



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR JANUARY 2024

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.

January 7, 2024

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

Depending on whether you celebrate the Epiphany on 6 January or not, you may choose whether to use these resources for Christmas 2B this Sunday, or to celebrate this as Epiphany Sunday, and use the resources for Epiphany. If you follow the readings for Christmas 2B, you will note the attitude of celebration and hope which springs from God's restoration and salvation of God's people, God's presence with God's people especially through Christ's incarnation, and God's promise of a world made whole. In addition, you will note the call to live out of this hope and celebration now, even as we proclaim the dream of a world of love and justice.

May our worship this week feel us with hope, turn us away from cynicism and despair, and lead us to live as little incarnations in our corner of the world.

READINGS:

Jeremiah 31:7-14: A prophecy of restoration and salvation in which God promises to gather a faithful remnant from the ends of earth and bring them to Zion where they will enjoy peace, abundance, laughter and salvation.

OR **Sirach 24:1-12**: Wisdom sings in praise of herself, and celebrates how she has been with God since creation, and has sought a resting place among people. She sings of how God instructed her to make her home with the people of Israel, and she obeyed, making Zion her dwelling.

Psalms 147:12-20: A call for the people of Israel to praise God for God's blessing, for the peace and security God has provided, for the commands and statutes God has given to God's people, and for the fact that God has not done these things for any other nation.

OR **Wisdom of Solomon 10:15-21**: A celebration of how Wisdom rescued God's people from their oppressors, and enabled them to stand against kings with great signs and wonders. Also a celebration for how God led God's people, became shelter for them, and enabled them to overcome their enemies.

Ephesians 1:3-14: God is to be blessed because of God's great blessing and grace in Christ in which God has adopted us as God's children, has forgiven us, poured out wisdom on us, revealed God's plan to us, and given us the Holy Spirit as a down payment on our eternal inheritance.

John 1:(1-9), 10-18: The prologue of John's Gospel in which he declares that the divine, Creator Word has become flesh, shining the light of life into the world, and enabling all who receive him to become children of God.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

All of the readings for this Sunday call us to great celebration for the grace and blessing of God, and for our adoption as children of God. What a wonderful way to conclude the season of Christmas as we celebrate not just God's incarnation in the baby Jesus, but God's

incarnation in us as daughters and sons of God. Both Jeremiah and Sirach speak of God's restoration of God's people, and of how God promises to dwell among the faithful. The Psalm and Wisdom of Solomon readings also celebrate God's love and grace for God's people, and how God provides peace, security, abundance, and deliverance. In Ephesians we are reminded of all that God has done for us, and given us, in Christ, and of our eternal inheritance which we already experience through God's Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel, which is also always set for Christmas Day, the incarnation is proclaimed along with God's gift of adoption for those who believe in Christ. Theme that stands out this week is one of great joy and celebration for God's care and love for us, and for God's gracious adoption of us as God's children who receive great blessing in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

In a world of great suffering and trauma, of religious extremism, of racial conflict and injustice, of corruption, poverty, gender and sexual violence, and inequality it may seem naïve and callous to speak of celebration. It may also seem somewhat delusional to speak of God providing peace, security, and abundance for God's people when we know that faith is no guarantee of these things. But without a dream for a world-made-whole in Christ, we have nothing to offer. And, if our work for justice and compassion has no room for joy we will never find the strength, faith, hope and love to sustain us in the long run. This week's theme calls us to remember our hope and to keep it real and alive in our hearts. It calls us to remember God's presence among us in Christ, and God's presence within us by God's Spirit. And it calls us to allow our experience of God to keep us connected to our vision of restoration and hope. Then, as we live from the inspiration and wisdom that our faith and hope bring us, we are able to address the great struggles of our world with love and service. Our hope, then, is not just a future dream of restoration, but is a lived reality that we seek to embody and incarnate in our own lives, even as Christ incarnated it for us.

