



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR FEBRUARY 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.

February 4, 2024

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

There is both comfort and challenge in the Lectionary for this week. On one hand there is the assurance of God's care, and the particularity of grace as God meets each person at their point of need. On the other hand there is the call to extend a similar adaptive particularity to one another – willingly becoming what others need from us – in order to carry the Gospel's grace and restoration to the world.

May we find the grace we need, and learn to become the grace others need as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Isaiah 40:21-31: To whom can God be compared? God created the earth and human rulers are short lived. Why should God's people complain that God has forgotten them? Those who wait on God will be renewed.

Psalms 147:1-11, 20c: An exhortation to praise God for the way God restores those who have been exiled and broken, for the way God provides for God's people and for the creatures of earth, and for the way God treasures those who honour God.

1 Corinthians 9:16-23: In his preaching of the Gospel, Paul explains how he becomes all things to all people in order to win them for Christ.

Mark 1:29-39: Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and then many sick and demonised people come to be healed. After that Jesus goes off alone to pray, but Simon and others track him down. Then Jesus leads them off to other towns to preach and heal.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This week the Lectionary offers us a message of great comfort and reassurance. All of the readings speak about God's compassion and grace in healing, restoring and strengthening God's people – those who wait on and honour God. In each reading there is a clear indication of the way God meets us at our point of need in order to transform and save us. In the famous song of Isaiah 40, God's saving power is praised and the weary exiles are reminded that God will restore and strengthen them if they will just turn to God in hope. In the Psalm, God's gracious restoration and provision for God's people, and for all of creation, is praised. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians he explains how he strives to meet every person where they are in order to bring them to Christ, becoming as they are so that he can share the Gospel with them. Finally, in one of those wonderful moments of particular care, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. But, then, immediately the Gospel moves to a wider focus, as Jesus heals and restores the many who come to him, and then, seeks to travel throughout Galilee to preach and heal. The amazing grace of the God who comes to us at our point of need and restores and calls us makes this week a truly celebratory one.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

Over the last few decades the emphasis of human development teachers and spiritual gurus has moved away from self-sacrifice and towards self-actualisation. This quest to “be true to yourself”, while it has brought some measure of healing and growth to some, has also been used to justify all kinds of destructive behaviour, from the breaking of marriages and committed relationships in favour of “my needs,” to the militant and violent defence of materialistic and consumerist “ways of life” in wealthy nations. The cult of selfishness is the exact opposite of both God’s Reign and of the God who comes to us in Christ. The Scriptures offer us a startling vision of a God who is willing to go out of God’s way to meet us where we are – a God who would be incarnated and suffer death in order to draw humanity into God’s Reign. The Reign of God which is established by the self-sacrificial Christ, also calls its citizens to follow in this sacrificial life by “becoming all things to all people” in order that they too may know God’s grace. This revelation of God’s gracious glory is a challenge to every human system at work in our world – from the careless consumption of planetary resources, to the power games played in national and international government, from the self-interest of big business and political and religious lobby groups to the violence that all too easily erupts between factions, ethnic groups and countries who refuse to share. How different might our world be if leaders sought to be “all things to all people” and if they, like Christ, were willing to meet people at their point of need, and spread the good they do as far and wide as possible? How different might our world be if Christ followers, rather than trying to manipulate the world’s systems according to their own agendas, were more willing to serve and restore others irrespective of differences in belief, conviction, morality and association? In what ways can we commit this week to being true followers of Christ, sacrificing our own interests and agendas in favour of the greater good of God’s Reign?

Local Application:

It is both shocking and disturbing that, in many segments of society, Christianity has been used as an excuse for an attitude of entitlement. The way the Gospel has been presented has left many outside of the Church feeling coerced and manipulated and rejected. It’s like we’re saying that, rather than us meet others where they are, they must change to become like us. Rather than touch and heal the sick and demonised, we have told them that they have no place among us, while we have refused to acknowledge our own demons. Rather than become “all things to all people” we have tried to make all people become like us. Rather than inviting people to be restored and saved by God’s grace, we have used the Bible as a club to break people down when they believe or live differently from us. In this way God’s glory has been hidden from the world, rather than being reflected through us. In this way Christ has become for many a false prophet rather than a true reflection of the glory and grace of God. This week, while we can celebrate that God meets us where we are and offers us healing and restoration, we must also acknowledge that we need to repent and change to become those who sacrifice ourselves – our own needs, our own desires, beliefs and agendas – in favour of the wholeness, justice and goodness of others. If we are to embody the Reign of God which Jesus preached and demonstrated we need to release our self-interest and begin to step into the shoes, and the worlds of those who need to experience God’s love. This will mean letting go of our need to be right, and our need to be comfortable and our need to control the world. But, it will also lead us even deeper into God’s grace and love as we experience God working in us and through us even more.

