



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR NOVEMBER 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.

November 5, 2023

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

God's salvation is once again an important feature of this week's readings, but coupled with another theme that shows how God's salvation is made visible in human experience – integrity. It is when God's people – through whom God works God's salvation – live out faithfully what they believe, that life and wholeness is brought into the world. It is this call to integrity that forms the basis of our worship this week.

READINGS:

Joshua 3:7-17: Joshua commands the priests to carry the ark of the covenant into the Jordan, and tells them that as their feet touch the water, it will bank up and the people will be able to cross on dry ground. When they do what Joshua says, the water does bank up upstream, and the whole nation is able to cross the river on dry ground.

OR **Micah 3:5-12:** Micah prophesies against the prophets who falsely prophecy peace, and against the corruption of the priests and leaders of Israel, declaring that they will find themselves walking in darkness, with no word from God, and that the city of Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed.

Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37: A song of thanksgiving on behalf of those who have been rescued by God. Though they wandered in the wilderness, God guided them back to human habitations, and though God can turn rivers and streams dry and make fertile land unproductive for the wicked, God also makes the desert fertile and filled with water for those that God rescues.

OR **Psalms 43:** A plea for God to rescue the psalmist from dishonest, unjust and ungodly people and for God to bring the psalmist back into the place of worship so that the psalmist can offer thanks again. Yet, in spite of the struggle, the psalmist encourages his soul to continue to hope and trust in God.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13: God's messengers worked among the Thessalonians, preaching the Gospel, while supporting themselves through their own labour so as not to be a burden on the Thessalonian Christians, and the new church received the Gospel not as a human message, but as God's word that works in them.

Matthew 23:1-12: Jesus warns the people to obey the teaching of the religious leaders, but not to follow their actions because they do not live what they preach. He also instructs them not to call or be called "Rabbi," "Father" or "Teacher" because only God deserves these titles, and no one should dominate anyone else, for all are sisters and brothers. Those who try to raise themselves will be brought low, Jesus teaches, and those who make themselves low will be raised up.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The theme of this week's readings is a combination of two seemingly disparate ideas. The first is that of God's rescue of God's people, and of the weak and the lost. In the Joshua reading, God's people are brought into the Promised Land by a repeat of the Exodus miracle, with the Jordan river offering them a dry passage to cross through. In Psalm 107 this is echoed in the song of God's bringing those who wandered in the wilderness to a human habitation – a home. The second idea this week is that of the corruption of religious leaders, a warning against hypocrisy, and the necessity to remain humble together in God's community. In Micah's prophecy the false prophets and corrupt leaders are warned of the judgement that will come upon them. In the Gospel Jesus warns against following the hypocritical behaviour of the religious leaders, and encourages his followers to refrain from seeking to dominate one another, but rather to see each other as equal as they live humbly together. These two ideas – God's rescue and the warning against hypocrisy and corruption come together in the remaining two readings – in Psalm 43, the psalmist pleads with God for rescue from corrupt and wicked people, and in Thessalonians the church is reminded of how good leaders brought God's salvation to them, and how they found life in the Gospel message, which enables them to live lives worthy of God. When these two ideas are brought together, we find a remarkable synergy, and a very challenging call – to Christlike integrity. God seeks to save and provide for all people, and, when those who claim to follow Christ do so with integrity, God's salvation is shared through them. However, when we use faith as a way to dominate and exploit others, when we fail to live what we preach, we bring pain on others, and we get in the way of God's saving work in others, forcing them to listen to what we say, but reject the example of our lives. Unfortunately, this hypocrisy is too often what causes people to reject the Church and its message in our world today. Yet, the world still longs for people of faith who follow Christ with integrity and who truly reflect God's saving character and purpose in their lives. May we be those who offer this reflection.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: Integrity is a much needed trait in all human affairs, although it is too often found to be absent. In many of our greatest leaders, this has been the defining characteristic and has informed and given power to their work and their message. People like Lincoln, Gandhi, Mandela and Tutu come to mind here. The challenge for those who are leaders on a global scale is to consistently make the choice for integrity over expediency. This can be tough when the expedient route can so easily seem to get quicker and more effective results. Yet, when high standards of ethics and justice are established and maintained, the impact on the world is always lasting, healing and liberating. What this means for us, in practical terms, is that all who seek to follow Christ have a responsibility to support leaders (wherever they may be found) and decisions that are just, liberating and consistent with principles of integrity, for when we do this, we open the door for God's salvation to come to all of us, but especially to the poor and marginalised. It's like a safe pathway is opened up through the flood waters of greed, power-mongering and corruption. In addition, in whatever small way we may exert influence in our corner of the world, we are likewise called to live with integrity in order that God's reign and salvation may be reflected in us and be adopted by those who receive our message and benefit from our work – like the apostles with the Thessalonian church. In the days of apartheid in South Africa, the story is told, church leaders confronted the government about its policies. However, the government simply pointed to the discrimination and apartheid that was rife in the church

and told the church to keep quiet until it practiced what it preached. May this not be the case with us!

