



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR OCTOBER 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.

October 2, 2022

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

This week our worship shifts to the daily reality of persevering in faithfulness to the small actions that bring justice into our world. As hard as it can be when the justice we seek fails to come as quickly as we long for, giving up is not an option. But, if we can remain faithful, offering God our small seeds of faith, we become part of God's world-changing purpose.

May our faithfulness and perseverance be strengthened and inspired as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26: While Jerusalem has been devastated and the people of Judah have been conquered – their former glory and pride lost in their humiliation, God remains compassionate, God's mercies are new every day, and those who remain can continue to wait for God's salvation.

OR **Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4**: Habakkuk complains about the corruption and injustice in the land, but is assured by God that God's purposes – a vision of restoration for God's people – will come to pass.

Psalm 137: A Psalm of grief for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people.

OR **Psalm 37:1-9**: A warning not to envy or be angry at the success of evil doers, but to remain faithful and trusting of God, who will act on behalf of those who wait for God.

2 Timothy 1:1-14: Paul celebrates Timothy's ancestry in the faith, and encourages him to stay true to Paul's teachings about Christ and the way of Christ, even to the point of being prepared to suffer for the sake of the Gospel.

Luke 17:5-10: Jesus explains the immense impact that even small measures of faith can have, and encourages his followers not to expect reward for simply doing what should be considered their duty as they seek to serve God and follow Christ.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The readings this week offer a fascinating juxtaposition of ideas. The Old Testament and Psalm readings all explore the pain and humiliation of God's people when they are defeated, conquered and exiled, and as they long for forgiveness restoration and salvation.

Even Psalm 37 deals with similar issues, albeit in a more generalised way, speaking of the pain and confusion that arises when destructive or evil people prosper, and the difficult work of faith and patience in God's action on behalf of those who trust God's ways. The New Testament readings, on the other hand, explore the impact that a life of simple, ordinary faith can have, and the attitude of humble servanthood which expects no undue reward for simply living faithfully. In essence, both Testaments are saying the same thing this week.

In a world where bad things happen to good people, and where it often appears that the lawless and 'godless' get the best, it can be tough to live in faith and faithfulness. Justice can take a long time to come, and it can be tempting to use any means – however undesirable – to achieve what we long for. This applies even when our goal is to manifest God's reign. However, as we live in faithfulness, and pass our faith on to others who come after us, the small, ordinary acts of goodness and justice that we do each day, the small faithful commitments to our convictions that we renew each day, really do 'move mountains' and change the world, little by little, into a place where God's salvation is visibly revealed.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: In the light of the huge challenges facing our world – hunger and poverty, human rights abuses, unequal distribution of resources, human trafficking, dread diseases, environmental degradation, conflict and war – it is easy to get frustrated and impatient, and it is extremely tempting to embrace any strategy that gets results. The danger here, though, is that we can too easily become what we seek to overcome, and our efforts, which may appear successful in the short term, leave us in deeper trouble in the long term. Two important principles that the lectionary offers us this week are 1) the power of small acts of goodness and justice, and 2) the need to think systemically and long term, waiting at the "guard post on the wall" (to use Habakkuk's image) to observe, nurture and cooperate with any manifestations of God's reign that emerge. In the world of big business, big politics, and powerful lobby groups, such long term thinking can be frustrating, but, as demonstrated by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela (it must have taken faith to spend 27 years in jail and then still embrace dialogue as a valid process to end apartheid) such faithful, consistent and just living does result in significant change. What long term commitments to justice can you embrace or renew in your community this week?

LOCAL APPLICATION: Perhaps the best focus, on the local level, this week, is the power of small, ordinary, "everyday" acts of justice. When we refuse to live according to the expedient, self-centred, materialist values of the society around us, it may appear to have no impact, and we may feel like we become nothing more than a laughing stock – a people in exile, suffering for what may sometimes feel like foolish and ineffectual convictions, while those around us "live it up" and succeed. The promise of the Scriptures, though, is that such alternative living does have an impact – a significant one – and also has lasting value – becoming the heritage of faith and goodness that is passed down through generations and across communities. The reassurance this gives is that our suffering is not in vain, and that our faithfulness is useful to God. In our "instant gratification" society, such perseverance and endurance is hard and counter-cultural, but is a powerful witness to the Gospel. Where has your church's commitment to "everyday justice" grown tired or weak? In what ways do you need to renew your commitment to persevere? What alternate living choices do you need to make or renew together? To whom can your faith heritage be passed on? What can you do to inspire and sustain small, long term, commitments in your community this week?