February 11, 2024

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

The healing narratives continue this week – with a twist! The connection between the healing of the man with the skin disease on Mark's Gospel and the healing of Naaman in the Old Testament is clear, but things get very interesting – and a little uncomfortable – when the Epistle reading about discipline and focus is added to the mix. Could it be that the nature and extent of the healing we receive differs according to our willingness to submit to Christ? This is the disturbing but life-giving question that the Lectionary asks this week.

I pray that our worship may lead us into a deeper commitment to the ways of God's Reign this Sunday.

READINGS:

2 Kings 5:1-14: Naaman, the general of the king of Aram, suffers from a skin disease, but an Israeli slave girl informs him of the prophet Elisha who she believes can heal him. So Naaman sets out to Elisha, who, through a messenger, tells the general to wash in the Jordan seven times. At first Naaman is indignant, but then, after some pleading by his servants, he obeys and is healed.

Psalms 30: A psalm of celebration for God's grace and protection, for ensuring that the psalmist's enemies did not overcome him, and for his favour. Also a recognition of how easy it is to get comfortable in God's presence and goodness, but how easily this sense is lost – although when this happened and the psalmist cried out to God, God responded and turned mourning to dancing.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27: The apostle encourages his readers to be disciplined and to stay focussed in their following of Christ, like runners in a race or boxers in a ring, in order to claim the prize of an eternal crown.

Mark 1:40-45: A man with a skin disease asks to Jesus to heal him and Jesus does, instructing the man not to say anything to anyone but to show himself to the priests as a witness to them. Instead the man spreads the news which makes it impossible for Jesus to enter any towns, forcing him to stay in deserted places outside the cities. But even there, people keep coming to him.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The main thrust of this week's readings is clearly God's healing power and grace. In this case, the particular affliction of skin diseases is the focus, but the wider implication is easy to see. In the reading from 2 Kings, the well-known story of Naaman, the king of Aram's general, is related, along with the dismissive way that Elisha facilitates his healing. There are resonances here with the man who is healed by Jesus – both in the disease that is experienced, and in the response to the healer. In Elisha's case, Naaman is initially indignant at the prophet's instruction, almost to the point of rejecting them and the healing they promised. In Jesus' case, the man ignores the clear instruction to tell no one but the

religious leaders, with overwhelming results for Jesus. We are not told whether he ever obeyed the instruction to go to the priests. These two stories also have resonances with the Psalm in which God's rescue, God's presence and God's answer to prayers for help are all praised.

It is the epistle reading that seems like an odd one out this week. Paul speaks about discipline, focus and hard work as the necessary requirements for receiving the eternal crown. You may decide to leave it at this, and not seek any connection between this passage and the others, choosing to focus either here or on the Gospel. Alternatively, you may want to contrast Paul's call for discipline with the undisciplined responses of those who came to God to be healed – both Naaman and the man Jesus healed wrestled with choosing their own agenda over God's. In the end Naaman, submits and is healed. The man in the Gospels is healed anyway, but never submits to Jesus' instruction – he receives the benefit, but cannot have received the relationship that comes with following Christ's ways. He had found a healer, but not a Teacher or Master.

This may be a good angle from which to approach the theme this week. There is a difference between coming to Christ in order to receive benefit only – clinging to the hope of being saved, for example, or receiving healing, prosperity or happiness – and coming to Christ in order to become a disciple. There are all too many who choose the former, but Christ calls us to the latter. There is, of course, the benefit of the "eternal crown," of abundant life, when we become disciples of Christ, but discipleship is far more than just receiving a benefit. The benefit is simply a by-product of a life lived for Christ's sake. The call to follow Christ and to submit to God's ways, is, in itself, sufficient reward because there is no other way that is worthy of our full devotion.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