LOCAL APPLICATION: When many people who reject the church are asked why, the response is because of the hypocrisy they have experienced among Christians. While this may be a convenient excuse to avoid Christ's challenge, it is unfortunate that the criticism is too often true. It is all too common for prominent leaders to preach one thing and live another. It is way too easy for leaders to have one public persona and a different private one. And for individual followers of Christ, it is easy to sing and pray one thing on Sunday and then live by a different set of values through the week. But, none of these situations lead us to the life and freedom that Christ offers. It is only when we commit to integrity, bringing together our thoughts, words, actions, beliefs, ethics and principles into one unified whole that we begin to truly experience the life-giving power of the Gospel. And it is only when our lives are filled with integrity that we hope to bring life to others, or to be agents of God's salvation for them. This means that in our communities, in our homes, in our places of work and our relationships, we must strive to live what we preach – or perhaps start to live what we believe and stop preaching! It means that as we seek to influence our corner of the world, we must earn the right, through our integrity, to speak, to act and to influence others. It means that when we worship, we cannot use the sanctuary as an escape from the world, or as a "different reality" from our daily lives. Rather, our prayers and songs must be both the expression and the formative influence of our whole lives. Saving the world is not so much about preaching words about heaven and hell, sin and repentance to others. Rather it's about seeking to live with integrity the kind of life that we believe God desires, and that will bring wholeness and justice to the world. Then, if we are asked to share what we believe, or tell our story, we can express in words what we have already preached with our lives. As St. Francis is reported to have said: "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Perhaps then we will truly be participants in God's saving work, and we will be those who guide the lost wanderers home to God.

November 12, 2023

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

There is a strong connection between hope, wisdom and connection. Without hope, we struggle to stay the course, and we make foolish, impulsive mistakes. With hope, we discover stamina and perseverance we didn't know we had, and we are able to slow ourselves down and move beyond our fear to the choices that bring life. This is the basic message of the Lectionary this week.

May our worship renew our hope, and, through it, give us strength to commit to, and the wisdom to act in alignment with, God's always coming reign – for which we remain always watchful.

READINGS:

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25: Joshua challenges the people to turn from their idols and serve only God, and they commit to doing so.

OR **Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16**: A celebration of Wisdom, which brings great benefit to those who seek her, and who searches for those who are worthy of her.

OR **Amos 5:18-24**: The prophet challenges the people who long for the Day of the Lord, warning them that it won't be what they imagine, but will be a time of pain and judgement. Then he calls the people to justice and mercy.

Psalms 78:1-7: A call for people to hear a message of God's greatness and goodness, remembering how God gave the people laws and instructions so that they and their children could remember God's deeds and hope in God.

OR **Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20**: Those who desire instruction are those who find the beginning of wisdom, and who enjoy long life and closeness with God.

OR **Psalms 70**: A plea for God's help to come with haste, for those who seek the Psalmist's downfall to be stopped, and for those who seek God to rejoice.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: A word of encouragement to remind the believers that death is not the end, but that believers, both dead and alive, will enjoy life eternal in union with Christ, which is our Christian hope.

Matthew 25:1-13: Jesus tells a story about bridesmaids who are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom at a wedding. Some have extra oil and are able to wait for as long as it takes, while others, who do not have extra, have to leave to find more and so miss the groom's arrival. Then, when they return, they are shut out and not allowed in. Then Jesus encourages his hearers to be alert.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