Local Application:

It is easy to get caught up in the cynicism, negativity, futility, and despair that is so often reflected in the media and echoed in conversations between friends, families, and even communities of faith. It is easy to embrace a faith that speaks only of the ultimate destruction of the world and the evacuation of a small remnant of believers. But, neither of these attitudes are acceptable for us if we take the readings of this week's Lectionary to heart. This week we are called to live as people of hope, as people who know and experience the presence and wisdom of God in our daily lives, and as people who know that God's Spirit is both our current strength and the guarantee of the future we long for. This means that we are called to replace cynicism with optimism, negativity with possibility, and despair with joy and hope. It means that we live in the faith that what we see and experience is not the only – or even the primary – reality, but that God's Reign is at work within and among us. This means that in every interaction, every moment, and every situation we can be bearers of God's joy, peace, love, and hope and in so doing be the embodiment of God's light as little Christs.

January 14, 2024

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

We move into the journey of learning who this Jesus is in earnest from this week. The glory of God revealed in Christ is manifest in unusual but exciting ways through the readings. But, perhaps what makes the Lectionary for Epiphany 2 so challenging, is the way it calls us to be people who, like Christ, reveal the glory of God to our world.

May we encounter the glorious Christ and be changed from glory to glory as we worship this week.

READINGS:

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20): The boy Samuel, who has been placed in Eli's care to serve God, hears God speak as he prepares to sleep, but doesn't recognise the voice. Then Eli instructs him how to answer, and, after Samuel responds to God's call, God speaks a prophecy over Eli's family.

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18: A Psalm in praise of God's creation of the psalmist and the intimate way in which God knows him, inside and out.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20: Although all things are permissible for Christ-followers but not everything is good or beneficial. Our bodies belong to God, are given life by God and are temples of God's Spirit, and so they must be used in service of God.

John 1:43-51: Jesus calls Philip to follow him, and Philip calls Nathaniel, who is, at first, uncertain. When Jesus sees him he affirms him, and Nathaniel is won over. Jesus assures him that he will see heaven open and God's angels ascending and descending on Christ.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

At first glance this is a strange collection of readings! But, with a little bit of time and reflection some very exciting insights begin to emerge. It is helpful to remember that the season of Epiphany invites us to witness two things. The first is the way various individuals and groups perceived Jesus. This is a fitting way to follow the season of Christmas, because now we are given the opportunity to learn who this Jesus is through the eyes of those who met him. The second invitation of Epiphany is for us to witness God's glory as it is revealed in the incarnate Christ. This week's readings give us a wonderful way to accept both of these invitations. As the first disciples are called, we meet Nathaniel, initially a little sceptical of Jesus, but won over by Jesus' insight. But, Jesus calls both Nathaniel and us to a deeper experience than that of mere witnesses of a small perception of Nathaniel's true character. In the enigmatic reference to Jacob's ladder, Jesus claims that he is the one who will both reveal God's glory to the world, and be the "channel" through which God's presence, glory and purpose is mediated to the world. The call to witness God's presence and glory is affirmed by all of the other readings for this week. Samuel's experience of God's manifestation and communication reveals both God's desire to connect with humanity, and

the human capacity to connect with God. The psalmist's song reveals how intimately God is connected with the people God has created, and how deeply we can know God. Finally, the letter to the Corinthians reveals the way God continues to be incarnated in every person who believes, as we become temples of God's Spirit, and are called to use our entire beings – including our flesh – in God's service. The invitation this week is up close and personal – not only do we get to witness God's glory in Jesus; we are called to accept God's presence and glory into our own being!

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

After last week's assurance of God's solidarity with us, the gift of God's self goes even further this week – God is not just with us, but within us. This is an echo of the assurances we have already received during the Advent season, but takes it even further. As we address issues of justice in our world we are invited to ensure that our response is one of deep faith in two realities – firstly, that God's presence and God's glory are not just available to us, but are available within us, and secondly, that God is always communicating with us, if we will just learn to listen. As naive as this may sound, if we have the humility and the imagination to believe it, we will discover that we do not face our world's challenges alone. Rather, we can trust that God's resources and presence are with us to guide and strengthen us, and we can listen for God's communication to lead and teach us. Of course, much of this communication of God's self has already happened in Christ, and we need only look to him to know how to act, how to treat others and how to respond to the challenges of greedy consumerism, reckless exploitation of the planet's resources, violence in all its forms and the unjust distribution of the world's wealth. Our task, then, is to study each day, the example of Christ and seek to embody in our own actions and attitudes what we see in him, trusting in the power of God's Spirit to enable us to do this. If even a small percentage of Christ followers made this a habit, what a different world we could begin to manifest – as we are already seeing happen in some significant ways

