

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 10th May 2020



Acknowledgement of Country

As you enter this time of worship please acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Kamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land and pay respect to their elders – past, present and emerging.

Call to Worship

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
loving God, in whom is heaven:
the hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom
sustain our hope and come on earth!
With the bread that we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,
now and forever. Amen.

From: *Be Our Freedom Lord*, ed. Terry C Falla , Open Book Publishers. 1994

Song *Christ is the world's light*

Christ is the world's light, he and none other; born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father: Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's peace, he and none other; no one can serve him and despise his brother,
Who else unites us, one in God the Father! Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's life, he and none other; sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father: Glory to God on high.

Give God the glory, God and none other; give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
give God the glory, God in all, my brother: Glory to God on high.

TiS 246. Frederick Pratt Green. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers

Generous God, you are like a mother hen which gathers her chicks under her wings:
loving, comforting, protecting, encouraging, and we thank you.
This day we thank you for the gift of our mothers who, in so many ways, have done likewise.

Silence

For those of us whose mothers have been less than what we encounter in you, we seek your healing
and your peace.

Silence

God of fulfilment and blessing you came to this world in Christ who showed us how to live.
We are sorry for those times when we fail to follow his way of compassion, of love,
of acceptance and of justice.

Silence

We are sorry for those times when we fail to proclaim his truth, seeking instead to hide behind
excuses such as 'I'm afraid to speak up'; 'I don't have the words to say'; 'I don't want to be
thought too radical'.

Silence

We are sorry for those times when we fail to live the fullness of life that Jesus gives:
when we are less than the people you have made in your image; when we fail to accept what you
have to offer us; when we look out for ourselves at the expense of others.

Silence

Gracious and forgiving God we ask your forgiveness.
Help us to open ourselves to your encouraging, redemptive and transforming Spirit,
we pray in and through the name of Jesus Christ – our Way, Truth and Life.
Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness

Hear God's words spoken to us through Christ:
'Your sins are forgiven. Go, and sin no more.'

Thanks be to God!

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge, do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.

² Incline your ear to me, rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

³ You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

⁴ take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

¹⁵ My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶ Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

The above Psalm is by David and is thought to have been written when he was fleeing from Saul. In these verses we have someone calling on God to deliver him. But, not only this, David knows God as his ‘rock and fortress’.

Take a moment to think about the following questions:

Do David’s words resonate with me?

What have been the times in my life when I have known God’s strong,
rock-like presence with me?

At this time of Covid-19 how is it helpful to say this Psalm?

Then spend some time in prayer.

Song *Put all your trust in God*

Put all your trust in God, in duty’s path go on;
Walk in God’s strength with faith and hope, so shall your work be done.
Commit your ways to him your work into his hands,
and rest on his unchanging word, who heaven and earth commands.

Though years on years roll on, God’s covenant shall endure;
Though clouds and darkness hide his path, the promised grace is sure.
Give to the winds your fears; hope, and be undismayed:
God hears your sighs and counts your tears; God shall lift up your head.

Through waves and clouds and storms his power will clear your way:
await his time; so shall this night soon end in joyous day.
Leave to God’s sovereign sway to choose and to command;
so shall you wondering own, his way how wise, how strong his hand.

TiS 555 Paul Gerhardt. Public Domain

The Gospel *John 14:1-12*

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

The Contemporary Word

I remember, as a child, singing the chorus 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' That's what Jesus said. Without the way there is no going, without the truth there is no knowing, without the life there is no growing. 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' That's what Jesus said.

I imagine some of you also have memories of singing this chorus.

These words, which are found in our passage for today, are followed by the words: 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'

For many years I thought that Jesus was the only way to come to God. That is, until I started learning about other faiths which also professed a belief in God – particularly Judaism and Islam which have the same roots as Christianity and both, like Christianity, proclaiming that there is only One God.

This made me start to wonder Is Jesus the only way to God?

