



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR FEBRUARY 2023

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.

**February 5, 2023**

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

Too often, it seems we create a division between Christians who live with an experiential relationship with God, and those who are concerned to make a difference in the world, and who may, at times, seem not to be interested in experiencing God's presence or power. It's like relationship with God and service of God are separate and disconnected things, and we need to choose to be either one or the other. Yet, this week's Lectionary readings proclaim that both expressions of faith are one, and that those who seek an authentic spirituality must embrace both the experience of the divine and the call to work in the world. In truth no real impact can be made on the world without a vibrant, empowering relationship with God, and no real relationship with God can be found outside of engagement with the struggles and needs of our world.

May our worship this week lead us into true encounter with God, and lead us out in the power of God's Spirit to serve the world that God loves.

**READINGS:**

**Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12):** The people complain because God does not seem to notice when they fast and pray, but Isaiah speaks God's word that challenges them on their injustice and exploitation – that they have the appearance of penitence without a true change of heart.

**Psalms 112:1-9, (10):** Those who live righteously are compassionate, just and generous, and they have confidence that God will care for them.

**1 Corinthians 2:1-12, (13-16):** God's wisdom is Christ crucified, which cannot be understood without opening our spirits to God's Spirit. But, for we who have received God's Spirit, we are able to know and receive the wonderful blessing God offers us in Christ.

**Matthew 5:13-20:** Jesus calls his followers to be as salt and light in the world – allowing our good works to be seen in order that others may praise God. Further, Jesus calls his followers to true righteousness, beyond the external legalism of the Pharisees, but embodying the true spirit of the law.

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

What is authentic spirituality? In what ways do we know – and do others experience – that we have a real, vibrant relationship with God? These are the questions raised by the Lectionary this week. In Isaiah a contrast is drawn between the indulgent spirituality of the people, which leaves them disconnected from God and from God's purposes, with the result that they feel no answer from God when they fast and pray, and true fasting and prayer which are expressed in lives of justice and compassion. In the Psalm, those who live justly and righteously are celebrated, and are assured of God's care. In Paul's letter, we are reminded that God is not known by the usual means that the world tries to find life and goodness, but only in Christ and Christ's crucifixion. It is as we open to God's Spirit that we receive God's presence and power, and that we receive "the mind of Christ" which will

inevitably lead us into lives that emulate Christ's selfless service and sacrifice. In the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel, we discover that true righteousness is not that of the Pharisees – legalistic, individualistic obedience to law – but is to be light and salt in the world, fulfilling the heart of the law by bringing life and goodness to others, and drawing them into healing and saving knowledge of God. Clearly, for the Lectionary this week, true spirituality is seen in a living, vibrant relationship with God through Christ, and by God's Spirit, which is then reflected and expressed through actions of compassion, justice and service in the world. If we live this kind of spirituality, it will inevitably draw others to this God we serve – and that's a huge bonus for us!

#### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

##### ***Global Application:***

It is all too easy to allow our spirituality to become "otherworldly" and disconnected from life's realities. It is all too easy, even for those of us who are committed to justice and compassion in our world, to become like Pharisees who focus on outward, legalistic observances – becoming social justice fundamentalists, if you will – and losing the life-giving relationship with God and the empowerment of God's Spirit that makes us true salt and light – healing, creative, colourful, restoring influences in our world. Yet, as we engage with the systems of our world, we need to keep asking ourselves how we can be those who lead both victims and perpetrators to "give glory to God", to find a real relationship with God for themselves. How do we work with the powerful, the connected, the wealthy, the influential in such a way that they are led into lives of justice and compassion as well? Judgement, self-righteousness, or adopting the world's methods of control, coercion and condemnation will not bring true change to our world. Rather it is as we commit to a cross-embracing way of living, and offer ourselves in service and compassion of all people that we are able to bring something of God's life and justice into being. It is as we commit to authentic, lived righteousness – becoming salt and light in word, action, thought, communication, participation in the systems and processes of our world, and engagement with others – that our different way of living demonstrates the power and wisdom of God, and invites others into this alternative life, while also gently bringing change where it matters.