October 9, 2022

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

It's not the first time the Lectionary has brought us face to face with the scandalous inclusivity of the Gospel, but that's the thread running through all of this week's readings. As tempting as it may be to find ways to draw lines and keep some people out for whatever reason, the Scriptures do not allow us that luxury – and, in truth, our world desperately needs us to be people who, like Christ, embrace, include and welcome all people indiscriminately.

May our worship this week lead us into the scandalous inclusivity of Christ again – and there find a welcome not just for ourselves, but for all.

READINGS:

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7: Jeremiah encourages the exiles in Babylon to settle into their new country, to build homes and live there among the Babylonian people and to work for the prosperity of their new land.

OR **2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c:** Naaman, the Aramean commander, is healed of his skin affliction after reluctantly obeying Elisha's instruction to wash in the Jordan River seven times.

Psalms 66:1-12: A call for all the earth to praise the God who rules over all, and for all nations to bless God.

OR **Psalms 111:** A Psalm of celebration for God's mighty acts, and for God's miraculous, merciful and compassionate acts on behalf of God's people.

2 Timothy 2:8-15: Although Paul is imprisoned for preaching the Gospel of Christ's resurrection, the Gospel itself is not imprisoned. God offers life to those who die with Christ, and God remains always faithful, which is why Paul encourages Timothy to remind people of these things and to continue to serve and teach faithfully.

Luke 17:11-19: Jesus sends ten men with a skin disease to show themselves to the priests and they are healed as they go, but only one, a Samaritan, returns to give thanks.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week the theme could be called "The Liberated Gospel"! The thread running through all of the readings is about "outsiders" being included in God's grace and among God's people – or of God's people making themselves at home with those with whom they would normally not have associated. Jeremiah encourages the exiles to settle in Babylon, and Elisha heals a gentile soldier. Both Psalms call all the earth and all people to join in the praise of God. Jesus heals a group of men with skin diseases, including a despised Samaritan, and only the 'outsider' Samaritan returns to give thanks. And Paul celebrates the Gospel that is not imprisoned, but, through God's faithfulness is available to all. It's a week to celebrate the indiscriminate, all-encompassing love, grace and life of God, and to hear the call to live this radical inclusivity in our times and circumstances.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: As author Brian McLaren notes in his book *A New Kind Of Christianity*, we all woke up this morning in a world where religious conflict threatens the peace and survival of the entire planet, and in which militaristic radicals have the weaponry to destroy us all. In such a world religious exclusivity and finger-pointing is more than just an act of immaturity – it is a very dangerous way to live. In the midst of this we are challenged by a Jesus who was scandalously inclusive and who crossed all sorts of lines in order to draw circles around everyone. The only ones who were shut out of Jesus' embrace, were (and are) those who choose to exclude themselves – and even they continue to be loved and accepted by God. In a world where we define ourselves according to nationality, race, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, educational level, language and so much more – and use these distinctions to justify everything from killing to exploitation, from stereotyping to the threat of hell – we desperately need those who will bravely follow Christ in the act of making outsiders insiders, and embracing even the ones we most struggle to love. This is not just an act of personal spiritual obedience. It is a world-changing commitment that has economic, political, environmental, and even medical consequences.

LOCAL APPLICATION: If the Church is to retain any prophetic voice in our current era, it must relearn the radical inclusivity of Christ. Contrary to the 'popular' version of the 'Gospel' that makes Christianity an exclusive enclave for those who have prayed the right prayer, or who agree to the right theological ideas, the faith of those who follow Christ must be one that opens its arms to all others. This means that, as many in the emerging church conversation have suggested, we need to move from a process that goes from believing to behaving to belonging, to the reverse process of offering belonging first (with no strings attached), and then allowing our relationships to influence behaving and ultimately lead to faith – or believing. We need to become indiscriminate about who we serve, love, give to, include and bless. We must refuse to judge or disassociate from others on the basis of any false distinctions. We can no longer allow a word like 'Muslim' to become an insult, but must rather honour those who follow this faith with sincerity and commitment. We can no longer allow our faith to lead us into arrogance, dominance, exploitation or dismissal of others. This means that in every community, we cannot avoid making ourselves at home among those whom we would naturally avoid. What this means for your Church will be recognised very quickly when you identify those who are missing from your Sunday gatherings, but whom you can't help but notice as you pass them on the street during the week.

