



CROOKWELL UNITING CHURCH

“To Know Christ and to Make Christ Known”

HOME PRAYER PACK FOR MAY 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.

May 5, 2024

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

Again the Lectionary continues with the call to live a life of sacrificial love in order to know and share resurrection. This week the "one another" that we are called to love expands in radical and universal ways, leaving us with no excuse for any refusal to love, and inviting us to become part of the cosmic love-community that God has established in Christ.

May our love for God, expressed in our worship, expand to include all of the creation that God created and loves with death-defying love.

READINGS:

Acts 10:44-48: As Peter preaches to the Gentile believers in Cornelius' house, the Holy Spirit comes on them and they begin to speak with other tongues. Peter then baptises them confirming that God's salvation is for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

Psalms 98: An exhortation to all creation to praise God for the wonderful works God has done, revealing God's righteousness to all nations and bringing God's justice into the world among all people.

1 John 5:1-6: When we love God and keep God's commandments, we love God's children. It is by this love that we know that we are born of God, and it is this faith that overcomes the world.

John 15:9-17: Jesus calls his followers to love one another just as he has loved them. There is no greater than to lay down one's life, as Jesus does, for one's friends. Through this obedience to Jesus' command to love we bear fruit that lasts.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The theme of love continues in the Lectionary this week, but the "one another" that we are called to love expands radically. In the Psalm all creation is called to praise God for the righteousness and justice that God brings to all people. In the Acts reading, Peter preaches to a group of Gentiles, with the result that they, too, receive the Holy Spirit, revealing that God's love, grace and salvation is for all people, not just the Jews. With these two readings in mind, John's letter, which calls us to love all of God's children, becomes even more challenging because we realise that the whole creation is God's child, and all people who inhabit God's world are God's children – which means that there is no one to whom we can legitimately deny love. Finally, in the Gospel, the call to love one another must now be understood to go beyond just our companions in the faith. The "one another" whom we are called to love through the sacrificial laying down of our lives, now includes all people and all creatures. The moment we begin to try and exclude some people from our love, for whatever reason, we have failed to truly embrace the love of God. But, when God's love flows through us to all – including even our "enemies" – we know the vibrant, abundant life of resurrection, and we become life-bringing agents of God's love to the world.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The radical inclusivity of the Gospel is one of the hardest truths to embrace. In so many ways the world is easier to manage and navigate when we can easily distinguish between friend and enemy, between “us” and “them”. National boundaries and patriotism become important lubricants for this divided world. Personal agendas and interest groups are easier to maintain, and the world is much simpler when we only have to love those who love us, who are like us and who are part of our group. In this view of things, we can make economic, military and even environmental decisions easily, because we only have to worry about ourselves and “our world”. Unfortunately, we inevitably discover the fallacy in our thinking when we see the connectedness of everything, and we begin to see that our actions have consequences for others, even as theirs do for us. Our divisions are, ultimately, illusions, and so the Gospel call to love all people is really the most common of sense. When we begin to love sacrificially, we become more mindful of how our decisions and actions and agendas impact others, and as we start seeking to live in love, the world becomes a more peaceful, loving, and co-operative place – which ultimately benefits us. If there is anything that gives a clear picture of resurrection life it’s love – and as we learn to love sacrificially, as Jesus did, we bring life to others and we enjoy a more vibrant, abundant life ourselves. The challenge, of course, is that the onus is on us, as Christ followers, to be the first to embrace Jesus’ way of love, no matter the cost, in order to prophetically reveal the power of love to the rest of creation.