As we begin to move closer to the end of this year and the start of the Advent season, the Lectionary offers a set of readings that make a good preparation. In the Gospel Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids is a reminder that God is always coming to us, and that we need to be alert and watchful so that we don't miss God's presence and activity in our lives. In the letter to the Thessalonians, this reminder extends to death and to the end of time when our hope in Christ is fulfilled. The connection, though, of course, is that we need to live this hope now in each day of our lives. In the Old Testament related readings, the Day of the Lord is viewed by the prophet Amos as a time to be watchful of, and a reason to embrace justice and mercy. In the continuous Old Testament reading, Joshua challenges the people to be committed to God alone. Finally, in the Psalms and Wisdom readings, there is the celebration of living with wisdom, of remembering God's gracious acts on behalf of God's people, and of trust in God's help. When all of these ideas are brought together, we find there is a single, cohesive theme that emerges: As we hope and trust in God's coming and God's activity in our lives and our world – past, present and future – we are inspired and challenged to live out this faith and hope by being alert, mindful and wise. Our hope in Christ, then, forms the basis for wise and abundant living.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: Despair never solves problems, creates justice or brings life. To make a positive impact on the world requires faith, hope and love. This is the challenge of the Lectionary this week. In the face of the overwhelming challenges of our world, it is tempting to despair. But when we remember our hope in Christ, when we commit to stay true to Christ's message and mission, we discover resources that empower and sustain us for our work. These resources include an alert watchfulness to recognise God's coming – God's presence and activity – and co-operate with what God is doing, the wisdom to know how best to respond to the challenges we face, and the stamina to keep going when it gets tough. When we remember that God's reign arrives in the subtle, unexpected ways Jesus spoke of, we discover that these resources are exactly what we need to make the small, consistent commitments and contributions that really do change the world for the better.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is unfortunate that Christianity has become an 'evacuation' faith (to borrow Brian McLaren's word). Instead of engaging our communities and getting involved in the struggles of people, we have offered an escape and a lame hope that may promise bliss in eternity but has nothing to contribute to our world now. This is tragic and misguided. But, when we allow the hope that the Scriptures offer us (as in the Lectionary readings this week) to capture us, our engagement with the world changes dramatically. As we embrace our hope for the future we live differently now. We gain the wisdom of God's perspective and the faith to work as agents of inspiration and possibility in our communities. We begin to be alert and watchful for the signs of God's coming in the lives of those we serve and we become more committed to live out our hope now. In this way we are able to contribute to the manifestation of God's reign where we are. And when our lives and ministries reflect Christ in this way, we can't help but be agents of grace, healing, and salvation to hurting, hopeless people.

November 19, 2023

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

This week continues the Matthew 25 parables, and, in the Old Testament continuous section, moves to the Judges, but the connections are clear and actually quite simple. The basic New Testament context for this week's reading – the Parable of the Talents – is of God's coming, and of the Old Testament is Israel's need for a liberator – two strongly connected ideas. So, this week, the call of our worship is to be alert for God's coming, to assess our resources, and to step up and be participants in the work of God's reign in our world.

May our worship challenge us to be participants and not spectators of the coming of God's reign into our lives and communities.

READINGS

Judges 4:1-7: At a time when the Israelites are oppressed by the Canaanite King and his army led by Sisera, Deborah, the prophetess, instructs Barak to assemble an army, and she promises to help him to overpower Sisera.

OR **Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18:** A prophecy of judgement warning that the day of the Lord will come with fury, and that those who believe they are safe because of their wealth and influence will find their lives devastated.

Psalms 123: A psalm affirming trust and devotion to God, and pleading for God's mercy in the face of the shame and mockery that has been endured.

OR **Psalms 90:1-8, (9-11), 12:** A song in praise of God's eternal nature as God, recognising that human beings are short lived and struggle through life, and pleading for wisdom in using our time well.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11: A reminder that Christ's coming will be like a thief in the night, and an encouragement for God's people to stay alert and live sober lives protected by love, salvation and faithfulness, in union with Christ.

Matthew 25:14-30: Jesus tells a story about a wealthy man who entrusts some of his wealth to his servants. Two of them increase the money, while one simply buries the money & gives it back when the master returns. The master is angry and rejects the third servant, giving his small amount of money to the servant who made the most.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week we are still reflecting on the coming of God's reign through Christ. In the letter to the Thessalonians, the believers are encouraged to stay alert and live Christ-like lives in order to know union with God both now and in eternity. In the Gospel, the parable of the talents is a difficult challenge for us to reflect on how we are making a contribution to the coming of God's reign into the world. In the Old Testament readings this call to alertness and to utilising the resources God has given is emphasised still further by Deborah story in which she challenges Barak to be the military commander Israel needs, and in which (in Zephaniah) the wealthy and powerful are challenged not to trust in their wealth and power

