



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR AUGUST 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 11:30am each Sunday, and can also be watched any time at <https://iview.abc.net.au>

Stay safe. God bless.

August 6, 2023

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

Feasting and covenants. These two ideas are always linked in Scripture and they signify God's commitment to us and God's invitation for us to be included in God's family. While this is certainly Good News for us, it is also a huge challenge when we face the truth that we are to become agents of God's covenant and carriers of God's invitation. This means both proclaiming and living out the inclusivity of the Kingdom and facing issues of hunger and poverty in our world and our communities.

May we feast on God's grace as we worship, and go out to create both physical and spiritual feasts at every chance we get.

READINGS:

Genesis 32:22-31: Jacob spends the night on the banks of the Jabbok River where he wrestles with a man until dawn. In the fight, Jacob is injured, leaving him with a limp, but he is also blessed and his name is changed to Israel.

OR **Isaiah 55:1-5:** An invitation to God's feast, and to enter a new covenant with God.

Psalms 17:1-7, 15: A prayer for God to listen to and rescue the psalmist, who affirms his commitment to follow God's ways and be faithful, and to trust in God's willingness to answer his prayer.

OR **Psalms 145:8-9, 14-21:** A song of praise for God's grace, compassion and love, and for God's care and protection of those who trust in God.

Romans 9:1-5: Paul expresses his love and concern for his Jewish brothers and sisters, and celebrates the covenants, promises, law – and the Christ – that the Israelites received from God.

Matthew 14:13-21: Jesus tries to get some time to himself after hearing of John's death, but the crowds find him, and end up, late in the day, in a remote place and without food. Jesus instructs the disciples to feed them, but they object that they only have few resources. Jesus then feeds the crowds with the disciples' food, after which baskets of leftovers are gathered up.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The two ideas that come together in this week's readings are God's covenant with God's people, and the invitation to feast with God. Of course, these are simply two ways of expressing God's commitment to us, and of showing the care, compassion, faithfulness, grace and salvation of God that the psalmists celebrate and rely on. In Genesis, Jacob is visited by God and, in the struggle, is both wounded and blessed – which is always the case when we are touched by God in our broken world. In Isaiah, the restorative invitation of God is proclaimed loud and clear. In Romans, Paul celebrates the Israelite people – the descendants of Jacob – to whom were given the invitation and the covenant, and expresses his longing for them to respond to God's new invitation and new covenant in Christ. Finally,

in the Gospel, the crowds who come to Jesus discover that they are welcomed, taught and fed, discovering, truly, a new Moses in Christ – one who gives them both a new law and a new manna.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: It is hard to read Isaiah's prophecy and the Gospel story of the crowd which is fed without thinking about the reality of poverty in our world. The challenge of the Scriptures becomes even more urgent when we recognise that there is enough food being produced to feed all the people in our world. The problem is not with the food, it is with people not having money or opportunity to get the food they need. The story of the feeding is a prophetic word challenging us to work for ways to provide for the needs of everyone. This may mean working against unfair farming subsidies, or unjust trade laws, or it may mean ensuring that the way we buy and use our food is supportive of just practices. These are complex issues, but eating simply, minimising waste, and buying from producers and distributors that pay a fair wage and engage in just practices is a relatively easy first step. The readings from this week's Lectionary can also be expanded beyond just this one issue, though. God's gracious covenant with humanity is a challenge for us to recognise the dignity and humanity of all people, and to ensure that our attitudes, our ethics and our worship are free from exclusionary or diminishing language and practices, from dominance and power abuses, and from compliance with any system that unfairly oppresses or disadvantages some in favour of others. Essentially, we are called to become the people of God, welcomed at God's table, and living as global citizens with a world-centric perspective and a God-inspired longing for healing, justice, peace and inclusion of all. It's a dream, perhaps, but one worth striving for.

LOCAL APPLICATION: In our communities, homes and churches we all have resources that can be used to care for, to 'feed' others. As people of God we are recipients of God's commitment to, God's covenant with, us. We are those who know God's provision and abundance – even if we aren't financially wealthy. The call we must face, though, is to be those who can trust in God's care for us, and lean into God's commitment to us, and allow this to release us in generosity, in inclusivity and in service of others. Paul's care for his Jewish brothers and sisters meant that he was willing to sacrifice and serve them wholeheartedly. And Jesus' words to the disciples ring through the centuries to us: "You feed them". This means that we cannot avoid the responsibility of learning to care for and seek to serve those in our neighbourhoods, churches and even our own families. It means that we cannot hoard what we have, but must be willing to live simply and share what we have, inviting others to sit at the table with us. It means that we must be willing to become God's provision, God's welcome, God's commitment and God's service to others. Inevitably, we will find ourselves wrestling with God over these challenges, because it is never easy to be called by God. And inevitably we will find our hearts broken, our souls and bodies wounded by the grief and need we will find ourselves facing as we seek to serve others. But, in spite of this, we will also know the joy and 'reward' that comes when we know we are being used by God, and we are growing the community that knows and shares God's feast.

