



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR MARCH 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.

March 3, 2024

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

In a world of seriousness and a Church of purity, the Lectionary calls us to a strange way of being this week – foolishness. The cross, which is God's wisdom and God's strength, is placed alongside the law in the readings this week, and as we examine these two themes side by side, we discover that they are actually both calling us to the same thing – as surprising as that may sound.

Come to worship as a fool this week, and allow God's foolish wisdom and God's weak strength to transform you!

READINGS:

Exodus 20:1-17: God gives the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, instructing them how they should live as God's people.

Psalms 19: A psalm that celebrates how creation reveals God's glory and wisdom and how God's commands and teachings are more valuable than anything, making those who follow them wise. Then a call for God to forgive hidden sins follows the song of praise.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25: God's wisdom is far wiser than human wisdom, although it appears like foolishness and weakness to human beings. God's wisdom and strength is Christ crucified which offends those who seek human strength and wisdom, but saves those who are willing to believe and embrace it.

John 2:13-22: Jesus drives out the animal sellers and the money changers from the temple. Then when the religious leaders ask for a sign to prove he has the authority to do this, he tells them that if they destroy the temple, he will rebuild it in three days – to which they respond with incredulity. The disciples, however, after he is raised, realise that he was referring to his body.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

Two seemingly unrelated themes come together this week. The first is God's gift of the law, and the value of God's law which brings wisdom. The Exodus passage is the account of the people of Israel receiving the law and the list of the ten commandments (or Ten Words, as they are sometimes known), and **Psalms 19** celebrates God's instruction which is revealed both in nature and in the Law. The second theme is the foolishness of God's wisdom which is shown through the cross, which Jesus cryptically points to, in the Gospel reading, as the proof of his authority to cleanse the Temple. Finally, today's well known Epistle reading demonstrates how the cross, which appears to be weakness and foolishness, is actually God's saving strength and wisdom. There is a tension here. The law can appear to be a call to both strength and wisdom, and the foolishness that the apostle speaks about is not immediately apparent. However, when the basis of the law is recognised – love for God (the first four commandments) and love for neighbour (the last six commandments) – the foolishness becomes clear. For a people who had just been delivered from slavery, these commandments represented the opposite of the life and systems of power and wealth that they had known in Egypt. They were offered as a liberating guide for the life of a free

people. In the same way, the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is a “foolish” act, undermining the corrupt systems of power and wealth that had crept into the religious and national life of God’s people. His act was a liberating, prophetic act revealing how a liberated people, a people of God’s Reign, should live. When questioned about his authority, Jesus pointed not to power or wealth, but to the giving of his life for the sake of love. The question that is posed then, this week, is whether we will embrace the foolishness of God’s law of love and live it out as Christ did in selfless sacrifice and service, or not.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The marks of human “wisdom” are seen across our world. When we feel threatened, we simply accumulate more and bigger weapons than our enemies. When we fear scarcity, we simply take what we want, hoard and protect it, and, if necessary, destroy those who compete with us for resources, or who have what we want. When we feel insecure or out of control, we simply court those in power, and manipulate our way into positions of power and control, and then “play the system” in our favour. And, in our wake lie the broken remains of lives, institutions and even our planet, that are the victims of our “strength” and “wisdom”. But, sooner or later, some weak and foolish prophet reveals the truth of our lives and values, and they come tumbling down around us. It is always the jesters who can speak truth to power, and when the truth of our so-called “achievements” are revealed, the world inevitably changes significantly. When the weak and foolish live in their “counter-cultural” way, the result is always greater freedom, life and peace for all. If there is anything we need in our world now it is foolish leaders who will have the courage to defy the accepted wisdom of our world that gives power to the few and widens the gulf between rich and poor. And we need communities of foolish people who will take the Gospel of Christ seriously and seek to live it out in the weakness and foolishness of love, inclusion, generosity, justice and peace.