##### ***Local Application:***

It is very easy to allow our sense of call to be reduced to becoming the conscience, or the moral watch dogs, of our communities and neighbourhoods. It is easy to point fingers and judge, to identify evil and, like Pharisees, make our religion about separating ourselves from "others" who don't live up to our standards. This can be true for both conservatives and liberals, for both "evangelicals" and "social justice" Christians. But, such engagement with the world seldom brings any real change. It is when we are salt and light – those who live out in our own lives what we seek to see in the world – that we make a real difference. Salt and light people are those who bring flavour and colour, integrity and insight, healing and compassion into the world by the way they live, love and interact. Their influence is felt not through judgement or legalism, but through a life lived with a completely different quality, that touches others with grace and truth and compassion and calls out to the best in them, leaving them longing to live better lives themselves. This is what it means to let our good deeds be seen so that others will praise God, and it's the only thing that really brings change into the world. As Gandhi famously said: "Be the change you wish to see in the world".

**February 12, 2023**

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

This week the Lectionary continues with the Sermon on the Mount, and with an examination of what true spirituality looks like. Here Jesus focuses on the heart as the place where true obedience and true righteousness happens, and from which a Christ-like life of grace and compassion flows.

May our worship capture and transform our hearts, so that we become true reflections of Christ in the world.

**READINGS:**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20:** Moses offers the people a choice between life and death, challenging them to love and remain faithful to God and God's commandments, and promising them prosperity and blessing if they do.

**OR Sirach 15:15-20:** Before each person are life and death, and each must choose which they will receive.

**Psalms 119:1-8:** Because a life of integrity is blessed, the psalmist pleads with God for the ability to live a life of obedience to God's commands.

**1 Corinthians 3:1-9:** Factions among people of faith are a sign of immaturity. Paul calls the Corinthians to be mature and to recognise that those who serve God's people are equal, and insignificant. It is God's work in the believer to bring growth that matters.

**Matthew 5:21-37:** Continuing the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that righteousness is not just about following externals, but is about what happens in the heart. He challenges his hearers to true integrity, goodness and compassion with regard to dealing with anger, lust, adultery, divorce and making promises (vows).

**REFLECTIONS ON THEME:**

Not surprisingly, there is a clear development this week from last week's readings. The Old Testament passages, though, if looked at alone, can be misleading in the sense that they seem to indicate that obedience to God's law is a guarantee of health, wealth and happiness. This is, of course, much the way the world was believed to work back when these passages were written, but we know that it's a little more complex than this. It is this complexity that both Paul and Jesus try to engage in their teaching. For Paul it's about growing into a spiritual maturity that no longer needs competitive factions to feel secure and "righteous". Paul calls the Corinthians to recognise that all of God's servants are just that – people doing a job for God's reign. What is important is not aligning oneself with particular people, leaders or ideas, but following God's constant work of growth into becoming a true Christ-follower. For Christ, faithful and true spirituality is not about ticking off a few laws in a box of obedience, but is doing the work of the heart, of checking the real impact of who we are and how this works out in what we do and in our relationships. It is embracing the quest to reflect God's grace, God's goodness and God's integrity that is the

heart of this week's call. Law is easy, and does not transform. Living with a God-formed integrity of heart, speech and action is what truly saves.

### **CONNECTING WITH LIFE:**

#### ***Global Application:***

There are two ways to apply the theme this week. The first is to reflect on Paul's ideas of factions, and Jesus' call to reflect on how we treat each other. It takes only a few seconds to identify the many ways we separate ourselves in the world – nations war against nations; political parties slander and undermine each other; religions seek to kill one another's followers; wealthy and poor seek to protect themselves from each other. The destruction brought about by this division is devastating. If we can begin to find our common humanity within, and begin to live, globally, from a Christ-like heart, we can begin to heal some of the damage we have done. The second is to focus the challenge on living our faith from the heart in a globally connected world. It is easy to do business in ways that are legal, but that nevertheless hurt poor farmers, factory workers or the environment. It is easy to lead nations or organisations in ways that are constitutionally and legally sanctioned, but that nevertheless serve only ourselves and leave others broken. It is easy to conduct ourselves as citizens of the world in ways that are lawful, but that bring great harm to people in other parts of the world – or even our own neighbourhood. Christ's challenge is to refuse to allow ourselves to live only according to the low standard of law, but to go beyond it to living from the heart – serving, seeking justice, offering welcome and compassion, protecting the vulnerable and preserving our rich ecological heritage on the planet. There is no question, though, that to adopt Christ's heart-driven life is going to be painful and difficult. It will also open the doors to life for us and others, though.