October 16, 2022

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

This is a week to challenge one of our most basic Christian practices – prayer. But it is also a week to bring together two important things that prayer does for us – writing God's law on our hearts, and opening us to the coming of God into our lives and our world. The potential for this mix of ideas is tremendous, and the possibilities it offers, not just for preaching, but for real, transforming encounter with God, are many. Those of us who seek to work for justice in our world cannot ignore the place and power of prayer that changes our hearts and leads us into true encounter with God.

As you worship this week, may your prayer be heartfelt, and may it overflow into every action, thought, word and interaction in your life.

READINGS:

Jeremiah 31:27-34: A prophecy of restoration, of an end to generational curses, and of God's new covenant with God's people – written on hearts, not stone.

OR **Genesis 32:22-31**: Jacob wrestles with God, is given a new name, and lives with a limp from that time on.

Psalms 119:97-104: A song of rejoicing in God's laws and instructions and the way they guide and lead to life.

OR **Psalms 121**: God is a help to God's people, the One who watches over and protects them day and night.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5: Paul encourages Timothy, in the name of the coming Christ, to remain faithful to the Scriptures and to teach God's message faithfully at all times.

Luke 18:1-8: Jesus tells a parable of a poor widow who persistently asks a judge for justice, and he finally relents because of her persistence. Then he muses about whether, when he returns, he will find people of faith on earth.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

There are two related themes running through the readings this week. The first is that of God's word written on the heart (Jeremiah), offering guidance and life (Psalms 119), as the basis for teaching and the Christ-following life (2 Timothy), and expressed in the parables of Jesus. The second is that of God's coming to God's people – in a night-time wrestling match with Jacob (Genesis), as a help and protection for the Psalmist (Psalms 121), as the coming judge (2 Timothy), as the God who comes to bring justice to God's people in Jesus' parable, and as the Christ who will return in Jesus' musings at the end of the Luke passage. Of course, the idea of prayer is also found in many of these passages as well – and is, perhaps, what brings the other two themes together. On the one hand we long for God and seek God's presence, God's justice and God's protection. On the other hand, God longs to come

to us, offering us guidance and life through God's word, God's law, written on our hearts. In prayer we express our longing, and we open ourselves to God's presence and purpose. As we pray, God's word is truly written on our hearts, and the God of justice breaks into our human experience with justice, life and divine principles for full and meaningful living. The power of this theme of prayer as the meeting place for God and people is that it is not just the pray-er that is changed by the encounter, but the world in which the pray-er then lives and acts out the prayer each day.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: In the practical world of justice-bringing, prayer can feel like a rather impractical and ineffectual pursuit. If we seek to bring pressure to bear on leaders or groups with whom we disagree through prayer, in the hopes that God will somehow swoop in and bring about the changes we pray for, then we are little more than delusional, and our prayer is indeed impractical and ineffectual. If, however, we seek to be changed by God's coming to us as judge, challenger and guide, if we seek to open our hearts in order that God's law may be written on them, and we can live the justice we seek to bring, then our prayer is a powerful, transformative act. In this sense, no work of justice is complete without prayer. Interfaith dialogue must call us to pray together; engagement with political and social processes must be done prayerfully; protest action, where necessary, must express the prophetic nature of prayer; contribution and service must be clothed in prayerful awareness of God's presence and purpose – or we just become another social upliftment movement. Of course, there is a difference between doing things prayerfully and imposing our form or version of prayer on those of other religions or faith communities. In this sense, prayer must also be engaged in sensitively and gently. No one can ban prayer from any aspect of our lives (even our schools), because we can always pray in our hearts, which is no less effective. What can be banned – perhaps legitimately – is imposing our way of praying on others in public gatherings or places. The true heart of prayer is welcoming, invitational, inclusive and compassionate, not arrogant, selfish, opinionated or exclusive.