August 13, 2023

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

Evangelism is not a popular word today. Many Christians shy away from sharing their faith because of all the baggage that has been accumulated over the years. But, our faith is public, not private, and as followers of Christ we are called to participate in God's work of saving the world. This week the Lectionary invites us to explore how we might approach this challenging, but exciting call.

May our faith be strengthened as we worship, and may we be transformed that little bit more into those who reflect Christ's life and message.

READINGS:

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28: Jacob loves his son Joseph more than his other sons, and gives a Joseph a beautiful robe. But, his brothers become jealous and sell him into slavery.

OR 1 Kings 19:9-18: Elijah takes refuge in a cave and he is visited by God. he experiences windstorm, earthquake and fire, but God is not in these dramatic events. Then he hears God speak in a gentle whisper and he receives instructions from God.

Psalms 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b: A psalm of thanksgiving and celebration of what God has done as the psalmist remembers Joseph.

OR Psalm 85:8-13: The psalmist commits to listening to God and calls God's people to stay away from foolishness, while receiving God's salvation, righteousness, truth and blessing.

Romans 10:5-15: Becoming right with God is not about the law's requirements, but about recognising the nearness of God's word and responding to it in faith – which is why it is so important that there are those who will take the message to the world.

Matthew 14:22-33: Jesus walks on water to join the disciples in the boat as they struggle with the storm. Peter asks Jesus to call him to join him, but as he walks toward Jesus he fears and begins to sink. Jesus rescues him, and when they climb back into the boat, the storm dies down.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The readings this week all tell stories of rescue and salvation. In each of them, there is a person who is tasked with bringing God's rescue to others. In Genesis it's Joseph who, although he goes through immense suffering, will rescue Egypt (as we know from Psalm 105). In Kings, it's Elijah who hears God's instructions (as the Psalmist commits to do in Psalm 85) and rescues God's people from corrupt leaders. In Romans, Paul celebrates the faith that responds to God's word, and the ones who proclaim the word so that people can believe. Finally, in the Gospel, it's Jesus who rescues Peter and the disciples as the storm threatens to overwhelm them, and who, in doing this, leads them to faith. Ultimately all rescuers point us to Christ and call us to respond to Christ in faith. But, at the same time, the

Scriptures call us to be the ones who proclaim God's nearness, and who invite others to find salvation in Christ. It's a challenging call, and one that has often been understood in destructive, arrogant and hurtful ways. But, when we recognise that beneath the call is God's grace, and that, as Paul says, it is not our job to question who will "go to heaven" and who will "descend to the place of the dead", we can embrace God's call to be those who graciously and compassionately reach out to others with a genuine concern for their sakes.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: There have tended to be two responses to the call to bring salvation to the world. On the one hand, Christ-followers have viewed this in purely spiritual terms, and related to specific beliefs and ideas. The Word is thought to be the Scriptures, and the faith that is needed is purely about Jesus forgiving sins and taking us to heaven. In this scheme, it is important to impress on people that they are sinners and that Christ is the only way to salvation. However, any earthly salvation that might be needed is largely ignored. On the other hand, salvation is seen purely in terms of social justice, in terms of overthrowing unjust systems and creating a world of justice, peace and equity. In this scheme, any need for spiritual rescue, or for consideration of eternal realities are largely ignored. However, in our world, there is a need for both rescues, and for people who are both committed enough and humble enough to proclaim it in ways that are life-giving, welcoming and practical. There is a need to recognise that we are not capable of saving ourselves, and that we need God's Word in Christ to empower us, direct us and transform us. There is a need to recognise that God's reign challenges and confronts unjust human systems and to work for a change in how our world is structured. And, there is a need to recognise that all people are loved by God, are made in God's image, and are eternal creatures whom God longs to bring into loving, healing relationship with God's self. If we are to participate in God's saving work, then, it will mean that we need to be both people of faith and people of practical, liberating action. Both people of courageous proclamation, and people of gracious, loving welcome. And it will mean having the humility to realise that it is Christ – not Christians, or even the Church – that must ultimately be the Saviour, and that Christ can choose to do this work in any way Christ chooses – and through any means.