Local Application:

Our scarcity mentality seems wise, and “winning” in a world based upon such wisdom requires us to be strong. But, in our relationships, our refusal to be vulnerable and weak leaves us alone and disconnected from each other. In our communities, our refusal to share resources leaves us afraid and suspicious of one another. In our societies, our refusal to challenge the “accepted wisdom” of our organisations, structures, and systems leaves us with a few who enjoy wealth and power, and many who struggle to survive. Even in our churches, the tendency to adopt the same power dynamics and wealth-driven strategies of the society around us has weakened our witness, and made it impossible for us to influence the world to embrace Gospel ways of being. Yet, there are those who seek to follow Christ, and who willingly take the risk of foolishness and weakness for the sake of others. It is these fools who reveal the poverty of our systems and wisdoms, and who call us back to the simple laws of love for God and neighbour. It is these fools who show us a different way – a Jesus way – of living, of treating one another, and of building community. The challenge this week is for us to decide whether we will be one of those fools, or, like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, collaborate with the system. This applies to the “small” context of our homes and families to the “larger” contexts of church and community – in all of which situations we can seek power and control, or treat our spouses, children and neighbours with the foolishness of love and collaboration.

March 10, 2024

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

It's a week of looking up. For the Israelites in the wilderness, it was looking up at a bronze snake that would open them to God's healing from the poisonous snakes in their camp. For Nicodemus it was looking up at the Christ who promised that when he was lifted up he would draw all people to himself. And now for us, we are called to look up, both as an act of repentance, turning away from what poisons us, and as an act of faith, trusting in God's grace and salvation.

May our worship lift our eyes to the Crucified One and give us the courage to do the tough but healing work of repentance.

READINGS:

Numbers 21:4-9: The people of Israel complain about being in the desert because there is no food or water and they don't like the food God has provided. Then a plague of snakes attacks them and they ask for forgiveness and salvation. God instructs Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that anyone who is bitten by a snake can look at the bronze snake and be healed.

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22: A song of praise for God who punished those who, in their foolishness disobeyed and rebelled, but who forgave and saved them when they called out to God.

Ephesians 2:1-10: Though we once followed the ways of the world and were dead in our sins, deserving judgement like anyone else, God saved us through Christ, as an act of grace that we did not earn. But God has created us to do good works in Christ.

John 3:14-21: As the snake was lifted up on a pole in the desert, so Christ is to be lifted up so that all who seek to be saved may look to him. God sent him into the world to save, not condemn, but those who love darkness rather than light are already condemned, because they want to keep their actions hidden and not have them exposed.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

On the borders of the Promised Land a generation who had never lived in Egypt (or, at least were too young to remember living there if they had) complained about the hardship of the wilderness and longed to "return" to Egypt. Hundreds of years later, Jesus uses the story of the plague of snakes that attacked these rebellious Israelites, and the bronze snake that God instructed Moses to erect for their healing, to describe the healing work he had come to do. A key to both stories is the willingness to admit what plagues us. To find healing the Israelites had to "look up" to the bronze snake. This was an act of repentance, turning their eyes from the fiery snakes, to the God who had cared for them for decades and now offered them healing. Those who love darkness, says Jesus, will not look up to him when he is lifted up, because to do so would take repentance and an admission of their need. Those who are unashamed and willing to come to the light will look up and find life. In the same way the Psalmist tells that those who rebelled but then repented (the song seems to reference the

Old Testament story) found healing and were forgiven and saved. Finally, in Ephesians we are reminded that it is God's grace in Christ that saves us, which we appropriate simply by faith – which means that we recognise our need, and turn to God to meet it. The invitation of this week's Lectionary, then, is that God graciously and freely saves us, but, to live as "saved" people, we need to recognise our need, repent and look up to Jesus. The result of this, as Ephesians tells us, is a life of good works. We are saved by grace, changed by repentance and called to a life of meaning and abundance in the good works God has prepared for us. All of this means we face a decision today: Where do we need to repent, and how can this change our lives so that we become followers of Christ who bring grace to others through our good works?