to save them from the coming of God's reign. Finally in the Psalms, faith and devotion go along with the recognition of our human frailty and the need for us to use our time and our lives wisely. The word to us this week, then, is for us to use our resources – time, talents and treasures – mindfully in service of God's purpose in order to share in the coming of God's reign into our world. In addition, we are to recognise that whatever wealth or influence we may have does not "protect" us from the confrontation of God's new order, but rather must be used in service of God's reign.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: It is always easier to make ourselves small in the face of global challenges, and to claim that we are powerless to make a difference because we are "just one person." This week, though, the Scriptures do not allow us this refuge. Rather, we are called to be alert to what God is doing in the world. As we remain mindful of global shifts and events, we are able to assess them in the light of God's reign, and decide how to respond. Then, we are called to assess the resources that we do have – the gifts and abilities that we have been given – and how they can best be used in service of God's liberating, saving activity in our world. What is clear is that, whether it's using our wealth, our influence, our voice, our creativity or just our presence as part of a movement, we all have a role to play and a contribution to make, and as we all obey the call, we do make a difference because we become, together, a force for change. In this way we are participants in bringing God's reign – God's coming – into manifestation in our world. This is a "realised eschatology" that does not wait for some other-worldly kingdom in the future, but that begins to live the truths of the Gospel and the reality of God's principles and purpose right now in the world we find ourselves in. Whatever the coming of Christ may mean for eternity we can only imagine. But, what the coming of Christ means for us now is clear – we cannot hide our contribution and just wait for the end of the age or of our lives. We have work to do, and we've been given the resources to do it. Now, we just have to choose to act.

LOCAL APPLICATION: Every community has struggles that need addressing. In every church there are people with great need who long for healing, support and help. In every society there are jobs that require the skills and talents of ordinary people in order for a difference to be made. The challenge this week is not to see church or worship as an escape from our responsibility to act. Rather, if we believe in the coming of Christ – past, now and in future – we cannot avoid the call to put our faith into loving, serving action. This may mean using our wealth to support those who have too little to meet their needs. It may mean offering our time to befriend or serve those who are lonely or shut-in or weak or ill. It may mean using our influence to fight on behalf of the marginalised, voiceless and poor. It may mean using our creativity, our attention or our insight to help someone else heal their lives or relationships. Whatever it may be, we only find life when we step up and do what we can as participants in the world. As we do this, we become those who help to bring the reality of God's reign into being with those around us in our neighbourhoods and churches. If, however, we refuse to contribute and we keep our resources for ourselves, we inevitably find that we lose life's joy and vibrancy, and we end up disconnected and depressed. The good news, though, is that when we do respond and seek to act, we have resources beyond just ourselves, because God and God's people join with us to make a difference in our world. It is also not hard to know where or how to act, because if we just look around us, we will discover opportunities at every turn.

November 26, 2023

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

This week marks the end of Year A in the three year Lectionary cycle. Of course, as usual, the year ends with an encounter with Christ as King, and each year gives us a different, surprising view of Christ's reign. This year, as we finish our journey with Matthew, is no different. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats can do nothing but shift our perceptions of what it means for Jesus to be the monarch of our lives and of the world – and the picture it offers us is one of a realm of radical inclusion, welcome, grace and mutual service.

May we have the courage and the humility to embrace this reign and begin to live as its citizens, and may our worship this week help us to do so.

READINGS:

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24: God promises to rescue God's sheep, like a good shepherd, and to bring them to a fertile land, and then to judge between the sheep, protecting the weak from the bullies.

Psalms 100: A call to come and worship God and to enter God's temple with thanksgiving as people who are made by God and are the sheep of God's pasture.

OR **Psalms 95:1-7a:** An invitation to celebrate the God who made and owns the whole of creation and to kneel before God as God's people, the sheep of God's hands.

Ephesians 1:15-23: Paul gives thanks for the Ephesian Christians and prays that they may know God, God's call which is their hope, and God's power which raised Christ from the dead and made him head over all things, and which works in them.

Matthew 25:31-46: Jesus tells a parable about judging the nations as a shepherd who separates sheep from goats, rejecting those who have failed to serve and love their neighbours, but embracing and welcoming those who have.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week, as Year A comes to a close, we are faced with images and Scripture passages that are so well known that our familiarity can cause us to lose the power of this closing to the year's journey. But, the images of sheep and shepherd, and the parables of judgement which accompany them, are not comfortable, however well we may know them. The hinge point, of course, is the Gospel, which portrays the nature of Christ's rulership. The shocking invitation which we are given is to recognise the King in those who are anything but royalty – the sick, the naked, the hungry and thirsty, the homeless and imprisoned. And our ability to be welcomed into the realm of this Shepherd-King is not so much about how Jesus decides to treat us, but about how we choose to treat one another. If we are able to make the shift to seeing Christ in all others, we discover that we are citizens of this new realm that Jesus preached – because suddenly God's reign is visible everywhere and can be experienced and enjoyed in every moment, every place and every interaction. When we fail