#### ***Local Application:***

It is all too easy to build our lives and our churches on programs – easy sets of rules and laws that guide what we do, but that have little connection with our real, heart-felt, lives or what's going on in the world around us. It is easy to go to church on Sunday and sing songs and pray prayers. It is easy to not steal, not kill, not commit adultery. But, simply obeying these laws does not bring life to us or to those around us. It is when we allow God to capture our hearts with the truth of the Gospel, when we allow God to continually and disturbingly challenge and grow our hearts, when we live from the inside out, ensuring that our hearts are filled with Christ's love and are right with God and others, and allow that to guide our speech and actions – then we become those who make a healing, restoring impact on the world around us, and who both find, and bring to others, fullness of life. This living from the heart takes far more work, and far more awareness than legalism. It requires us to allow God to constantly challenge our attitudes and convictions, to constantly transform our feelings and reactions and to constantly call us to a higher standard. In this way of living we cannot rest in a future guarantee of heaven after we die. We are called to work to be citizens of heaven now, and to actively bring heaven into our world and our lives through submitting to God's gracious transforming guidance. But one thing is sure. If we are courageous enough to embark on the journey of heart-driven living, we will discover a richness and a fullness to life, a deeper connectedness and a more gracious way of relating and living together. In this sense the Old Testament writers are correct – following God's ways does guarantee life for us.

**February 19, 2023**

Rev Dr Douglas Galbraith, Church of Scotland

From the ninth century until the publication of the Revised Common Lectionary, the Eastern date for the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, had been followed by the Church in the West. The new position of the Last Sunday after the Epiphany came from the Lutheran tradition, and one can see from the internal signals in the gospel accounts that this not only makes narrative sense but adds theological and spiritual insight. Scholarship explains that the use of the word 'after' is not just sequential but signals a relationship between two events. This event comes 'after' Peter's declaration at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' teaching that true messiahship takes the way of suffering and death, and that His followers would be those who took up their cross and followed. Now the vista from the mountain is across the whole stretch of Lent when we pace ourselves with our Lord on His journey to the cross, seeking to match our lives and our worship to the quickening pace of God's saving work in Christ.

Any approach to unpacking the readings and preparing the sermon involves time. A first reading can help to connect with the themes, to begin to see images and ideas that link them (there are the obvious things and then the small details, for example 'six days' appears in both the Exodus and Matthew readings) and to allow ideas to begin to surface. A second reading identifies things that puzzle or surprise about the texts. This might lead to some reading of commentaries. There is a lot of other rich material around the Transfiguration, particularly poetry and art. It is worth spending a bit of time exploring some of that, and again making connections between themes and ideas.

Equipped with those insights from both biblical scholarship and wider resources, it is then the key work of prayerful reading and reflection that allow ideas to surface.

### **Exodus 24:12-18**

The question this and surrounding chapters seek to answer, perhaps from the later perspective of Temple worship, is how can we know when we worship that we are not calling into a vacuum? What should we do or say, how should we structure our approach, so that we are more likely to meet and be addressed by God? This and previous chapters suggest a careful and orderly, rather than a casual but well-meaning, approach: the people at the foot of the mountain taking part in extended preparation, the representatives of the people half way up, Moses and Joshua continuing onwards, building the connection, as it were, with the living God. But it is not a one-way impulse; the cloud signifies the movement of God to meet them. God breaks into our world even as we worship. There are two other insights that we may glean: that the coming of God can be a disturbing, even dangerous, event (special persons are chosen to prepare the ground, to represent God to the people and the people to God); secondly – a true act of worship cannot be hidden but is to be seen by all. It is no wonder that in our tradition we refer to the Sunday service as 'public worship', an aspect so important that a higher council has to adjudicate if it is proposed on one day not to hold it, even for a good reason.