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The big question for the world this week is whether we will admit our need – the poison that is destroying us, our communities, our economies and our planet? Like the Israelites, it's easy to look at the hardships of the world and long for the "good old days", forgetting that those are the very days that brought us to this place. It's easy to hanker for what we don't have and to complain that God isn't "fixing" everything the way we want God to. What is much harder is to acknowledge our culpability in the break down of our world's systems. It's hard to face the way our greed and consumerism has brought suffering to others, and has put strain on our economic systems and on our planet. It's hard to recognise that our addiction to credit, to fossil fuels, and to immediate gratification has had destructive consequences. It's hard to release our sense of entitlement, of exceptionalism, and to stop justifying our narcissism. But, until we are willing to do this, we will not find the healing we seek. As long as we force our leaders to put expediency first, in order to retain our votes, we will find no solutions. As long as we keep rewarding unjust employment conditions, and seek financial benefits over the humanity of abused workers in other countries, we will never find global peace or personal security. As long as we keep choosing immediate satisfaction over healthy eating and exercise, our economies will pay the price in health care costs for avoidable heart disease and diabetes. As long as we deny our tendency to judge and exclude others on the basis of prejudice and stereotyping, we will never find true community and belonging. However, in a world where denial has become a global pre-occupation, such true repentance requires great courage and great humility. It may be naive to believe that widespread repentance can happen in our world, but as small groups of people begin to take responsibility for their part in their struggles, begin to dream of a different world, honestly repent and commit to the "good works" of justice, simplicity, generosity, inclusivity and love, even in small ways, some measure of healing will be found. The choice is ours.

Local Application:

Denial is a destructive thing. When we fail to acknowledge our brokenness and apologise for hurting others, relationships break down. When we refuse to take responsibility for our own health, our own habits of eating and exercise, our bodies break down. When we refuse to look at our finances honestly, and admit our tendency to spend what we don't have, our peace of mind and our economic wellbeing breaks down. When we refuse to look at our beliefs and recognise when they fall into self-righteousness, exclusivity, legalism, and judgmentalism our witness to Christ breaks down. In every family and community the pain

of denial can be easily recognised. But, so can the healing and freedom that comes from honest repentance, true taking of responsibility, and committed work to change and do “good works”. Every follower of Christ has a daily choice to live in the darkness of denial or the light of repentance. We can choose to know the salvation of God’s healing and restoration, or stay in the poisoned wilderness of our own fear, pride, and selfishness. This may sound harsh, but, it is only those who acknowledge their sickness who can find healing – as even Jesus taught. In this way, the call to repentance is not a “hellfire and damnation” message, but is an invitation to grace, to discover that there is nothing that can keep us from God’s restoring mercy, or from God’s liberating forgiveness. If we will just open ourselves to this truth, we will find the abundant life we seek by turning from our darkness, and moving into the light of truth and of God’s love. Once again, the choice is ours.

March 17, 2024

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

The idea of losing life in order to save it may sound like a contradiction, but once we allow this week’s Lectionary to move us into Jesus’ view of things, it makes perfect sense. The struggle, though, is less about understanding what Jesus meant, and more about how we actually find the courage and faith to live his call.

May our worship lead us into losing our lives for the sake of the Gospel so we may truly find them.

READINGS:

Jeremiah 31:31-34: God promises a new covenant in which God’s law is written on people’s hearts, and in which no one needs to instruct another, because all people will know God, will be forgiven by God and will automatically follow God’s ways.

Psalms 51:1-12: A psalm asking for God’s mercy and forgiveness, and for God to wash the psalmist clean, restoring to him the joy of God’s salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

OR **Psalms 119:9-16**: A celebration of God’s law that keeps a young man pure, that is valuable and precious and that is hidden in the heart, making the person who treasures it happy.