to see Christ in all others, we have chosen to close our eyes to the miracle of God's reign which infiltrates every life and every circumstance, with the result that we find ourselves – by our own choice – outside of the experience of God's reign. Ezekiel's prophecy is simply another way of saying this same thing – God will judge between those who are "lean" – who are satisfied with enough and are not greedy and dominating – and those who are "fat and strong" – those who bully others and take more than their share. Both Psalms invite us into the joy and worship of those who have learned to be God's faithful sheep, trusting in God's care and provision – which is, of course, the basic foundation that enables us to live as "lean sheep" and to serve one another. Finally, Paul celebrates Jesus as the one who has been placed over all, especially of the Church which is Christ's body – the vehicle through which Christ interacts with the world now – and prays that God's people may know God's resurrection power and the hope we have in Christ, both of which are sorely needed for us to be the agents of Christ's grace and compassion that we are called to be. The reign of Christ, then, is not about seeing Jesus as some dominating despot, or conquering military victor. Rather, we are invited to see Christ's reign as the gift of God's grace, service and compassion that is available to all, and that we share with one another as we live as the body (the physical presence) of Christ in the world today.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: It is tragic that for so many the reign of Christ is seen only as some great military victory that Jesus will enforce on the world at some later time. It is tragic that for so many, this image of Christ's reign leads to cold disregard for the injustices in our world, and the suffering of the poor, the weak, the sick and the marginalised. Nothing could be further from the image of Christ's reign that we are asked to see and embrace in this last week of Year A. Here we are given a vision of a ruler who does not dominate or conquer by violence, but who chooses to be revealed in the margins of society – in the very ones we too often consider to be outside of God's grace and welcome. Here we are given a vision of a ruler who chooses the image of a nurturing and protective shepherd to describe his reign, not metaphors of violence, opulence and domination. Here we are invited to recognise that finding our place in God's reign is not about retreating from the world into some holy enclave and pointing fingers at all the "sinners" out there while we wait for Jesus to come and get "us" and destroy "them". Rather, finding our place in God's reign is about recognising that we – and all the outcasts that we thought were left out – are already included, if we will just see it, and see Jesus in each other. Then, as we serve and love and protect each other as we would Christ, and as Christ would us, we find that we are living and enjoying belonging in God's compassionate, gracious and serving reign. We do not need to wait for some future time for the parable of the sheep and the goats to be a reality for us. We can experience its truth today as we open our eyes to the Jesus in others and serve them accordingly, and as we allow them to serve us in return. We can know God's reign right now as we live from the hope that compassion and grace and welcome can be the principles on which our world is based, and as we allow that hope to give us the faith to trust in God's provision and care for all of us. Then, as we begin to see and experience the truth of God's reign in our daily lives, we will begin to show the generosity, the understanding and forgiveness, the inclusivity and celebration of difference that makes this reign of Christ manifest in our world now.

LOCAL APPLICATION: It is tempting to think of God as “our” Shepherd, and God’s pastures as “our” home, and then to exclude those who don’t fit with “us”. In our churches and communities, and even in our families and social circles, this sorting of society according to our categories and sensibilities is ubiquitous. But it is also a massive exercise in completely missing the point. When we are faced with the parables and readings of this week, we cannot help but see that God’s sorting method is wholly different. In fact, it isn’t even, really, God who does the sorting, it’s us! The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats may, at first glance be a parable of judgement, but that’s not the point of it. The point is whether we have learned from Christ enough, whether we have become intimate enough with Jesus, that we can recognise him even when he looks out at us through his “distressing disguise” as Mother Teresa put it. And then, if we have learned to see Jesus even in the outcast, we will have learned to see & experience God’s reign in our own lives. But, if we haven’t learned to see Jesus, we wouldn’t know how to recognise God’s reign, even if it should kick us in the pants! The challenge of this week, then, is for us to release our obsession with sorting, and to focus instead on seeing – seeing Christ in all people – and on serving – serving others as though they were Jesus himself. Then, we will have entered the reign of God without even trying and we will see and experience God’s reign in every place and every moment. The hard part is for us to make the conscious and difficult decision to recognise Christ in all others. It takes work and imagination, grace and a willingness to let go of our pride, our control and our natural tendency to stick with people like us. It’s a scandalous truth – which Matthew’s readers must have choked on at first – that everyone belongs. It’s only those who cannot find a way to accept this who ultimately end up excluding themselves. The Shepherd really does welcome everyone, and those who are willing to follow the Shepherd’s example, discover this to be true for themselves. The question is how we can be the inclusive, God’s-reign-reflecting community that God calls us to be. May our worship this week help us to discover some practical ways to do this.