LOCAL APPLICATION: In our local church communities it seems that prayer tends to take one of two places. Either we work with prayer a little like the spells and wands in a Harry Potter book – where we “wave” our prayer at situations and people, expecting God's answer to be always dramatic and ‘supernatural’, or we ignore prayer almost altogether, apart from, perhaps, as a ritual practice within our Sunday services, acting as functional atheists as we approach our ministry and witness in the world. This week the Lectionary challenges us to engage with prayer in more meaningful ways than this. In the first instance, we are encouraged to wrestle with God in prayer, to allow our engagement with God to be a way of opening our hearts to the law of God which is to be written on them. This kind of prayer is a transformative practice that confronts our prejudice and self-centredness, while challenging us to allow God's reign to be the reference for our living and acting. In the second instance we are encouraged to experience prayer as a true encounter with the God who comes to us, with the Spirit who fills and empowers us, and with the transforming acts of God in the world. In this sense, prayer is a way of discerning what God is doing among us and offering ourselves to cooperate with the work of God. These two realities – God's word taking root within us and God's coming to us are not separate realities, but are essentially one and the same experience, for which prayer is the vehicle. The question, then, is this: What is God doing (or seeking to do) in our churches and communities? Where do we see

evidence of God's presence, God's coming, and where does God's word need to be written on hearts? How can we cooperate with this work of God in ways that bring justice, grace, compassion and the reality of God's reign into the lives of ordinary God-Beloved people?

October 23, 2022

Jennifer Stark, Church of Scotland

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

The Letters to Timothy and Titus stand (a little doubtfully) under Paul's name as author, but 2 Timothy is thought more likely to be by Paul. Some scholars have placed them towards the end of the first century, rather than around 65 BCE (the time of Paul's death). It is agreed however that they reflect a time when the early church was morphing gradually into an institution, with orders of ministry and the beginnings of creeds and confessions; and that the author, whether Paul or another, is calling for the churches to stay faithful to the apostolic gospel and avoid Gnosticism. Timothy ('my beloved child') was clearly a much loved and depended-upon disciple, and had a mission centred on the Macedonian churches.

The lectionary in previous weeks has taken us through 2 Timothy, and these verses form part of the concluding section. There seems no particular reason, incidentally, why verses 9-15 should not be included; for me, adding the personal names and references 'ground' the letter in the world and situation of Paul.

The section in Chapter 4 has the flavour of a 'last will and testament' from Paul, who appears to have already appeared for trial, and is facing almost certain martyrdom. It is a moving and faith-filled testimony of Paul's faith and resolution, and his confidence in the love and right judgement of God.

Connections with the other readings for today are not immediately obvious, and preaching on this text may well be as part of a focus on the whole letter during the previous few weeks. One commentator points to the sense of achievement in Paul's words: "I have run the race, I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith".

How and when do our efforts matter with God? We speak at funeral services of a 'life well lived'. As All Saints Day approaches, people might be asked to think about people they've known who have mattered. Here we are reminded of the tension in Christian theology between faithful, good works and the undeserved love of God.

Luke 18:9-14

The tax-collector's prayer is one that often comes spontaneously into my mind. Why? Somehow it both names my despair and gives me hope.

As often in Luke, you feel yourself taken directly into the physical space of the story. I was particularly struck this time by the placing of the two men. "The Pharisee, standing by himself..." and "the tax collector, standing far off". I wondered why Luke described them thus. Perhaps it is symbolic of the Pharisee's mistaken approach to God – that he is in fact like others in his humanity and imperfection, not a 'stand-alone' example of a good life (and he does lead a good life), which in reality depends on others too.

The phrase "far off" might well mean that the tax collector does not feel worthy to stand anywhere near other – more apparently worthy? – worshippers.

There is a post-communion prayer in the Church of England liturgy that perhaps echoes this phrase, "Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home". (Common Worship, First Order of Communion). We are unworthy, yet not unworthy of the grace and mercy of God. We are imperfect and fallible and yet there is *hope* – the strong message of this parable.

While discussing this passage (and the Sirach text), I was struck by how much everyone hated hypocrisy. It was one of the strongest reactions in the group, perhaps partly because so much hypocrisy has seemed to be around in national affairs at that point.

If God were to speak to these two men in the Temple, what would each one need to hear?