Hebrews 5:5-10: Jesus has been appointed by God as a priest like Melchizedek. He suffered for God’s people, crying out to God in his anguish, and God heard him because of his devotion and obedience. Now he is the source of salvation for all.

John 12:20-33: Jesus teaches that a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to produce fruit, and that those who try to save their lives will lose them, but those who

give up their lives will guard them for eternal life. Then he asks whether he should pray to be delivered from his hour of suffering, but recognises that this is what he came for, and that when he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The Lectionary, in this last week of Lent, brings together some thought-provoking Scriptural teachings. In Jeremiah there is the promise of God's new covenant, in which the law is written on the heart. Both Psalms echo this promise, with Psalms 119 celebrating the blessings and wisdom of God's law, and Psalms 51 (David's confession song) expressing the prayer that God would bring about a change of heart which would restore David's relationship with God and enable him to obey God's law again. In the New Testament readings, the focus is on Jesus in his high-priestly role. In Hebrews, the mysterious figure of Melchizedek is used as the metaphor for Jesus' pleading and action on behalf of God's people in order to bring them salvation. Finally, in the Gospel reading we have the closest thing in John to Gethsemane and the closest thing to the transfiguration. Jesus has a moment when he considers asking to be freed from his time of suffering, but then he acknowledges that it is in his suffering that his mission is fulfilled and God is glorified. Then, God speaks to Jesus affirming him and assuring him that his work will bring glory to God. But, then the question of suffering is expanded to include followers of Jesus, who must inevitably give their lives up – like seeds falling into the ground – in order to find God's life and bear fruit for God's Reign.

When we bring all of these threads together, we are faced with the surprising and disturbing challenge that God's new covenant is appropriated for us through the work of Christ as both priest and sacrifice, and also through our own willingness to lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel. This makes sense, since it is impossible to enter a new life unless we are willing to release the old one, and a new covenant cannot be written on the heart if we remain obsessed with the externals of the old covenant. The call to die in order to live may appear at first as a "works-based" theology, but to view it as such is to misunderstand what it means to die. Dying is not something we do. It is, rather, a release, a ceasing to strive and live, and a submission to the inevitable. In the same way, once we have recognised the inadequacy of the old way of being – the old "covenant" with its external law – we can do nothing other than release it, to die to it, and to submit to the coming change, the inevitable transformation from who we were to who we are to become in Christ. We cannot make this transformation happen, anymore than the seed can make itself sprout. However, we can, if we so choose, resist the death and cling to the old way. This is where Christ's example is crucial for us – as we witness Jesus' willingness to die and trust in resurrection, so we are given the grace and the faith to follow.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The idea of a new covenant, a new way of being, that calls us to die in order to live may sound too "spiritual" and esoteric to have any relevance in the "real" world, but it is, in fact, exactly what we need as we face the major crises of our generation. We need to die to the economic systems built on unlimited greed and consumption, in order to find a new way to live and use our wealth to build a more sustainable society. We need to die to short-sighted, expedient exploitation of the world's natural resources for our own gain, in order to make a

new covenant with the earth, and find a way to live on our planet with responsibility and restraint. We need to die to our false sense of disconnection with others, and die to our aggressive, protectionist tribalism in order to build a new connected, respectful and equitable world. We need to die to our lack of compassion for the poor, the sick and the oppressed in order to work more intentionally and consistently for justice for all. In so many ways the world as we know it – our current “covenant” with each other, with God and with the earth – is inadequate. Our current “laws” and “traditions” are unable to deal with the challenges we now face. Our organisations and institutions are hopelessly ill-equipped to navigate the complexity of our society. However, to bring about the needed change will require a death. We cannot build a new way of being without letting go of the old. We cannot just “tweak” the systems. We need to release them in some significant ways, and endure the pain, the death, that will result. Death, birth, and change all result in times of chaos before order emerges. Unless we can embrace this chaos, this “dying to live” we will just continue to do things as we always have done, and in the process, we will lose our lives. But, if we are willing to follow Christ, risk the new “covenant” and lose our lives, we will discover a new life – a new world – waiting for us.