Local Application:

Two small, but important, factors impact every relationship, from families to churches to neighbourhoods. The first is our struggle to believe in our own worth and capability to rise to the challenges of modern living. This struggle manifests itself in the constant need to prove ourselves, in defensiveness when we are challenged, and in fear of sharing our resource in case we end up with less than we need. The second factor is our struggle to recognise the glory in the humanity of others – particularly those who are different from us. This results in factions and divisions between people along racial, gender, religious, sexual, economic and educational lines, and often leads us to treat one another with disdain, suspicion and even hostility. The message of this week's Lectionary gives us ways to overcome both of these struggles. As we begin to recognise the way God has revealed God's self to us in Christ, and how we have become, in ourselves, temple's of God's Spirit, we are able to accept our worth and our significance in God's purposes and God's domain. When this sinks into our hearts, we are able to relax into our new identity in Christ, and stop

striving against others to feel good about ourselves. Secondly, when we are able to recognise God's glory in others, and affirm them as temples of God's Spirit, we begin to see them as Christ and treat them as Christ, which naturally leads us into collaboration, affirmation, forgiveness and acceptance of one another. And, as we allow ourselves to believe in God's revealed glory in ourselves and those we live and worship with, we discover that God's glory is not only revealed to us, but is revealed through us.

January 21, 2024

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

The call to follow Christ continues this week, with Mark's Gospel narrating the call of Peter, Andrew, James and John. But, along with this call comes a challenge to trust in God and not in the temporary, unreliable things of this world. In truth, unless we learn to trust God, and release our desire to find security, wealth and satisfaction in material things, we will never really know God's Reign, and we will never be able to bring God's life to others.

May we see the glory of the Christ who revealed God's Reign, and may we seek to reflect that glory to our world this week.

READINGS:

Jonah 3:1-5, 10: God sends Jonah to Nineveh for a second time, and Jonah obeys. He preaches that God is going to judge and destroy the city, but the people repent, and so God decides not to do it.

Psalms 62:5-12: An exhortation to wait on God and trust God as our refuge and salvation. Wealth, whether stolen, extorted or simply increasing, does not provide the security that God does, for God, in God's mercy, gives rewards.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31: The world as we know it is not going to last, so we must take care not to depend on the things, the people or the experiences of this world.

Mark 1:14-20: After John the Baptist is imprisoned, Jesus begins his ministry preaching that God's reign has arrived and that people should repent and believe it. Then he calls Peter and Andrew, fisherman, to be "fishers of people", and shortly after, he sees James and John and calls them too.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The clear call of this week's Lectionary is to get our priorities right. The way this is applied to our lives is twofold. In the first instance, there is the call not to depend on the things of this world, not to place our hope or trust in things that cannot save us, and that will ultimately pass away. Both Psalms 62 and the letter to the Corinthians stress this truth and call us to trust only in God. Then, there is the call to commit ourselves to God's purposes and invite others into God's grace and life. The story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet, shows how

committed God is to this, and the calling of the first disciples to be “fishers of people” reveals how Jesus’ mission was to lead people into God’s Reign and the lasting life that it offers. It makes sense, of course, that when we have experienced the life of God, and learned to trust in God rather than in temporary, unsatisfying things, that we should desire to share the joy that we have found. So, as we begin to understand this Christ, and as we recognise God’s glory revealed in him, we are invited both to receive God’s life and presence, and to be those who reflect Christ’s presence and glory to others.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

There is little mystery to this week’s theme and how it applies to our world. The call to shift our allegiance from “things” to God may sound naïve, but it is actually exactly what we need to address the big challenges we face in our world. It is our desire to accumulate wealth, to have enough weaponry and to satisfy every appetite that has left us in the crises we now experience. But, when we can trust in God and God’s Reign to be our security, our sufficiency and our best life, we lose the need to grasp what we can and fight against others to protect ourselves. This is the repentance that Jesus calls for, and the Reign of God is the new way of being that can lead us to life and security and enough for all. In God’s Reign we no longer need violence, war or terrorism, or weapons to keep us safe, because we know both that they are unable to protect us, and that the only truly secure life is that hidden in God. In God’s Reign we do not need to prioritise the accumulation of wealth above all else, because we know that money does not provide us with the things that make life really full and meaningful, and we know that there is enough for everyone, if it shared well. In God’s Reign we do not have to marginalise or exclude others in order to have a strong national or personal identity. Rather, our identity is given to us by God’s adoption of us as children, and we learn that all people are our brothers and sisters. And so, one of the most powerful, healing and just things we can do, is to recognise the life, the security and the sufficiency we have in Christ – the way God’s grace and love are revealed in Christ – and to share our trust, our simplicity, our inclusivity and our generosity with others. In this way, we become those who see God’s glory revealed in Christ, and who reflect it to others – while trusting that it is a glory that truly can heal our world.