This is perhaps the obvious reading to pair with the Gospel, with themes that link both. Both are set on mountains; both involve the prophet and lawgiver of Israel; both have something to do with encounters with God; both have some form of divine revelation; both have importance for the people of God.

This section of the book of Exodus is some of the oldest material in the Hebrew Bible. It forms part of what is known as the 'Holiness Code' (chapters 21-24), which scholars suggest is a collection of traditions spanning a 1,000-year period.

At the heart of this passage is the question, 'who can worship God in God's most sacred place?' In looking at that question it is important to read the whole of the chapter. When we do that we find the simple answer: Moses. Despite setting out with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and several other elders, Moses is told by YHWH; "You alone [Moses], and none of the others, are to come near me. The people are not even to come up the mountain." (v2)

However, the whole group heads up the mountain (v9) and they all see the God of Israel. This is a really rare occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. It is amazing. They all survive to speak of it (v11): "God did not lay a hand on the chief men of the people of Israel, yet they beheld God, and ate and drank." This is the first recorded divine picnic!

In this passage, Moses alone is called up the mountain. Yet he takes with him Joshua. He leaves Aaron and Hur in charge (with the fateful words, "Whoever has a dispute can go to them", eventually leading to their making the golden calf in chapter 32).

One of the striking things for me about the passage is that meeting God requires time – this is not an instant download; there is a lot of waiting around – it is six days before God calls to Moses out of the cloud. Moses enters the cloud and is there for 40 days (biblical shorthand for 'a long time'). Too often we are expecting everything to happen instantaneously.

What is distinctly different to a few verses earlier is that Moses *does not see* God, rather he sees the 'glory of God'.

The description of God's glory to our modern eyes doesn't seem that extraordinary. We are used to seeing the incredible both in the natural world – the explosion of a volcano, the power of a glacier, and in the world we create – the power of a rocket blasting to space, the dreadful destruction of long-range missiles laying waste to a whole town. We have become so numbed to these things that I am not entirely sure we would tremble at the sight of God's awesome majesty. Sadly we have lost the sense of awe. In a world where 'awesome power' describes a rugby performance, 'awesome beauty' a designer dress and 'oh my God' is just an utterly trivial 'OMG' in a text message, we somehow need to recapture the wonder of encountering God.

## **Psalm 2**

One of the 'royal' psalms, it sees human kingship as embedded in the kingship of God who rules from Mount Zion, a psalm that, in face of the pain of constant war and its terrible consequences, finds security in God's ultimate rule in the world, expressed through the messianic king. Possibly arising from coronation ritual during the monarchic period, it reads

as if spoken by the king in a worship setting surrounding the ascent to the throne, affirming that the power of the king rests in God and not in political schemes. Both the passage from Exodus and this psalm prepare us to understand the Transfiguration not as something beyond this world but rather the very descent of God into the world and among humanity, and that transfiguration is not complete until all aspects of our world are remade, suggested in the Psalmist's language of the king being adopted as the son of God.

Some psalms have phrases that are deeply familiar. This is one of those psalms. Those of you familiar with Handel's Messiah will now have an ear worm that you'll be humming all day. It is not just Handel who takes phrases from this Psalm – references to it are scattered through the New Testament (Acts 4:25-28, 1 Cor 1:20).

Coming right at the opening of the Psalter, the pitch is made that this is about more than just the reign of David and the Kings of Israel. It is almost certainly a psalm for a human coronation. It of course points to an understanding of David's reign being on behalf of God – the divine right of kings being echoed through history even until now ('Dieu et mon droit' appears on the royal coat of arms), but it is about much more than claiming the right to governance in a small region of the Middle East.

There is an emphasis on the double title, 'the Lord's anointed' – anointed being the word that comes to us ultimately as 'Messiah' and 'Christ'.