Local Application:

The global call to love described above can only really be expressed and lived locally – but it is here where the real power of love can make a lasting impact on the world. It starts in our homes as we begin to learn to lay down our lives for our parents, children, and spouses. Then, as our love expands, we begin to learn to lay down our lives for our faith community, loving our Christian sisters and brothers as Christ loves us – embracing worship styles that may not be meaningful for us, giving up our agendas for the sake of others who need God’s love revealed to them, treating one another with grace and kindness instead of criticism and judgment. Then, inevitably, as our love grows, it will expand beyond the walls of our churches into our neighbourhoods, to touch those who are lonely, impoverished, hungry, abused, homeless, and displaced. As this happens, our love becomes like a pebble dropped into a pond, raising ripples that expand ever outward to make the world a more just and gracious and peaceful place. All it takes is the daily decision to lay our lives down for one another, and allowing that “one another” to continue to grow as God brings new people into our circle of influence. St. Francis’ prayer is, perhaps, the best way to think of living this life of love that Jesus calls us to. You may want to sing or pray it this week.

May 12, 2024

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

As the Easter season draws to a close, the final challenge of this part of the Lectionary, before turning to Pentecost, is for us to commit to Christlike holiness – which, as it turns out, is also a call to unity and community. For this task, we will certainly the empowerment of God's Spirit that next week promises, but if we are willing to answer the call, our quest to live our connectedness will have deeply healing effects on our world.

May our worship connect us more deeply with God, with others and even with ourselves this week.

READINGS:

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26: Peter suggests that the disciples should find a replacement for Judas, so they select two candidates and draw lots, and Matthias is added as an apostle to join the other eleven.

Psalms 1: Those who love God's instruction and refuse to join in the company and works of the wicked are truly happy and bear fruit, while the wicked are ultimately destroyed.

1 John 5:9-13: God has testified about Jesus that life is in him, and whoever has God's Son has life eternal, so if we believe God's testimony, we have this life.

John 17:6-19: Jesus prays for his followers, the ones to whom he has revealed God's name and God's word which is truth. He prays that God would keep them safe, would make them one as he and the Father are one, and would make them holy in the truth.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This last Sunday of Easter (which is the week before Pentecost) closes out the Easter season in a strange way. Although at first glance, the readings seem to be rather disparate, a deeper examination reveals that through each of them two themes are repeated. The first is the call to holiness. In Acts, the apostles seek to complete their number again in order to continue Christ's work effectively. In Psalms 1 the righteous person is praised and revealed to be one who bears fruit and who is truly blessed. In John's letter, the holy person is shown to be one who receives God's testimony about Jesus and who receives life from Jesus. Finally, in Jesus' prayer in John 17, Jesus asks that God would keep his disciples safe and would make them holy through God's truth in God's word. The second theme is that of unity with God and with one another, which flows out of the call to love of the previous few weeks in the Lectionary. In Acts, the unity of the apostles is extended to include the new appointment of Matthias. In Psalms 1, the righteous person is one who rejects the company of the wicked but who, unlike the wicked, finds a place among the company of the righteous. In John's letter, believing in Jesus as the one who brings life connects us with God and in Jesus' prayer in John 17, Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples with one another even as he is one with God. In the end, these two themes merge and become one, because it is in our union with God and one another that true holiness is expressed and lived. It is

wickedness that divides and separates, while holiness (which John Wesley defined as perfect love) unites and joins and creates community. The message of the Lectionary this week, then, is for us to embrace the life that God gives us in Christ and allow it to bring us into loving communion with God and with others.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

In the quest for global justice the idea of “holiness” may seem out of place and irrelevant. However, when we define holiness in the way the Lectionary seems to be inviting us to this week, it turns out to be a very relevant and important characteristic to develop. When we think of holiness as a sharing of the life of Christ in unity, we discover that the quest for such holiness leads us right into issues of justice. As we seek to connect and share life with others, we inevitably find ourselves seeking to address the causes of inequality and poverty, we work for power sharing and collaboration, and we recognise our connectedness, which leads us to seek the best for all people. In addition, we discover our connectedness with all life, resulting in a greater awareness of our need to care for creation. When holiness is about sharing life in community, the quest for holiness becomes inseparable from the quest for justice – the two are really synonymous. As we strive for holiness, then, we will find ourselves reaching out to one another across the lines of ideology, religion, race, nationality, education, and economic station. If there is anything our world needs today, it’s people who seek to recognise and strengthen our connectedness, rather than preserve what divides us – and the holiness which is presented in the Scriptures this week is exactly the guide that will lead us to become such people.