Local Application:

No relationship can be sustained without fairly regular “dying” experiences. The single person must die to become united in a relationship or marriage. The couple must die to give birth to a family. The family must die to release the children to their own journey into love and growth. The same is true for community. The small group must die to become a community. The community must die to become an organisation. Every season of growth, creativity, change or re-orientation, requires a losing of life in order to save life. In ministry, this call to die is, perhaps, most keenly felt. The church cannot hold on to its own life if it is to be Christ’s instrument of healing and justice in the world. Rather, the church must die to its own needs, to its own agenda, and to its own self-preservation, giving itself for the sake of those around it, or it loses its life and becomes an irrelevant “club”. But, if we embrace our deaths, following Christ to the cross, we discover true, abundant life as we serve others. On a personal, individual level, the same principle applies as well. When we seek to save our lives – refusing to become vulnerable to others, refusing to release our own desires, agendas and perspectives – we lose our lives, and end up alone and bitter. But, when we willingly let go of our own life – giving ourselves for the sake of connection, family, friendship and intimacy – we find ourselves rich and alive with connections, love and support. It is, perhaps, one of the greatest challenges in our increasingly individualist and self-centred world to learn to die to the false life of an idolised self in order to find the true, lasting life of intimacy and community.

March 24, 2024

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

The Liturgy of the Passion really requires little in the way of resourcing. In many ways it is best to allow the Scriptures to speak with as little embellishment as possible. However, one feature that is included in the Mark account of the passion, and that could be highlighted this year, is the young man (who is sometimes thought to be Mark himself) who flees naked into the night when Jesus is arrested. There are some wonderful creative possibilities in using this image as a symbol of what this day can mean for us.

May we come to worship ready for the cross to leave us naked and honest before God.

READINGS:

Isaiah 50:4-9a: A prophecy of the obedient servant, beaten and mocked, but vindicated by God.

Psalms 31:9-16: The cry of God's servant, persecuted and beaten.

Philippians 2:5-11: Jesus' humility and obedience in his incarnate, crucified life, and God's exaltation of Christ.

Mark 14:1-15:47: This long reading runs from Jesus' anointing at Bethany through the Last Supper, Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial, to the trial, crucifixion and death of Jesus. It's a meditative journey through the passion of Christ from Mark's perspective. One notable feature this year is the young man (Mark himself?) who ran away naked when Jesus was arrested.

OR **Mark 15:1-39, (40-47)**: This shorter reading picks up just after Peter's denial at the start of Chapter fifteen, and puts the focus on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

It is only the Gospel reading that changes each year for the Liturgy of the Passion, and the essential elements of the story remain the same with the Synoptic Gospels. The invitation for this Sunday is to meditate on the passion – the self-giving – of Christ, and allow it's power, it's drama, and it's impact for our lives to confront us again. If the long reading is used, there is little need for a sermon, and the Scriptures can be allowed to speak for themselves. If a message is to be preached, though, it is probably wise to avoid being either too 'clever' – trying to find something too new and surprising here – or too familiar – just repeating old formulae. This is a tough ask, but, perhaps, the key is to create space for the hearers to make their own connections and draw out their own implications. One thing I would certainly avoid, though, is to make the focus of the service a simple "Jesus died for me" message. Mark's version of the Gospel story highlights a striking contrast between Jesus' refusal to give up his integrity and love in spite of the cost, while all around him, for various expedient reasons, his disciples betray, deny, or abandon him, and the religious leaders and people reject him. Yet, as symbolised by the young man's naked flight, we are all left naked in the face of Christ's grace and love, and when we face the cross, our true

selves are revealed, confronted and, if we allow it, healed. This is more than just personal forgiveness. It is about transformation of both individuals and society. The Gospel reveals the cross as the final judgement of human Empire, and the final revelation of God's Reign which is established in the crucified Christ. It is important to remember that the original ending of Mark had only a very brief, and quite disturbing resurrection narrative, which heightens the drama of this Sunday's readings.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