We don't like to hear that God's grace and healing is in any way conditional, but there seems to be an element of that stark reality in the readings this week. While on the one hand, the healing of the man in the Gospel story indicates that Jesus heals first, and then the instructions come – which he is free to obey or not – the Naaman story reveals that he was required to follow Elisha's instruction before the healing could happen. Then, of course, there is Paul's challenge that, in order to know God's life, we need to be disciplined and "run to win". What might this mean for us in today's world? To begin with, we need to define what the healing of the world might look like. For those who seek a "quick fix" the healing of the world would probably mean "getting things back to how they were" – which would be a world without challenges to the status quo, and free from economic crises. This can certainly be achieved, but would this be healing? I don't believe so – since the brokenness would remain, and our political, economic and social systems would inevitably collapse again at some future time. This is where the call to obedience – to discipline – comes in. Like the man who is healed by Jesus, but fails to submit to Jesus' Lordship, we can find ways to get the benefits without cost – and we often try to do this. But, when we do, we lose the life-giving reality of true wholeness and of God's Reign that comes when we submit to Christ and live according to God's ways. So, if we seek true wholeness for our world, we will discover that we must learn the discipline of the Gospel – the simplicity and restraint, the generosity and compassion, the patience and commitment, the justice and peace – that can

change the systems of our world in radical and creative ways. I am not suggesting that we can create God's Reign on earth. I am suggesting, though, that as we begin to live according to the principles of God's Reign we begin to embody the prayer that God's kingdom may come "on earth as it is in heaven" and that we facilitate an environment in which the work of God's salvation, healing and justice may be manifest. However, when we fail to embrace God's discipline – the ways of God's Reign – we make it impossible for us, and our world, to experience the benefits that God's Reign would bring.

Local Application:

It seems to me that there is a tendency in our society to believe that we can "shortcut" our way to anything. We try to fight obesity with creams and pills, without the discipline of exercise or healthy eating. We try to create relationships with quick sex and none of the work of navigating our own, or the other person's, "rough edges". We try to find wealth and fame through reality TV or lotteries with none of the "paying of dues" that is usually required for lasting influence of that magnitude. And we try to find physical and spiritual wholeness through quick routines of affirmations, prayers and thought processes that cost us nothing. Yet, by and large, we remain unhealthy, disconnected, disillusioned and unfulfilled. Somehow we just don't want to hear that the abundant life we seek might require discipline, time and submission to something other than ourselves. We have even tried to frame the Gospel in these quick-fix terms to our own detriment. However, both healing stories and Paul's exhortation reveal that, while we may find some benefit from our self-centred solutions, we won't find true life – the eternal crown – without the disciplined work of learning to follow Christ and follow the ways of God's Reign. Nor will we find the life we seek if we seek it simply for ourselves. The call of God's Reign always involves the slow, patient work of learning, growing, discipline and walking together in community. If the man with the skin disease had thought for a moment about the consequences of his actions, he would not have subjected Jesus to the crowds that followed his story. He would also have prioritised going to the religious leaders in order to give Jesus the benefit of official recognition (which may not have happened anyway, but at least he could have tried). Instead, he used his story to gain glory for himself without thought of the impact of spreading the word against Jesus' request. He sounds a lot like us! And we can learn from him and from Paul's wise instructions, to find life by becoming true disciples – disciplined followers – of Jesus.

February 18, 2024

Dr Jock Stein, Church of Scotland

Introduction

When material is prepared a few months before the actual service, it is hard to anticipate current events, but Lent is likely to include some broad themes which play out in different ways year by year:

- Our human frailty and failure to deal adequately with challenges like people movements, war-making and climate change.
- Our appeal, 'Lord have mercy'. In Lent (as in Advent) candles can be lit with imagination and significance. In our local church there is a regular quiet midweek evening hour.
- Our recall in Lent of 'the great events of our salvation', while always part of a ministry of word and sacrament, has special meaning when we lose our moorings to the past (and fear excessively about the future), for example:
- How things that happen are part of a truth that is greater than 'my truth' or 'your truth'.
- How we experience now something which happened a long time ago (like being buried and raised with Christ, Romans 6:4). It may be valuable, where you can, to introduce testimony.
- How the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, and the cross which followed, is something which has meaning for, and which actually *did something for* every person who ever lived and lives, and beyond that for the universe itself – as in the older hymn CH4 398, whose words can too easily be dismissed as beyond our understanding: 'earth and sea and stars and mankind by that stream are cleansed all'.