LOCAL APPLICATION: The reality of our world is that many people are tired of hearing the traditional evangelical presentation of the Gospel and resent the sense of judgement and exclusivity with which it is presented. It is tempting for us to see ourselves as obedient servants of Christ who do not reach people simply because they are resistant to God. However, we would do well to consider whether we may have missed what God is really calling us to do, and whether we have reduced God's message down to only a few parts of the whole. For some of us, the idea of offering God's salvation to others is the cause of much embarrassment and resistance because we don't want to be associated with certain groups, preachers or ways of evangelising. But, in every community, every neighbourhood and even every family, are those who would be grateful for us to serve them as Christ did, to work on their behalf to change unjust systems, and to help them find practical ways to address their struggles. In every community are those who want to see our message being lived out in practical ways. In every situation are those who wish that the message of God's grace and love was presented with the same grace and love it proclaims. As churches we cannot avoid the call to share the Gospel, but we can be more careful about how we respond to it. In Joseph's case there was no blame placed on Egypt for the famine. There

was just grace, love and rescue. In Elijah's case, there was confrontation with corrupt leaders, but solidarity with the poor and oppressed, not judgement. In Paul's letter he instructs believers to avoid getting into judgements of who is going to heaven or to hell, and just to be the "beautiful feet" that bring Christ to those who need Christ. And in the case of Christ, Peter and the disciples are invited to trust Jesus more, and learn to trust his rescue which is always available for them, while learning to recognise who he really is – the only one who can offer them God's eternal life.

August 20, 2023

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

Mercy, blessing and salvation are three words that belong together, that are often associated with Gospel, and yet, that are sometimes viewed completely separately as we wrestle with God's grace and justice. However, to really understand them, and to really grasp the power of God's work in and through them, these words need to be placed together and allowed to inform, define and influence each other. When that happens, we discover that God's gift of salvation, justice and wholeness is offered to all people. Mercy is available to all. And the motivation to participate in God's work, and the result of God's work in our lives and our world, is celebration. It is easy, when wrestling with brokenness and injustice to forget this, but the gift of celebration – blessing – is integral to the Gospel.

May we be reminded of God's mercy, may we embrace, again, God's salvation gift, and may we be led into a life of celebration that draws all people into it as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Genesis 45:1-15: Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers and forgives them, explaining that it was God who had sent him to Egypt to save them and others from the famine. Then he instructs them to bring his father to Egypt to be with him.

OR **Isaiah 56:1, 6-8:** God calls God's people to justice and fairness because God promises to come to them and bring not just God's people, but also the foreigners and outcasts, to worship and to be blessed by God on God's mountain.

Psalms 133: A celebration of unity among God's people which brings the blessing of life.

OR **Psalms 67:** A psalm of praise for God's blessings and mercy, which calls all nations to join in praising God for God's saving power.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32: God has not abandoned Israel, but offers God's mercy to all – both Jew and Gentile.

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28: Jesus explains that it is not what we eat that defiles us but the evil that is in our hearts. Then he is approached by a Canaanite woman who convinces him, in spite of his initial reluctance, to heal her daughter who is being tormented by a demon.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

Three ingredients come together to create a celebratory mix in this week's Lectionary: The first is God's salvation (expressed in terms of justice and mercy); the second is God's blessing given to those who are saved; and the third is the inclusion of "foreigners" and "outcasts". In Genesis, Joseph expresses his conviction that he is called by God to bring God's salvation and blessing to the Egyptian people, and others who come to Egypt to escape the famine. In Isaiah, God promises the people that God comes to them and rescues them, but also those who are not usually considered God's people – foreigners and outcasts. In the light of this, God calls people to lives of justice. [Psalm 133](#) reflects on the blessings that come through the unity of God's people, and [Psalm 67](#) expands this even further to include all nations in the praise of God and in the blessing God gives. Paul reflects on God's mercy emphasising that both Jews and Gentiles are included in God's blessing. Finally Jesus, after pointing to the importance of the heart, demonstrates, in what some scholars interpret as a point of learning & growth in Jesus' own understanding of his ministry, that even outcast Gentiles (Canaanites, who were a particularly disliked group) are included in God's plan of salvation. The focus, then, of this week's worship is on God's coming to us, welcoming all people, and including all people in God's mercy, salvation and blessing, while also calling all people to lives of justice.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The work of justice and compassion is often framed in negative and alarmist ways. Poverty is a problem because of the deaths it causes; climate change could destroy us; war brings about tremendous grief, trauma and social ills. It is right that these realities should cause us outrage. It is also good, though, to emphasise the blessings that mercy and justice offer, if we will only embrace them. Here is where the Lectionary speaks powerfully to us this week. God's welcome – and the diverse communities that we discover as we share it – brings great gifts of creativity and growth, and so we can be inspired to be people of inclusion who welcome all people, including "foreigners and outcasts". God's salvation – God's gift of wholeness and mercy – does not just save us from our sin and brokenness and injustice. It also leads us into a life of vibrancy, abundance and fulfilment. If the motivation for seeking God's reign and working for justice is only our fear and our outrage, we will easily find ourselves falling into despondency, despair and bitterness. When, however, we remember, along with our outrage, the blessing (to use the word from our readings today) that God offers through God's salvation and justice, this dream inspires, energises and encourages us in ways that can sustain us when dark times come. So, the challenge for us this week is to reflect on the world and celebrate both the blessings of God that we see and experience already, and also to celebrate the possibilities that await us as we gather all people, and together open ourselves to God's saving work. As hard as justice and inclusivity can be, they give us many reasons to rejoice and they give us many blessings to be thankful for. Let's take time to focus on these this week.