Verse 7 is the golden thread that connects this psalm to the other lectionary readings. "You are my son", (Matt 17:5, 2 Peter 1:17). These phrases have strong echoes of the accounts of Jesus' baptism as well as the Transfiguration. Inevitably as we read the psalm we do so through our Christological lens of it being a statement from God about who Jesus is. When we do that the psalm points us towards the kingly rule of Christ, the suffering servant soon to be enthroned upon the cross (and for the musically minded, you might now have another ear worm from Stainer's 'The Crucifixion').

## **2 Peter 1:16-21**

Peter was there! He heard the voice from heaven.

It was a pronouncement for the benefit of Peter, James and John, and ultimately for us. It is a pronouncement that affirms God was in Christ being revealed to the world.

The account that is given of the Transfiguration here neatly skips over Peter's bumbling offer to build some shacks for those there. In the context of this letter it clearly builds a case for the authority of the author (which is unlikely to be Peter himself as the somewhat self-conscious writer suggests, "We have not to depend on made-up stories..." (v16, Good News Translation). In fact the only real purpose of recounting the story here appears to be in strengthening the author's authority and with it the wider message of the letter).

The need for such authority in the writing of the letter becomes clear in the following chapter – some of those who were teaching were misusing scripture. The divine proclamation, "This is my own dear Son" (v17), underlines the importance of God's word revealed to us in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. We need to heed the words of v19 and

pay attention to God's word proclaimed. It is the dazzling light shining in the darkest of places.

The writer urges their readers to go behind these teachings to the person and work of Jesus Christ himself. He appeals to the account of the Transfiguration, with the writer as an eyewitness, proving the authenticity of Scripture and its prophetic teachings, but warns that interpretation cannot rest with any individual but belongs to the whole faith community (vv20-21), taught by these witnesses to divine revelation.

### **Matthew 17:1-9**

As always, Jesus is deliberate in what He does. He takes His disciples away (a useful reminder of the need for all of us in ministry to take time away to be with God).

Having gone away, we move straight into the main action and we encounter the strange word, transfigured. Transfigured means 'transformed' or 'changed' (cf. Rom 12:2, 2 Cor 3:18), the Good News Bible helpfully translates this as "a change came over Jesus". What it actually means is made clear – "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

The two other figures are interpreted as Moses and Elijah (how do they know it is them?). Their presence makes the links between the fulfilling of the Law (cf. Moses hears the voice from God on the mountain) and the prophets (the expectation that the Messiah's appearance will be preceded by the return of Elijah – cf. Malachi 4:5-6). Both Moses and Elijah are those who have conversed with God. Now we discover them doing the same with Jesus – another gentle pointer to His divinity.

The offer to build some shelters is puzzling. I am not sure that it would be a natural reaction, but then in moments of stress we all act differently. I read it as an attempt at some sort of hospitality and an attempt to keep them all there longer.

Peter is interrupted by the voice from heaven and the words – "my beloved Son". The disciples are full of fear at hearing the voice of God and are warned not to tell anyone about the experience, but for Matthew's readers this is not new – they are already in on the Messianic secret and this is another reinforcement of what they have already heard at Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:13-17).

Those who have visited Coventry Cathedral will be aware of the story of its rebuilding in the aftermath of war-time bombing. Standing in what remains of the medieval ruins you can see into the new section of the Cathedral. Through the great glass screen you can glimpse the extraordinary tapestry of Christ in Glory at the far end of the cathedral. From the midst of the pain and struggle of apparent ruin there is the reminder of the ultimate victory of Christ.

The transfiguration gospel offers a similar glimpse as the shadow of the cross becomes increasingly dark as it falls across Jesus and the disciples' path (and indeed our own journey through Lent). The disciples have moved from the excitement of hearing their master's

radical teaching to witnessing His life-changing and love-affirming miracles, to being plunged into deep confusion as Jesus reveals He will suffer. Now they are overwhelmed by the merest glimpse of His true glory.