Local Application:

It’s tragic that holiness has so often been defined, especially in Christian circles, as separation from – from other people, from particular ideas, from religions or groups that are different from us. I’m not sure where we got this idea, since Jesus, who we all agree was the epitome of holiness, was a connector, bringing together people of vastly different ideological, religious, theological, political, and economic positions. In addition, Jesus calls us to follow him – to do as he did – which should mean that, as we seek to be “righteous” or holy, we should also be seeking to share life with others in whatever way we can. The call of the Lectionary this week, and of the Gospel, then, is not to separate ourselves, but to connect ourselves, to take the risk of reaching out to others and welcoming them into our circle – as the apostles did with Matthias. Ironically, it is through this obsession with connection rather than division that we cease to be “of” the world. We live in the world, but we are oriented toward God’s unifying love and life, rather than toward the divisiveness which characterises so much of the agendas of those who ignore God’s life. The question we might want to ask in our worship this week is this: how do we become people who foster Christlike connectedness?

May 19, 2024

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

The power and significance of the Pentecost celebration is impossible to overstate, and this year the readings really reveal how far this gift of God's Spirit reaches. Pentecost is not just about a few individuals receiving a euphoric experience. Rather, the outpouring of God's Spirit reveals a whole new order for the entire cosmos!

May our celebration this year empower us and open us to find our place in the glorious, God-sustained unity of creation.

READINGS:

Acts 2:1-21: The believers are filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and they start to praise God in various languages.

OR **Ezekiel 37:1-14:** The prophet is given a vision of dry bones in a desolate valley, and God asks if they can live again. Then God commands him to speak and as he does, the bones come together, are clothed with flesh, and receive the breath of life.

Psalms 104:24-34, 35b: The world and all its creatures depend on God for provision and breath – which leads the Psalmist to commit to praise God.

Romans 8:22-27: All of creation, and we, hope for the day when God's children receive their "full rights." In the meantime, when we are weak, the Holy Spirit helps us by praying for us in groans beyond words.

OR **Acts 2:1-21:** See Above

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15: Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away, and that this is a good thing, because then he can send the Holy Spirit to be their advocate, to convict of sin and to lead people into truth.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

This year the Pentecost celebration has a particular emphasis on how the gift of God's Spirit impacts, not just followers of Christ, or even human beings, but the whole of creation. As usual, the reading from Acts 2 describes the experience of the disciples when they receive God's Spirit. The John reading supports this narrative with the account of Jesus' promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit whose presence and action will be experienced not just by the followers of Christ but also by the world. The life-giving power of the Spirit is also reflected in Ezekiel's prophecy in which God promises to revive and "resurrect" God's people. But, when these readings are placed beside the Psalm, which describes how all of creation depends on God for breath and life, and the Romans passage, which describes all of creation as awaiting the time when God's life flows through God's children, the cosmic implications of this day become clear. The giving of God's Spirit is not just about personal empowerment, or an individual experience of God's presence. It is about God's life and grace flowing into the entire cosmos. It is about followers of Christ being empowered to bring God's

resurrection life to the whole of creation, finding our place in the unity of God's universe. The reverse of the Babel confusion of languages is simply an image of the reuniting of all things under Christ by God's Spirit, and the experience which the disciples shared is recognised, in the Scriptures, to be available to all people, and ultimately, to all of creation.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