Two significant features of this year's passion narrative that challenge us on a global scale are the comparison of God's Reign (as revealed in Christ's death) with the Empires of the world (symbolised by the Romans and the religious leaders), and the way Christ reveals the truth about us – as seen in so many of the people around Jesus, but symbolised by the naked young man running away. In the first instance, this world of conflicting ideologies and violent struggle needs to see itself for what it is – competing Empires seeking to dominate all others. As long as we retain this imperial way of working in the world, peace and justice will continue to elude us and the gap between rich and poor will continue to grow. However, if we can allow the vision of God's Reign to capture our heart, we may begin to learn the power of self-giving and service, which will enable us to listen to one another, to share resources, and to make space for our diverse values, religions and needs in our one world. In the second instance, the way the cross confronts us is not just a judgement, but a doorway to freedom from our worst selves. The corruption, power games, greed, and denial that so easily define our politics, economics, and international relations are destroying us, but if we will allow ourselves to see ourselves truly, the worst in us can be acknowledged and healed. This is incredibly difficult for us to do on our own, somehow, but in the face of the cross, perhaps we can find a way. At the very least, if we can start in the Church, we can set an example for the rest of the world of what true repentance looks like, and the healing and justice it can bring.

Local Application:

It is easy to get so overwhelmed with global suffering that the pain on our doorstep gets forgotten. This Sunday it would be good to remember that there are people sitting in our churches who are grieving, who have been abused or rejected, who are living with life-threatening diseases, and who have lost homes or financial independence. It is deeply comforting to proclaim again that Jesus stands with all of these people in their pain, and that Jesus opposes any system that uses injustice, exploitation, control, and coercion to achieve its ends. It can also be a gift to gently call people into service and compassion in the midst of their own grief, because it is often in serving others that we find comfort and healing for ourselves. In this way the global suffering and the personal suffering can be brought together, with the cross as the place where they and Christ meet. Finally, it may also be helpful to spend some time in confession acknowledging the ways we contribute – both globally and locally – to the suffering of others, through our thoughtless consumption, our lack of awareness of companies and industries in which fair trade practices are ignored, our apathy, and our self-absorption. All of this can be a bit heavy, but it's important that our worship does not fall into a shallow "happy" mode all the time. While there are times for celebration, there are times for grief, and this is one of them.

March 31, 2024

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

Today is one of the year's most significant celebrations, and it moves us into perhaps the most significant season. Once again the Easter season reminds us that Christ's life is inextinguishable, and invites us to know the reality of resurrection every day. If we can avoid the "curse" of familiarity, this celebration can lead us ever deeper into God's life and transform us into life-carriers that bring life to others and to our world.

May Christ's life capture us and transform us a little more this year.

READINGS:

Acts 10:34-43: Peter preaches about the way God does not show favouritism, but welcomes and saves all, reflecting on his witness to the resurrection of Jesus, and the forgiveness that is available to all who believe in Christ.

OR **Isaiah 25:6-9**: God will create a feast for all people, will swallow up death, and will wipe away all tears. All people will celebrate that God has saved them.

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24: A psalm of celebration and thanksgiving for God's salvation, affirming that the psalmist will not die, but will live, and rejoicing that the rejected stone has become the main foundation stone.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11: The message that was preached by all of the apostles, and in which the believers believed was that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again, as witnessed by hundreds of disciples.

OR **Acts 10:34-43** (See Above)

John 20:1-18: Mary Magdalene finds the tomb with stone rolled away and tells Peter and the other disciples. Then Peter and the disciple Jesus loved go and investigate and find the tomb empty. After they have left, Mary encounters Jesus and returns to the disciples to tell them what she has seen.