In a world that feels increasingly fragile it is all too easy to live with the sense of deep darkness over us. Yet in the words of poet Malcolm Guite, "Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar eclipse that glimpse of how things really are." (Guite: 'Transfiguration' in *Sounding the Seasons*, Canterbury Press.)

Even as we journey through Lent towards the pain of Good Friday, we are reminded of the ultimate victory of God.

The challenge for us is how we help those beyond the doors of our church to catch a glimpse of how things really are.

## **February 26, 2023**

Phill Mellstrom, Church of Scotland

The readings for this first Sunday of Lent get us thinking about sin and temptation.

The story of how Adam and Eve turned away from God invites us to consider how, with our eyes opened to the knowledge of sin, we view ourselves and others. The psalm helps us to voice our repentance and appeal to the goodness of God. The New Testament reading reminds us that we are saved through the obedience of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel widens our view on this as we see how Jesus went to the desert to fast and pray for 40 days and resisted temptation.

In writing this material I tried to be as compassionate as possible regarding the story of Genesis, trying to be careful in how we might view our 'goodness' as human beings. As the readings go on, there was ample opportunity (as with the Psalms *Selah* moments), to stop and consider how I was orientated either away from God's love, or towards or in tune with God's love. As Lent begins I am often drawn to consider not only how my rhythm fits within wider rhythms of family, community and creation. I was also challenged to consider how my sin and sinful choices fit within this wider framework without being tempted to focus on structural injustices and so on while at the same time ignoring that my eyes have been opened to sin within my own life. The prayers and exams for Lent are intended to reflect this tension.

## **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

There is something important to note about the story in Genesis, from the beginning and not just Chapter 3. The story so far has been that Creation was good and then, with the addition of the two human beings, Creation became very good. This intrinsic value and very goodness is how we should view our humanity. We are very good at our core, valuable, beautiful and loved by God.

It is also important to hear the story of the perfect companion made from the rib. This is not a story about Eve being less than or inferior to Adam, but rather, this speaks of closeness and connectedness. These human beings in relationship are very good.

It is interesting that the stories told to the humans, by God and by the snake, are ambiguous in terms of truth. What does this tension do to our reading of this text, and ultimately to our hearing and deeper understanding of the stories told for us throughout the scriptures?

With the eating of the fruit comes the knowledge of their circumstance. The circumstance remains, that they are naked, but their seeing and knowing of their circumstance has changed. What follows from the resulting conversation and attempt to hide from God is a curse (not of the human beings, but rather of the serpent and the ground), but this is not part of our reading. So, we are left to wait in this space of opened eyes, of feeling naked, and of waiting to see what might become of this new knowing, and of the decision to put trust in somewhere else other than God.

Perhaps it is in this waiting that we begin to sense the call to listen fully, to try and understand more deeply our circumstances, the temptations that lie there, and to confess.

While the call is ultimately for us to repent, how often do we make this entirely about ourselves? The drama in this story is set in the midst of relationship, so what might the coming journey through Lent look like as it is lived out in our relationships and our communities?

## **Psalm 32**

Talking about sin, and acknowledging sin (v5) is difficult. How do we hold in tension that we are 'very good', yet we know that we make choices which are not? How do we understand that our own sin and the sin of the systems in which we live and move both need to be acknowledged/confessed; and in both, there is need for repentance? And how do we do this without condemning humanity with a harmful negative narrative, while recognising that focusing only on the wider injustice or evil, abdicating any responsibility, is not the full picture?

We are reminded in verse 3 of the withering effect of holding back and not speaking out against the wider sin of injustice and oppression and denying the effect of unconfessed sin upon our mind, body and soul. This psalm is not just pointing to the personal side of repentance and forgiveness, but through the course of the psalm the writer points outward to the community of faith – in verse 6 the invitation is made for all to come and live faithfully, showing that the whole community may be part of the rhythm of confession,

repentance and forgiveness. Psalm 32 is not particularly long, yet there are moments of *Selah*. What might this pausing, stilling, and waiting say to us about our Lenten rhythm?

### **Psalm 32 – Responsive reading:**

Leader: Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.  
Blessed are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.  
While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat  
of summer.