The message of Pentecost for all creation is further strengthened when we remember that it was originally the feast of first fruits – a thanksgiving for the harvest. Today, we seem to have lost this appreciation for the earth and the life God gives us through it. Rather than taking care to protect and preserve our planet, we debate whether climate change is our fault. Rather than appreciate and care for the resources that our planet provides to ensure sustainability, we exploit the earth to the maximum, damaging the creatures with whom we share the world, and jeopardising our children's future. When we view Pentecost as nothing more than a personal gift of empowerment and presence from God to us, we run the risk of increasing our selfishness and ignoring the wider call of God for which we have been empowered. But, neither we nor our world can afford such self-indulgence. Rather, we need to hear the message of the Scriptures which proclaim that God's "breath" gives life to all creation, and which reminds us that creation longs for us to take our place as Spirit-filled, loving, life-bringing children of God. This means, on a personal level, that part of our spirituality must include making daily choices for simple, sustainable living, and on a global scale, it must mean that we work, in whatever capacity we can, for governments, corporations and communities to make choices for sustainability and planetary care. God's salvation, and the dream of God's Reign, are not just about personal, human restoration. Eternal life is about the entire cosmos brought together in Christ, and this is the Pentecost challenge this year.

Local Application:

It is unfortunate that Pentecost has largely been presented, in the Church of today, as a personal "second blessing" experience that "fills" or "baptises" us with God's Spirit. There are a number of problems with this view from both a theological and a practical perspective. Theologically, this denies the Scriptural testimony that God is omnipresent. As Richard Rohr says, God is either everywhere or nowhere. Pentecost has to have been less an outpouring of God's Spirit and more an "outpouring" of awareness of God's Spirit that has always been the sustaining breath of creation. From a practical perspective, the individualistic view of Pentecost too often leads to rather un-Christlike attitudes of superiority, judgment and exclusivity. The Pentecost moment, however, is far more far-reaching and significant than just a personal experience of blessing. If we are truly to open ourselves, both as individuals and as communities, to the Pentecost Spirit, we must also open ourselves to our connection with others and with the cosmos – not just with God. This means that we receive God's gift as an empowerment which comes with a responsibility to grow in love, to grow in compassion and respect for other people, for all creatures and for the earth. Then, as we live out of this empowerment, we must inevitably make daily choices in the direction of unity, sustainability, peace and inclusivity.

May 26, 2024

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

Trinity Sunday is the only week in the year when the focus of our worship is a doctrine. This year, though, the readings move the Trinitarian theme beyond the realm of purely intellectual fascination, into a very practical response to the radical transformation that comes from an encounter with this Triune God.

May the mystery of the Trinity challenge and change us as we worship this week.

READINGS:

Isaiah 6:1-8: Isaiah receives a vision of God in God's glory in the Temple, and he hears the seraphim singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." Then, after he has confessed and been cleansed, he hears God asking for someone whom God can send, and he volunteers.

Psalms 29: A psalm in praise of God's glory, the power and majesty of God's voice, and acknowledging God as the eternal ruler over creation, the heavenly beings and all people.

Romans 8:12-17: By the power of God's Spirit, we are heirs with Christ of God's glory, we are adopted as children of God, and we are able to live according to the Spirit's leading, not following our sinful nature.

John 3:1-17: Jesus teaches Nicodemus that, in order to see God's Reign, he must be born of the Spirit. For whoever believes in Jesus, sent by God into the world to save the world, receives God's eternal life.