OR **Mark 16:1-8**: The two Mary's and Salome go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, but they find the stone rolled away and a young man in a white robe tells them that Jesus is risen, and instructs them to go and tell the disciples. The women leave the tomb afraid.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The focus of Easter Sunday this year is, of course, on the resurrection, but this year, the supporting readings all offer a tantalising glimpse of the inclusivity of God's Reign as it was expressed through Jesus. The message that comes through is that the resurrection brings life and salvation not just to the Jews, or even the disciples, but to all people. The Acts reading is taken from Peter's sermon to the Gentiles in Cornelius' house and celebrates God's inclusive love and life, and the Isaiah prophecy proclaims that God's salvation, and the feast that accompanies it, is for all people. The Psalm takes the celebration of God's life and salvation to a personal level, but acknowledges that God's rescue came even when the psalmist required God's discipline. In a similar way, Paul reflects on how Christ appeared to him even though he was persecuting the followers of Jesus. The Gospels tell the story of the empty tomb – the moment of resurrection that made life available to all of the people that

are mentioned in the other readings. Both Gospels show the inclusive grace of God in a reality that would have been shocking for the first believers – the first witnesses to the resurrection were women, and it was they who were given the responsibility of sharing the news with the men. The essential message of this significant day in the Lectionary is this – God has given life to all people, and it is in this inclusive resurrection community that we find and enjoy God’s life. This is not just an individualist, escapist Gospel, but an invitation for the entire cosmos to enjoy the gift of resurrection together.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: One of the great fallacies of human history is the persistent belief that some groups or individuals can find life and liberation alone, or at the expense of others. However, the last century has demonstrated how mistaken this way of living is. We have seen how closely connected we are, and we have experienced how the emphasis on our separation from one another and from our world has brought great suffering and conflict on us and others. The challenge of the resurrection is for us to realise that God has brought life to us all, and that life cannot be extinguished by our foolishness or even by death. Further, the life that God offers is neither for only some people, nor is it only for some other reality after we die. Rather, God’s life can and should be known and enjoyed now, but can only really be experienced together. While it can be tempting to think about the resurrection only in metaphysical terms, a whole new world of possibilities opens up when we see how resurrection permeates everything. When we start to live as resurrection people, we recognise that we participate in resurrection in every moment that we bring life to others, whether through caring for our environment, working to alleviate poverty, serving those in need, learning to understand other cultures and people, or living more simply and peacefully in order to foster justice and equality in our world. Resurrection, then, is a reality that we are called to live – as Paul demonstrates in his life and teaching. We do not just receive resurrection life, but we become carriers of that life to the world – if only we can believe in and embrace its power.

LOCAL APPLICATION: In churches around the world the resurrection will be the focus of our worship, but for many of us, the celebration will simply be a remembrance of a miraculous event from the past, with perhaps a mention of our hope of a life beyond death. But, if this is all the resurrection is, it actually has little value for us now – or for anyone else. But, if our celebration can connect us with the living reality of resurrection life now, everything changes. In our homes and families, we can live knowing that there is always hope and life, even after times of grief or conflict. In our churches and communities we can gather knowing that God’s life is found together, and that we are able to bring life to one another through the grace, love, care and compassion we show one another. When we allow the resurrection to become a reality by which we live, and not just an idea that we remember, our mission changes from just trying to “get people into heaven” to bringing life to others in whatever way we can – big or small. When our lives become oriented around the resurrection we cannot help but move away from just telling people about Jesus, to seeking to embody the life, the grace and the all-inclusive compassion of Jesus in our own lives. The resurrection, then, is not just an evacuation plan for us as individuals. It’s the basic principle by which the entire cosmos is ordered, and in which we participate when we share Christ’s life in every way, and at every opportunity.