all around us, be they a part of our church or the wider community. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us this week, "for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

It was this verse from Hebrews that stuck with me in the preparation of this week's material. Between the ongoing atrocities in Ukraine, where people are fleeing for the safety of their families and themselves as well as the anxieties associated with the cost of living crisis here in the United Kingdom, the Church needs to step up and answer God's call to offer our hearts, hands and homes to those in need.

As I reflected further on the readings from today, I realised how so much of what is written could have easily been written two minutes ago rather than almost two millennia. Sadly, people continue to be in need, people continue to seek peace and people continue to face exclusion on the basis of their class, gender, sexual orientation and/or ability. While we lament such a reality, we must continue to challenge such inequalities. The readings for today provide a solid foundation for each of us as individuals and as congregations to build upon and continue to hold close to our hearts and minds going forward.

Proverbs 25:6-7

This proverb begins a section of wisdom for leaders (Proverbs 25-31), which was collected by Hezekiah's advisers. The first part, including today's proverb, was written by Solomon, with Agur and King Lemuel, both of whom are reputed to have come from the kingdom of Massa in northern Arabia, writing the rest.

Today's proverb is part of a set of proverbs aimed at Hezekiah, one of the few Kings of Judah who honoured God. Given that "every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God, and in accordance with the law and the commandments, to seek his God, he did with all his heart; and he prospered" (2 Chronicles 31:21), it is understandable that Hezekiah had these proverbs collected and shared.

Proverbs 25:6-7 can be seen as the catalyst for today's Gospel passage, where Jesus effectively turns a proverb into a parable, emphasising how important it is that we don't go looking for honour just for ourselves, but rather to quietly and humbly undertake the tasks that God calls us to do. It is better to let others learn of our works for themselves than to broadcast all that we do in search of recognition or reward.

Psalm 112

Psalm 112 is towards the start of the final collection of Psalms (107-150), which praise the work of God and recall God's blessing on those who live a righteous life as well as giving thanks to God for deliverance. They serve as a reminder that the best thing that we can do in life is to offer ourselves and all that we do as a faithful sacrifice to the Lord.

This Psalm talks about the advantage of having faith and how the Lord is mindful of the actions and thoughts of all who follow in God's name.

As I prepared to write these notes, the two themes of generosity and living without fear contained in this Psalm stood out – they reflect the generosity that many are offering across the nation in light of the current economic climate here in Scotland, and as a result of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. At the same time, we are called to fear (as in revere) God and to trust that God will provide and protect in the midst of all that surrounds us from our past, the present and the future.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Hebrews 13 presents us with the concluding exhortations of the Book of Hebrews, the author of which we do not know. The book of Hebrews calls for Christian maturity. Addressed to Jewish Christians of the first century, it continues to challenge us 20 centuries later. The author, who regards Timothy as a 'brother', challenges the reader to put Christ first at all stages in our life and faith journey.

With echoes of Matthew 25, we read of the ways in which we can tangibly demonstrate love through our actions: be it kindness to strangers, empathy for prisoners, respecting a spouse in the context of marriage and being happy with what we have. In doing these things, we are able to show our love through hospitality, empathy, loyalty and serenity.

Verse 2, which reminds us that "some have entertained angels without knowing it" in offering kindness and hospitality to others, really stood out to me from all of this week's readings. It immediately transported me to Matthew 25, where Jesus explained that in the offering of hospitality and kindness to the sick, naked, hungry, imprisoned and thirsty, we were offering them to Jesus Himself. What an amazing thought and opportunity!

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Having already been a guest in the home of a Pharisee back in Chapter 7, we join Jesus once again in the home of Pharisee who seeks to trap Him into saying or doing something that could spark His arrest. Given that Jesus had not held back on denouncing the Pharisees on a number of occasions, it is only in realising the Pharisee's motive do we see why Jesus is being invited back into his home. In the verses omitted from this passage, the attempt to catch Jesus out when He heals a man with dropsy on the Sabbath is thwarted by His challenging response, which leaves the Pharisees and experts in the Law without a thing to offer by way of reply!

Jesus goes on in verses 7-14 to teach two lessons. He begins by telling those present in the Pharisee's home that they should not be seeking places of honour or prestige and should instead wait to be invited to such places of prominence. In doing so, Jesus seeks to remind them and us that service always trumps status in the Kingdom of God.

From here, Jesus goes on to address the host and how they should not limit their guest lists when it comes to a feast. Instead of just inviting people who are in a position to invite you to their feasts in return, a host should invite people who are **not** in such a position, thus demonstrating generosity, loving kindness and unconditional hospitality.