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

The obvious focus of the readings this week is the celebration of the Trinity. The uniquely doctrinal nature of this theme can make it a tough week to prepare for, but the specific focus of the readings for Year B offers some helpful practical possibilities. Isaiah's vision, with the triple "holy" of the seraphs, reveals how powerfully transforming a true encounter with the triune God can be. The psalm supports this with its celebration of God as king over all, including the heavenly beings. In the letter to the Romans, Paul reveals how the triune God works in our hearts and lives to make us, both in identity and action, true Spirit-led children of God. Finally, in John's Gospel, Jesus makes the same point in his call for seekers of God to be born again – transformed, by God's Spirit, into believers in, and practitioners, of the values and purposes of God's Reign, that was revealed, taught and demonstrated by Jesus. God is revealed, then, as the King and Creator, who seeks an intimate relationship, as of parent and child, with human beings, and all of creation. Then, God is also revealed in Christ as the one who shows the true nature of God's kingship, and who invites us to be participants in God's work in the world, by giving us an example, and by opening doors to God's life through his death and resurrection. Finally, the empowerment we need to enter this relationship with God, and live as kingdom people, is God's Spirit who is given to us and through whom we are born from above. The key for this week, then, is how God encounters us, in God's Triune nature, and transforms us into Christ-like, kingdom living, children of

God. The Trinitarian celebration is not just a fascinating theological exercise, but a moment of opening ourselves, in worship, to this transforming encounter with our majestic and mysterious God.

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

Global Application:

It can be tough to connect our very Christian belief in the Trinity with the very real struggle for justice in our world, but, if we manage to do this successfully, it can be a wonderful opportunity to reveal the power of the foundational beliefs of our faith. This year the readings are biased toward action. On the one hand, the emphasis is on God's action in us. What the Trinitarian focus reveals is how God works in us, and in our world, in so many different ways – as transcendent Monarch over creation, as friend and co-worker for justice in human affairs, and as personal and corporate empowerer and transformer. God is at work throughout the universe, and in the smallest details of our lives. God is at work in us as individuals and as communities. God is at work in us to transform everything, from how we live to the systems within which we live. On the other hand, there is the challenge for us to encounter this Triune God and be moved into action as a result. We are called to be personally changed – convicted, confessing and cleansed, like Isaiah, so that we are born from above – and to become those who bring the transforming influence of God's Reign into the world, not just living ourselves for justice, peace and love, but, like Isaiah, being sent to bring those qualities into the world. The challenge, then, of this week's celebration is to recognise that changing our world requires a recognition of God's activity at every level of our world, but also a commitment to being changed both personally and socially. As such, whatever work we may do to change our world for the better – be it poverty alleviation, creation care, advocacy for the marginalised, seeking an end to human trafficking – we need to begin by allowing the Triune God to work in us, and we need to value the small, individual contribution that we can make. Then, to this we can add prayer for God's work in the structures and systems of our world, and organised initiatives to bring about the change that God's Reign calls us to. The vision of God as Trinity opens our hearts and minds to all of these creative possibilities and more.

Local Application:

On a local level the challenge of this week's theme is much the same as on the global level, but the specific implications are more personal and immediate. Again, the recognition of God's activity in every aspect of our lives, personally and communally, is the basis from which we can hope to change, and make any kind of contribution to our neighbourhoods, communities and even countries. And the challenge for us to recognise God's call for us to change while also contributing to bringing God's Reign into visibility also remains. What it means, though, is that we need to learn to see God's Spirit at work in our relationships, our homes and places of work, our churches and schools. The God who is king of creation, incarnate embodiment of love and indwelling Spirit moves within us and through us, and is active in every moment, every interaction and every place. When we can begin to recognise God's Presence and activity, everything changes for us. Then, as we embrace God's call and power to be changed, we automatically become more like Christ and find ourselves bringing Christ's love and grace into every part of our world which can only have an impact for the good. It is impossible, therefore, to believe in God as Trinity, without also believing in God's constant, gracious, saving presence in our world and in our lives. It is also impossible to

believe in the Trinity without seeking to be changed into more loving and gracious people who bring life and love into our families, our churches and our neighbourhoods in practical ways. This may mean learning to forgive a family member, or serving at a soup kitchen. It may mean volunteering in our churches, or taking care of a sick child. Whatever the details, the more we learn to see and open to the Triune God, the more we will reflect that God's presence and power in our own lives. May this week be more than an interesting doctrinal exercise, but be a truly transforming encounter with God.