**All: We acknowledged our sin to You,  
and do not hide our iniquity;  
we confess our transgressions to You, O LORD,  
forgive our sin.**

Leader: We faithfully offer prayer to You;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.  
You are a hiding place for me;  
You preserve me from trouble;  
You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.  
I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.  
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed  
with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.  
Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

**All: We are glad in the LORD and rejoice,  
O righteous, we shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

### **Romans 5:12-19**

It feels too simplistic to land on the idea that sin and death came into existence through the turning of Adam from God. That one man is responsible and that we are cast forever in that mould, does not explore the depth of separation from our source that happens when we 'sin' and make decisions that serve only ourselves. It is important to understand that our actions have consequences and that death – of dreams, ideas, initiatives and so on – is a reality, and will impact not just upon ourselves, but our neighbour, our communities and the rest of Creation. It is important to see and recognise fully the interconnectedness of sin and death and its ramifications. It is in this context that we acknowledge the healing work of Christ upon all Creation – of which we are part – and begin to sense the fullness of the new creation, a new reality, begun in Christ, and the repairing of relationship between God and Creation. The relationship though is not just repaired; what we see here is God's abundance.

Christ did so much more in bringing life than Adam did in apparently bringing death. And there is yet more, not only are we to experience the grace of God and forgiveness from sin, but we are to live freely and fully and to strive to make decisions that orientate us towards loving God and our neighbour and working towards righteousness.

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

Led by the Spirit, Jesus goes into the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of testing, of preparing, of equipping, of waiting and of trusting. For Jesus, being the Son of God means accepting His humanity and depending on God for daily bread. When Jesus is tempted – to turn stones to bread and amass more than is needed, or to abuse a position of power in commanding the Angels to wait upon Him, or to bow to a corrupt power for personal gain – this highlights ways in which we can recognise that our way living and gaining of life/satisfaction etc., should not be to the detriment of others.

These tests in the wilderness are preparation for the choices Jesus makes later, as He lives out a ministry of service to others, and of healing. What happens in the wild does not stay there. We can see how it shapes the journey of Jesus' ministry, but how might it manifest itself in the reality of our own context and throughout the coming journey of Lent?

How do we respond when we are faced with temptation? It isn't always an obvious choice between good and bad, it is the grey areas that we can often find difficult. In the experience we read in the gospel, Jesus is able to discern what is happening and where the right path, or right response is to each of the temptations. Richard Rohr reflects, "Most people's daily ethical choices are not between total good and total evil, but between various shades of good, a partial good that is wrongly perceived as an absolute good (because of the self as the central reference point), or even evil that disguises itself as good. These are what get us into trouble."

There are different ways that we see temptation laid out in the gospel story, with something of this grey area of choice being the reality of our lives. Perhaps we can choose to reflect on how the journey through this period of Lent will involve choices every day, that can lead us into temptation, or if not deliver us from an obvious evil – at best allow us to choose a better way of living and being – that will ultimately help in the work of establishing God's community of love here on earth as in heaven.

What happens when we are tempted to limit God's word? In what ways do we reduce the impact and implications of scripture by reading it to our advantage? In what ways do our habits or practices limit how we might hear and respond to the 'Word'? How might our understanding of what God's word is, be opened up and expanded?

What happens when our identity is challenged? Perhaps we are tempted to deny our real identity because of our surroundings or who we are with? Perhaps we are faced with choices that can either dignify or diminish another's identity? Maybe we face the

temptation to see our identity as more important than another's, either personally or in view of culture or ethnicity?

What happens when we are tempted to use power for our own gain? What might the choices be for us that reflect Jesus being asked to bow down – how might we choose to side with the powerful to the detriment of others, whether close to home, or through the support of a system or practice that is not in tune with God's way of love?

How are we, in our day to day living, tempted to find life and meaning in destructive places and practices? What might this mean for our rhythm throughout Lent? We need to shape our habits of prayer and action to reflect a journey of self-examination in light of the hope or redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. We need to do this in the knowledge that our personal sin is bound up in relationships and systems, in which our choices promote or hinder the love of God being made real to our neighbour and all of Creation.