That was when I was about 18 – a time when Australia, particularly Dubbo where I grew up, was not even remotely such a pluralistic society as it is now. Fast forward some 30 years to when I was at college studying for the ministry. Over a period of a couple of weeks we had representatives from other faiths come and speak to us about their faith. Buddhist, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and members of the UCA Aboriginal community, came and shared their stories. It was an enlightening experience as I listened to stories about what their faith meant to them, how it connected with the way they lived their lives and how they experienced God in the midst of that.

I was asked to write a piece for the NSW Ecumenical Council magazine on what I had learnt and, whilst I haven't kept a copy of the article, I remember summing up by saying: 'Who am I to say that God cannot be found in a Muslim mosque, a Jewish synagogue, a Buddhist temple or an aboriginal corroboree as well as a Christian cathedral? God's Spirit cannot be confined by any one faith. God's Spirit cannot be hemmed in by fiery eyed Christian zealots who use this saying of Jesus as a weapon to bludgeon opponents into submission and as a proof that everyone who doesn't share their view of Jesus is going straight to hell.'

So we might ask ourselves: If God can be found through other faiths where does that leave us as Christians?

To answer this question we need to look at the context in which Jesus made this statements about being the Way, the Truth and the Life. One of the things that I'm fairly sure about is that when this saying was first uttered and when it was first written down, it was not attempting to answer anybody's questions about the value of other religions or the fate of their followers. To take any statement out of its context and try to get it to answer entirely different questions in a completely different context is always to risk distorting it.

If we want to hear what is being said when Jesus spoke the words, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me,' then we need to hear them in the context of John's gospel.

In our passage for today, Jesus was speaking to his closest followers in private as they faced the uncertainty of life without him around. Here they were – gathered in a room where they had shared a meal with Jesus. He had washed their feet and talked about one of them betraying him. Peter declared that he would never betray Jesus only to be told that before the cock had crowed three times he would have done so. And Jesus had given them a commandment to love one another as he loved them. You can imagine that the atmosphere in that room would have been fairly sombre.

Jesus knew that he was facing certain death and the disciples were unsure, confused, afraid and maybe even feeling somewhat betrayed by this man whom they had been following for three years.

They were not sure if they had what it took to continue in the way Jesus had shown them.

When the writer of John's gospel wrote these words down, he was writing for a Christian community that had been forced out of its home within Judaism, and which was under increasing pressure, sometimes even on pain of death, to give up the distinctive claims of their faith and conform with the religious norms of the day.

In the midst of that, Jesus's words were addressing questions of Christian identity: of what it meant to be followers of Jesus. Analysis of where the faithful adherents of other religions might be at was not even thought about. What the writer of the gospel was concerned about as he had Jesus speak these words was to remind his readers of who they were: followers of Jesus who was, for them, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

How might this passage speak to us today?

We Christians find ourselves to be followers of a minority faith in a country whose population holds many different values and beliefs. We, like the people of John's day, find ourselves having to think about what it is that makes us distinctive. What it is that lies at the core of who we are as Christians.

At this particular moment of time we also live in a country that is in the grip of an abnormal situation where many people – maybe some of us included, are questioning our values and what we hold dear.

As we wrestle with how to live as people of love and faith and peace and justice in the world we find ourselves in, Jesus says to us: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Two thousand odd years ago, Jesus addressed these words to those who were already his followers and who were anxious and uncertain about the way forward.

'I am the way. Follow me.'

He addressed them to those of who were already his followers and who were confused about what to believe. 'I am the truth. Believe in me.'

He addressed them to those who were already his followers and who were fearful for the future. 'I am the life. Live in union with me.'

'No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Far from being an arrogant claim that negates every other way of relating to God, it is little more than an obvious truism about a particular way of relating to God: if we want to approach God in the same unique and unprecedented manner that Jesus did, then we have follow him to do it. No one but Jesus can show us how Jesus did it.

And as Jesus said it to those first followers, so he says it to us today.

Now you might or might not agree with what I've just said – you might think that Jesus is indeed the only way, the only truth, the only life so I want to make a couple of points that I think could be made in light of that.

Firstly, while the reading of the verse that I've suggested does not assert the supremacy of the Christian faith over other faiths, it also is not addressing that question, so don't let's try to get it to answer it.