Local Application:

It is unfortunate that Jesus’ call for us to be “fishers of people” has so often been interpreted to mean coercing others into our way of thinking, believing or worshipping. Evangelism has been about trying to change others to be like us, rather than inviting them to follow Jesus. We have made Jesus’ message of God’s Reign about the Church, and about a specific religion, more than about Christ. In this way, rather than allow God’s glory, revealed in Christ, to shine, we have obscured it and distorted it and hidden it from others. In many ways we have become like Jonah, who at first did not want to prophesy to Nineveh because he didn’t want the people to repent and be saved. He wanted to be right, more than he wanted God’s grace to be seen. But, the downside for us in this equation is that we have actually stopped trusting in God, and have started trusting instead in our wealth, our

religions, our doctrines, our strength, our military or even our nation. If we can release this, and allow the radical – even offensive – inclusivity and grace of God’s Reign to guide us, we will discover, like Jonah that we cannot control God’s grace and we cannot act as gatekeepers of God’s salvation. Rather, we will have to learn to trust that not only is there enough grace and life and support for others, but there is also enough for us, if we embrace and welcome others. When this truth sinks into our hearts, becoming “fishers of people” stops being about “our” religion, or “our” truth, or “our” country or “our” blessing. Rather it becomes about allowing the light of God’s glory – God’s presence and purpose – to shine and to attract others into an inclusive, simple and trusting life that welcomes all and shares with all and loves all. The question is whether we have the courage and the humility to stop trying to control God and to allow God’s glory to be our guide, rather than our own fear, self-interest and pride. It’s a challenging, but liberating message, if we will but hear it again.

January 28, 2024

John Van de Laar, *Connecting With Life*, “Sacredise”

It’s an interesting collection of readings this week that could lead us in a number of different directions. The wisdom & power of God’s laws, commandments and teachings or the freedom that Christ offers would be two options. But a third, and I find more compelling, option would be to explore the authority and power of Jesus, especially in the light of Paul’s comments on how we deal with what he calls “weaker” brothers and sisters. There is no question that the power and glory of God that is revealed in Christ is a very different thing from the way we usually understand those terms in our world today.

May our worship this week give us a new vision of the power and glory of our God.

READINGS:

Deuteronomy 18:15-20: Moses promises that God will raise up a prophet for Israel like him, but warns that the people will be held accountable for whether they listen to that prophet.

Psalms 111: A song in praise of God’s deeds, God’s care and provision for God’s people, and celebrating how the fear of God brings wisdom.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13: Though idols are nothing, if eating meat sacrificed to an idol causes a brother or sister to stumble, we should rather not eat. Rather than knowledge, which creates pride, we should seek love, which builds up.

Mark 1:21-28: As Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Capernaum, the people are amazed at him. When he casts out a demon, they are staggered and the news about him spreads throughout the entire region.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