Genesis 9:8-17

While humans stand at the climax of the creation story in Genesis 1, they share the same planet as birds and beasts. This chapter reminds us that God looks after all species, a simple but special motive for us to do the same. It is also heartening that God has to 'remember' this covenant; God is not a computer but a living, personal being; and even if, in Calvin's words, God 'lisps' with us in Scripture (talks to us as a nurse would to a child), God's 'lisper' brings God close to us, as we are people who struggle to remember.

Three words immediately stand out (not in text order):

- Flood – two whole chapters, 7 and 8, and the experience of so many today, from dams which burst in Libya to houses built on flood plains in Britain.
- Covenant – a promise initiated by God, given to humans then and now, a promise which makes its own demands on humans. Can we lean comfortably on the 'never again' of verse 11, and assume the earth will not be destroyed, or does the covenant make demands on our stewardship of the earth? Is a covenant conditional, unconditional or simply consequential?

- Sign – the rainbow, which has been appropriated in different ways today: by a scientific mentality which reasons that 'knowing how' exhausts the world of mystery; by the LGBTQ+ community; and national support for medical staff during COVID-19. All, in quite different ways and for their own reasons, use the sign, whereas in Genesis the rainbow is an everlasting sign for every creature.

Psalm 25:1-10

This psalm has the same number of verses as the Hebrew alphabet, and is roughly, but not exactly, alphabetical – one thinks of the Muslim practice of leaving something awry in their art, 'since only God is perfect', though it may be more helpful just to accept that even in scripture we humans offer to God and others simply the best we can. John Goldingay suggests the psalm was written as a model to teach someone to pray, even if it was also used in worship.

Jewish, charismatic and the more 'catholic' expressions of faith typically have more physicality in worship, seeking perhaps to hold body and soul together. It would be natural to accompany verse 1 with the lifting of hands, and Lent – for example with the 'stations of the cross' – is a good time to encourage 'body worship' for those who are comfortable with it. Verses 9 and 10 are congruent with walking round a church.

Lenten themes include sin and mercy (vv6-7), waiting (v5) and humility (v9). Covenant is mentioned in verse 10. Below is a poem on this psalm I published in *Temple and Tartan*, in case it is of use. It's a pantoum, where the repetitions slow everything down so the reader has to spend time with the ideas and emotions of the psalm. In verse 7, the writer remembers the follies of youth, and the new things he has learned as he ages. Any poet loves new words, but the new words given involve pain and hurt as well as rhythm and right.

A New Lexicon

Back in my youth, wrapped up and gone,
I was no angel: but it's age
that opens a new lexicon,
puts loss and pain centre stage.

I was no angel: but it's age
and wrinkles make a tender soul,
put loss and pain centre stage
and start to make the person whole.

Yes, wrinkles make a tender soul,
reflect the crooked paths of life,
start to make the person whole
for break and make are man and wife.

Reflect the crooked paths of life,
reveal success, transmute defeat,

for break and make are man and wife,
they share a house in every street.

Reveal success, transmute defeat,
play on my heartstrings and my gut
which share a house in every street
I drive through mindfully; so please,

play on my heartstrings and my gut,
sound blues and rhythm in the glen
I drive through mindfully; but please
deal with me kindly, even then.

Sound blues and rhythm in the glen
where trip wires cross, and boulders roll;
deal with me kindly, even then,
make music in my empty soul.

Where trip wires cross, and boulders roll,
I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Make music in my empty soul
and I will answer with a song;

I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Back in my youth, wrapped up and gone,
I longed to answer with a song
that opens a new lexicon.

The writer of Psalm 25 seeks integrity, without the emphatic 'I'm in the right' of Psalm 26, which sounds like 'number one' on the Enneagram, while a concern for success and failure mark a 'number 3' who has had to learn to bear hurt, which fits Psalm 25. The psalm is also a dialogue between the simple prayer of a man conscious of his need of help in the midst of enemies or worries, and his strong belief that God can help him.

Athanasius wrote in his letter to Marcellinus that the Psalms become like a mirror to the person singing them, and so the poem speaks of the crooked paths of life which mirror success and failure. 'Heart' and 'gut' are important words in the Enneagram scheme, and do not always live comfortably together when they share a house.