I find a powerful way into stories like this is to imagine what came before and after for the characters. What took each of them to the Temple that day to pray? Why was the tax collector – whose prayer shows an awareness of his sin – doing this hated job for a corrupt administration? Had the Pharisee always prayed with self-satisfaction or was this a momentary lapse? And what happened afterwards to them, and to their relationship with the God to whom they prayed?

This story is one of several in Luke where the Pharisees are critically portrayed and they have a bad press generally in the Gospels. It is important to recognise that the polemical tone towards Pharisees (and, even more tragically, Jews) reflects the viewpoints of the writers during a long period of struggle and tension as the early Christian church was emerging from first-century Judaism. Matt Skinner writes, "Christian use of the word *Pharisee* as a synonym for hypocrite is inappropriate... it neglects the ways in which Jesus' (and Paul's) teaching arose from Pharisaical influences. It implies that the gospels' combative depictions of Pharisees are historically precise'. The real point of the story may be brought much closer to us if other 'categories' are used for the two characters, representing the 'respectable' and 'unpopular/outsider' groups of our own time.

October 30, 2022

Dr Mark Calder, Church of Scotland

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

These eight verses distil a longer, quite extraordinary exchange between the Prophet Habakkuk and Yahweh, and it may be worth encouraging our congregations this week to spend time reading and meditating upon the full, often troubling and ambiguous, exchange.

If we find it extraordinary, though, this may have more to do with our expectations of prayer and the register in which we usually address God in worship, rather than the expectations created by the Bible. In fact scripture is full of such audacious complaint to God – and complaint is a key part of biblical lament, that literary terrain in which scripture makes space for human perspectives on pain, suffering, injustice, and loss.

With no biographical details about Habakkuk, and noting the possibility that his name is not Hebrew, there is an 'everyman' quality to his words that speak to the universality of disappointment with God's action (or apparent inaction) in the world. Certainly, the first four verses speak especially clearly to me in my work as a conflict specialist for World Vision, an international humanitarian organisation.

Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble. Destruction and violence are before me.

How often it seems that God has caused me, like Habakkuk, 'to see' the horror of violence about which I feel I can do so little? Ukraine, Yemen, DRC, Tigray, Syria, Myanmar, the Sahel spring to mind... and so do children growing in homes and communities affected by violence, including women and girls subject to sexual and gender-based violence, permanently affecting their life chances.

The exchange then weaves its way through vivid observations about the destruction wrought by the godless, apparently without God restraining them, before Chapter Two introduces some consolation.

Yet this is not a quick fix or easy answer. It is a further horizon.

There is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end.

This echoes the biblical motif of 'The Day of the Lord'. This motif is not to be mistaken as being only that great one-off, the Last Judgement. In fact, it is a recurring feature of biblical storytelling: the moment at the end of a difficult season of injustice when God brings judgement, restoration, and wholeness to the oppressed. Relief. Release. The end, and a new beginning.

It is the horizon of the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus prays 'Thy Kingdom Come'. It *involves* the permanent end-times hope of a new heaven and new earth, but it is capable of being *realised* locally and temporarily in our conflict-ridden present too, and has been

realised many times before. This prospect is part of the motivation for the Christian peacemakers and peacebuilders I encounter in my work. Seeing the qualified peace in Northern Ireland and the Balkans as instances of such should drive us to cherish peaceful outcomes all the more. As such, this 'vision for the appointed time' inspires us to action in accordance with God's great Action, not fatalism.

Psalm 119:137-144

In my experience, Christians rarely enthuse about the 'Law of God'. In fact, I have more often heard Christians contrast the apparently stifling, guilt-inducing 'law' with life-giving, liberating 'grace', an opposition drawn with some justification from the Apostle Paul's writings. In Galatians Paul even describes us as being 'cursed' with the law.

In this light, we may wonder whether English translations that add 'but' to v141 are reading the Psalm through such a lens. In fact, no such 'but' exists. It could equally be read, 'Small I am, and despised, so I have not forgotten your precepts'!

The Psalmists (here and elsewhere, e.g. Psalm 19) view God's law as a lavish gift, an insight into God's heart, and an enduring measure against which all people's conduct – rich and powerful, poor and powerless alike – can be evaluated. It is therefore something that the 'small and despised' can lean upon when their rights are denied. Liberals and evangelicals alike have often focused on the respective attributes of specific laws, but the Torah's narrative contextualisation of the legal texts should remind us of the radical nature of a Bronze Age society pursuing order according to a statement of the inviolable dignity of all. It was a law that had no need for kingship until the people demanded it.