A prophet like Moses – this became a dream for the people of Israel, and may be why they asked John the Baptist if he was “the prophet”. As Epiphany gives us yet another perspective in Jesus, and the glory of God that he revealed, we discover that he is not just a prophet like Moses, but far more than that. If all the people wanted was a prophet like Moses, they were setting their sites too low. In the Gospel reading we are shown that this Jesus had an authority in his teaching that went beyond that of the religious leaders, and, by implication, even beyond Moses. Then, in his power to heal the demonised man, Jesus reveals his divine authority. Truly, as the Psalm sings, God has honoured God’s promises, God has cared for God’s people, and God has offered us one whose teaching gives wisdom and life. It can be tempting to take this uniqueness of Christ and use it for our own glory, as if we are somehow better than others because of our association with Christ. This, more than just the little issue of food, was Paul’s concern in the letter to the Corinthians. On the one hand he affirms that Christ is supreme – that demons and idols are nothing, and so eating food sacrificed to idols means nothing and should not be a concern. But, on the other hand, he points out that we cannot use our knowledge of Christ as a cause for pride, or as a reason to be unconcerned for the struggles of others. The glory of God that is revealed in Christ is authoritative and powerful, yes, but it is the power to serve and the authority to liberate. This week, then, the Lectionary calls us to recognise, in awe and wonder, the amazing, liberating power of Christ, and to be empowered by Christ to serve and liberate others in whatever weakness, struggle or bondage they may find themselves.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The issue of power and glory is a massive one in our world – as it has always been. Power, by our understanding, is “power over” – the capacity to conquer, to coerce or to humiliate. Authority is the ability to command and direct others and not to be under the command of others. In service of this kind of power, dictators have brought suffering on their own people, corrupt politicians and business leaders have feathered their own nests, while ordinary people have to pay the consequences for their greed. In service of this power, wars are fought and nations deny their connectedness. In service of this power, men beat and abuse the women and children they claim to love. In service of this power religious organisations have lobbied governments, excluded those of different creeds or ideologies, and have pronounced judgement on the world. This quest for this kind of power has created systems like Nazism, Apartheid and all sorts of destructive nationalisms. Napoleon was right when he said that power corrupts. But, when Jesus reveals God’s power and glory, it is an authority of a whole different order. It is not a “power over”. Nor is it a manipulative “power under”. Rather, Jesus calls people into God’s liberating community – collaborative, shared power. This is why Paul encourages the believers not just to enjoy their own freedom, but to consider its effects on others, and to serve them. That’s why Jesus’ teaching was so captivating for people – he called them to share in God’s Reign, and he revealed the freedom it offers. He did not use his authority to oppress, judge or control. In a world where a few powerful nations use their power to shape the world’s systems in their favour, where super wealthy people resist carrying larger tax burdens for the sake of those who have less, and where strong economies dictate the terms of trade to smaller and weaker ones, we

could do with a lesson in power from Jesus. And, as those who seek to follow Christ, we can work within our systems to collaborate with others, whoever they may be, to work for greater justice and equality, without trying to control things according to our own agendas, or fearing that we will somehow lose if we share our “power”. It’s easy to stand in judgement on those who see justice differently from us, but that simply polarises our world more. It may be that Christ’s example calls us to stand with those who still believe in the idols of wealth and power, while gently revealing the freedom of Christ through our grace, love and servanthood.

Local Application:

In every family, every neighbourhood and every church there are inevitable power struggles. We hold our convictions dearly, and we want others to see things as we do and to honour our view. In addition, we grow fearful that the views and needs and power of others may rob us of things we hold dear. Somehow we have come to believe that sharing power diminishes it, when, in fact, it does the opposite. Even in what we have come to call “spiritual warfare” – our “fight” against evil – we have framed the scene in terms of “power over” – Jesus proving “stronger” than demons. Yet, when we put Jesus’ teaching, and this story of healing, in the context of Jesus’ life, we discover that for Jesus fighting evil required a cross, not a sword, and drove him to service and sacrifice, not violence or conquest. What this means is that we are called, firstly, to embrace and experience Jesus’ liberation for ourselves – the release of those things that would bind us, which almost always stem from our fear or self-interest – and then to engage with others as Christ did, sharing power, serving and liberating. This may mean learning, as parents, to collaborate with our children on their own values and ways of discipline. It may mean, as spouses, learning the art of collaboration in everything from finances to sex. It may mean as leaders of churches or groups learning to free others to find their own leadership, and serving them in the process, without fearing the loss of our own power or prestige. It may mean, as Paul teaches, releasing our own “rights” and “freedoms” in order to ensure that we do not cause others to stumble. It may mean working alongside those we may disagree with if it will help to bring justice or grace to people in our community. If we long for God’s glory and authority to be seen in us, it certainly won’t happen if we constantly strive for things to be done “our” way or if we constantly fight for control. Rather, when we embody Christ’s liberating grace, that is when the glory and authority of Jesus is most clearly seen in us.