LOCAL APPLICATION: Two problems plague the Church when it comes to our common views of God's mercy and salvation. The first problem is our tendency to see salvation as an exclusive work of God given only to some in which those who are "outside" of the people of God are beyond God's interest or care. This means that in our communities live many people who feel both judged and excluded by the very people that God has called to love and serve them. And within many churches are those who do not really feel welcomed and who wonder whether, if others really knew them, they would be considered to belong among the "saved". The second problem is that we have proclaimed God's salvation and mercy to be primarily a rescue from sin and evil. This forces our evangelism (our reaching out) to take the form of convincing people that they are sinners and then trying to get them to 'buy' a solution that they didn't know they needed (and may well not want). It also means that we end up framing our ministry, our proclamation and even our liturgy in negative terms, focusing on our lack, our need and our weakness, and viewing God almost exclusively in terms of rescue, of working outside of our lives and resources, and as completely separate and "other" than us. The result of all of this is that we lose sight of the power of celebration, of acknowledging God's image and glory within us and others, and of working with God in bringing wholeness and justice to the world. Perhaps, in our liturgy this week, we can celebrate the Christ who includes the outcast and the foreigner, and whose salvation and justice remind us of our goodness and glory and call us to be our best selves. This is not to deny the important work of acknowledging our sin. It is simply, in what has been an overbalance on the negative, an attempt to see the Gospel as an attractive vision that calls us to God's promise of blessing and not just as a "fire escape." Perhaps this week in our liturgy we can expand our celebration to include the "foreigner" and "outcast" – celebrating the diversity of those who look, think, speak, act, love and even believe, differently from us, without feeling the need to separate ourselves from them or cast them as 'outsiders'.

August 27, 2023

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

Following on from last week's theme, this week offers us a new encounter with God's salvation. "Salvation" is a word that is thrown around a lot in churches, and also in the work of evangelism. The readings this week encourage us to revisit this word, to delve deeper into its meaning and to live it out as a daily reality, rather than a future promise of evacuation.

May we encounter salvation again as we worship this week, and may we become not just recipients but also agents of salvation in the world.

READINGS:

Exodus 1:8-2:10: After a regime change in Egypt, the Israelites are made slaves and oppressed by the Egyptians. Midwives are also commanded to kill all male children but they refuse to do so, so Pharaoh commands that male children be thrown into the Nile. It is into this context that the boy Moses is born, left on the river by his mother and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter.

OR **Isaiah 51:1-6:** God calls people to trust in God, remembering how God took Abraham and Sarah as a single couple and turned them into a great nation. In the same way, God promises that God's justice and mercy will come to God's people and restore them.

Psalms 124: A pilgrimage Psalm remembering how God has protected and saved God's people and kept them safe and free from their enemies' traps.

OR **Psalms 138:** A Psalm of praise for God's unfailing love and faithfulness, and God's commitment to keep God's promises, to answer prayer and to protect and save God's people.

Romans 12:1-8: Paul encourages the believers to offer themselves sacrificially to God, and to allow God to transform them by renewing their minds. He challenges them to remain humble and connected to each other, and to use their gifts in God's service.