We do not grasp the beauty of this easily if we focus on idiosyncrasies of a legal code made for ancient eastern Mediterranean agrarian society, but in many respects the economics of the Torah are more progressive and equalising than anything modern humans have sustained. The Torah is therefore an expression of the Word, the divine relationality itself, which should weave its way through Christian sociality in the church and through the church to all people.

But what is striking is that this law, while unbowed before status and privilege, is not 'impersonal' in the modern sense. This law still illuminates the iniquities of the powerful and religious and has the power to set free and refresh the poorest. Jesus applies it contextually and relationally: Zacchaeus knows salvation, or liberation, for generously compensating those he'd extorted; for the 'woman caught in adultery', the law is apparently abrogated and she is told, simply, 'go and sin no more' (John 8); while to the religious leader, law is not enough, 'Except a man be born again...' (John 3).

Here we see grace expressing the law's essence in real life contexts, relative to individuals' respective power and social status, rather than laying it aside.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

In the midst of great hardship, of uncertainty, affliction and outright danger, the church to which St Paul and his companions write in Thessalonica is a model to us: the Thessalonians model a growth in faith and in love for one another which causes their parent in the faith to boast about them to others!

The editorial cut in this reading means we lose the referent of v11, which is the hope of enduring vindication and the destruction of the evil powers persecuting them. 'To this end...', this hope, continue the Apostles, we pray 'that God will make you worthy of his call'.

This is a rather curious comment, suggesting that in some sense their admirable faith and love is not in itself their worthiness, nor that this worthiness is something attained once and for all. Instead it is a function of the power of God within the community, of which their faith and love is an expression.

It is not uncommon to note the remarkable spirit that animates our siblings in the faith in contexts marked by oppression and deprivation – notably in the global south. We need not romanticise such people and their hardship to assert this, nor should we stop praying for the ongoing sustaining work of God among them in order to continue to bear the fruit that we currently discern.

However we should also pray that, as circumstances around us turn markedly for the worse, our church communities would not be holy huddles barricaded against the world, but expressions of loving solidarity *and* hospitality in which an alternative, Christ-shaped way of being together is made available to our neighbours, a way of being that is robust in the face of injustice, and gentle with the stranger that arrives at our table.

Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus would have been seen as the worst of the worst by many of his neighbours. An Israelite by birth, but who'd sold out his people by collecting taxes for the Romans. Unjustly very rich, young and/or short (the Greek word could mean either), and utterly to be held in contempt.

We tend to think we know who 'the marginalised' are – invariably they are those for whom we have sympathy. But most of us have people whose political views or behaviours or apparent complicity with injustice make them beyond the pale for us – our opponents, even enemies. The Zacchaeus story tells us that, whether we like it or not, Jesus has a heart for those in *these* margins too.

Zacchaeus is a helpful embodiment of Archbishop Tutu's comment that, 'When we oppress others we end up oppressing ourselves too'. The marginalisation of wee Zacchaeus was a consequence of his choices, but that doesn't mean Jesus was therefore happy to stand, as we might, with pursed lips and a sense of justice being done. Hence both are true that Christ stands with the oppressed, and that His love and saving power reaches across the divide to the oppressors who, in seeking, find themselves sought by Christ.

There is so much to unpack in this short tale, but perhaps the most resonant with other scriptures are ways in which Zacchaeus moves from isolated exclusion and social contempt, towards his inclusion within the house of Abraham, the people of God.

Jesus' insistence that Zacchaeus' inclusion begins with showing hospitality: 'I *must* stay at your house'. The one whom nobody would entertain as guest is now the host of Jesus Himself.

And his belonging to this upside down kingdom, this new social order is expressed even more fully by his lavish gift, above and beyond his debt, to the poor – to those who cannot repay him. In so doing, according to the norms of his culture, Zacchaeus was throwing away his social capital to discover a new kind of belonging, with Jesus, in the household of God.

It is a beautiful and challenging story of a way of belonging together that could be especially needed in times of great hardship and deep division.