1 Peter 3:18-22

There is a challenging context here, earlier in the chapter – living with tender heart and humble mind (v8), suffering for doing right (v14), gently giving a reason for your hope (v14) – and our passage resonates with them in several ways:

- Christ suffered for us, but also for all, *including* those who have died and were disobedient.

- Noah's flood prefigures baptism. While in one sense only those in the ark were saved – which seems to contradict point 1 above – when the ark opened up, Noah and his family were given the rainbow sign for all. The Church is indeed the 'ark of salvation', but Christ's work was for the unbaptised as well as the baptised.
- Baptism (like the Lord's Supper) does not simply celebrate Christ's death for us, but His resurrection. We celebrate our own baptism and what it means, not just as a cleansing from sin, but as giving us a new and holy life in Christ and in heaven (cf. Colossians 3:1-3). A 'good conscience' is literally a 'good knowing of ourselves', which is both humble and happy.

The most unusual bit of this passage – unique in the Bible, I think – is the idea of Christ visiting the realm of the dead on Holy Saturday. In His life with us, in the stories of the Gospels we find Jesus 'descending' to be with us in our sin shame and despair, but in His death He goes even further. 'Jesus did not skim death, He entered fully into it.' (See Gerrit Dawson's *Raising Adam* – available www.handselpress.co.uk – for a profound look at this.)

Mark 1:9-15

Mark uses fewer and often more vigorous words than the other gospels. One notes here: the heavens were *torn apart* (v10), *well pleased*, which could be translated as 'delighted' (v11), *immediately* (v12) and *wild beasts* (v13). Not so much of the 'meek and mild' Jesus in this gospel (though it is other gospels which have Him clearing the money-changers out of the temple).

My mind is travelling further than the text with the idea of the sky being torn apart. Quite apart from what this might tell us about the 'eye witness' testimony of the gospels, it speaks to me of how this world is both connected to and 'invaded' by the next. The incarnation took a huge effort on God's part. We speak, rightly, of the way God gently slipped into the world at the first Christmas, taking time to grow in the womb of Mary in the person of God's Son. But it is also high drama – steep drama, deep drama. There is an explosive element, like in the birth of stars, to the breaking in of the Spirit into human affairs. And this same Spirit 'drove' Jesus into the wilderness. We sometimes speak about being 'led' by the Spirit – should we also speak about being 'driven' by the Spirit?

One final violent word – *repent*. Turn round, change. The word is the heart of a sandwich in verse 15: the good news is preached, the kingdom draws near in the person of Jesus, so repent – and then believe the good news. Faith both precedes and follows repentance, because faith is dynamic, not once-for-all but growing and being renewed; to push the metaphor, we never stop chewing that sandwich.

February 25 2024

Rev Laura Digan, Church of Scotland

Introduction

In Whiteinch during Lent we will have a weekly Bible Study for our life groups. In addition to these groups, our plan is to begin Lent 2024 with a retreat day for ourselves and the churches within our cluster and the local independent church we partner with. We are a church focused on prayer and have a weekly prayer walk, focusing on what God's vision is for the church and our community. This prayer walk will continue with an additional Lenten focus.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

The full chapter is described as the Covenant of Circumcision. God's promises are central to the story of Abraham. Here we have an extension, so to speak, of promises that God has already made. Abram is given the new name of Abraham and God promises to make him a father of many nations. Abraham might have thought his son by Hagar was the fulfillment of God's promises but this isn't God's plan. For God now includes Abraham's wife – the newly named Sarah, within this promise in verses 15-16.

Psalms 22:23-31

Here the Psalmist is encouraging the whole community to praise God. For God heard the cries of the Psalmist. Throughout the verses the community is further expanded to the nation, then the whole world and to future generations, and even to those not yet born.

Romans 4:13-25

Paul uses Abraham as a human example for living in the right covenantal relationship with God. The fulfillment of God's promise isn't because of a lawful guarantee, but through Abraham's faith and trust in God.

Mark 8:31-38

You have to feel for Peter, in the previous section of this chapter, he understands and knows that Jesus is the Messiah (v29). But in this section he fails to comprehend just what Jesus will have to do next. And Jesus speaks plainly and clearly. All Peter can hear is that Jesus will be rejected and put to death. He isn't hearing that three days later Jesus will rise again.