Matthew 16:13-20: Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus responds by affirming that God has shown him this and that he (or his proclamation – depending on which view you prefer) will be the rock upon which Christ's church is built, against which hell will not prevail.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week the Scriptures offer us a theme that can be a difficult one to preach and build liturgy around, especially if we are to connect with the realities of our world. This theme is God's salvation – God's protection, rescue and faithfulness to God's promises. In Exodus, we read the famous story of Moses' rescue from death and how he was brought into the family of Pharaoh. In Isaiah, God's people are called to trust in the God who saves them. Both Psalms are songs in which God's saving, protecting love is celebrated, and in the Gospel,

after the disciples receive insight into who Jesus really is, Jesus proclaims that the Church will never be overcome by evil. (There is debate about whether Jesus' mention of "this rock" refers to Peter or to the revelation he received. I think the significance of this has been overstated – mostly in terms of which church is the true church or not. Rather, the focus here, I believe, is on those who follow Christ, and form an alternative community in Christ's name. The promise is that, though they may be attacked and persecuted, God will ensure that they are not overcome.) Finally, the Romans reading seems a bit out of place in amongst these other readings, but it does reflect on the community of faith, and on God's work in and through it. Here, God's people are called to offer themselves completely (as sacrifices) to God, and to trust in God's transformation, God's community and God's gifting – all of which, it can be argued, are given by God to save, protect and empower God's church, and through it, the world. In the end, though, we have to choose whether we will trust in God's saving activity among us enough to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, to throw our lot in with the others who make up God's Church, and to give ourselves and our abilities to serve God's saving purpose in the world. It's a challenge we cannot avoid this week.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The promise of God's saving acts has often been interpreted in ultra-personal terms, and as a kind of "micro-managing" of the world (to use my friend Alan Storey's expression). There can be no doubt, however, when we read the Scriptures thoroughly, that God's salvation has global and communal implications as well.

Understanding how this works, takes a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of salvation than a simple "Jesus as Superman" view. Moses was saved personally, yes. But his salvation was not for his own sake – he was saved for the sake of his people. Jesus, on the other hand, was not saved from the cross. He had to go through it, but again, it was not just for his own sake, but for the sake of others. Abraham and Sarah, as referred to in [Isaiah 51](#), were saved from childlessness, but again, not just for their own sakes. Salvation, then, must always be understood in the light of God's purposes in the world – the Gospel's call for justice, equality, peace and care of creation. In this sense – and it's here where the Romans reading is so helpful – we must see ourselves as both recipients of God's salvation and agents of it. We are brought into relationship with God through Christ (saved) in order to offer ourselves to serve in the Church and the world according to our gifting. Salvation is not something that happens TO us, so much as it is something that happens WITH us. This means that, for us to enjoy salvation – whether we refer to a "physical" salvation from what would threaten or hurt us, or a "spiritual" salvation from evil and sin – we need to recognise what God seeks to do in the world (which is what Jesus' parables have all been about), we need to participate with God's purposes by becoming people of God's reign, and we need to work for salvation by seeking to protect and empower the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalised, the threatened and the neglected around us. In this way, we will both receive God's grace and protection and be God's channel to bring this grace and protection to others. Only in this way – and not by using the world's methods – can we truly know salvation. We are not saved from violence by declaring war on others. We are not saved from poverty by hoarding for ourselves. We are not saved from exploitation by exploiting others, and we are not saved from harm by ignoring those who are hurting. We find salvation and protection as we help to bring them to all people – as we acknowledge who Jesus is, as we embrace our identity as Church, and as we trust that evil – in whatever form – cannot, in the end, overcome God's grace and God's reign.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is unfortunate that salvation has largely been framed in terms of “going to heaven when we die”. While life eternal or abundant is certainly a promise of God’s work, salvation is not just a future hope – an evacuation from the world. The passages this week all speak about God’s saving work, but they all do so in reference to what is happening in the lives of people now. Moses was not saved by going to heaven, but by God’s activity in his earthly life. And he was called to save God’s people, the Israelites, not by giving them a guarantee of heavenly bliss, but by leading them out of slavery in Egypt. Abraham and Sarah were saved from childlessness in their earthly lives, and when Jesus spoke of the Church withstanding the gates of hell, he was responding to what was happening in the realm of human affairs, not to some eternal paradise. As Church we really need to hear this call of God, and bring our gifts and our connections (as Romans teaches) and offer them to be agents of God’s salvation for the people in our communities and families now. This means that we cannot just preach about avoiding hell and finding heaven when people die. We need to help them to discover heaven in their lives now. Our calling is to enable people in all circumstances and walks of life to find God, to find heaven, to find salvation in their daily reality – whether it is freedom from poverty or substance abuse or domestic violence; whether it is healing of a relationship, or a mind or a body; whether it is the discovery of a new dignity, or a new work opportunity or a new home. In every community the “gates of hell” are at work in people’s lives and the pain and destruction that results can be seen easily. But, if we as Church take our calling seriously, we will become known as the bringers of salvation, and lives and communities will be transformed. Then, when we begin to speak about eternity, people may be more inclined to listen.