We do live in a time of unprecedented pluralism. The Christian world view is no longer the only world view people grow up knowing. There are a multitude of world views with competing claims for the hearts and minds of people and the shape and direction of society.

But, and this is my second point, it is in the face of such pluralism that Jesus says to us – his followers who have identified ourselves with him, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.'

It is not our job to discern whether or not faithful Islam offers a genuine way to life in God. Rather, it is our job to live faithfully the way we have been called to follow. Faithfully taking the way of Jesus is to follow Jesus' example.

Faithful following of the way of Jesus will not make us hostile to people of other faiths or no faith, but it will make us distinctly and boldly different from them.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus we will be seeking, above all else, a depth and intimacy of relationship with God and one another, that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the more prevalent quests for image, power and prosperity.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be growing into a radical hospitality that welcomes the stranger as an icon of the risen Christ and which will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the selfish and xenophobic stance that has the majority of Australians calling for border protection and mandatory detention of those who come seeking refuge.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be investing in treasures of the spirit, and that will stand in stark and confronting contrast to the growing obsession with share prices and profit maximisation strategies.

If we are boldly and faithfully following Jesus, we will be standing up for the creation of which we are part and for the eco-systems on which we are so dependent.

As Christians we are called to unapologetically endeavour to faithfully follow Jesus and no other. We are called to listen to the scriptures and other writings that have informed our Christian tradition so that we might be shaped in that tradition.

Whether other ways might also lead to God is none of our concern. Our call is to live the way, the truth and the life that have been made known to us in Jesus and if we do this faithfully and well who knows where that might lead us?

Song *Our God is Love and we are lovers to*

Our God is Love, and we are lovers too; we sing, as lovers will, a hopeful song.
Come with us, share the work that love must do, and bring God's passion for the world along.

Christ is the Way, the path that those will take who come to know and see God face to face.
Follow this way with love, for Jesus' sake, and know the safety of God's warm embrace.

Christ is the Light, the Truth that sets us free, that opens doors, and sends disciples out
with clearer vision and new energy, to spread God's gifts of love and grace about.

Christ is the Life, and in that life we grow, we bear much fruit, as Jesus said we would.
Graceful and strong, we flourish, and we know our God delights in us, and God is good.

Tune: TiS 161 Elizabeth J Smith. Copied under CCLI Worship License No. 604439

Prayers of the People

(Prepared by Paul Turner)

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, in whom we live and move and have our being, at this time in our worship of You, we bring the cares and concerns that are on our minds. But before we do, we give You our thanks, our gratitude for Your loving care and kindness, not just for ourselves and families, but for our nation. For in spite of all that has happened over the past months: drought, fire and flood, we are blessed by the beauty of our land, and for the freedoms we enjoy. We thank you for Your Church wherever it is found, for within its fellowship we may worship You, without restraint and without persecution. For our own church, where Lord in the convenience of technology, we may meet as Your people, be it by the internet or telephone. Help us to continue to support each other and to 'hang in there' in these difficult times.

We pray for those suffering from or under the threat of COVID-19 disease. For families who have lost loved ones, we ask for comfort. For those who are ill, we ask for healing. For health workers, we ask for protection. For those whose actions threaten the safety of others, we pray for a realisation that their actions may cause harm, and that they need to act responsibly. And Lord, we give grateful thanks for all those people who, by their actions, make life easier for the common good.

Father God, we pray for the elected leaders of our nation. May they call on You for guidance, strength and good common sense, in dealing with the many problems outside of experience, faced at this time in our history. In particular we bring to You our prime minister and the many pressures and criticisms that he experiences.

We pray for the spiritual condition of our nation. Lord, so few of our people are now Your children. We ask that You send Your Holy Spirit throughout our land, bringing to mind the realisation that You are a God who can be a reality in their lives; a God who loves and cares and who calls to all. We pray that so many will hear, and in seeking You with all their hearts, will truly find You, and will give themselves to You and to Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

Finally, dear God, we pray for ourselves. In this time of stress and uncertainty, help us to continue to love and serve You and each other, to be that light on a hilltop which draws others to You. And we pause to bring to You, those other concerns not mentioned.

Silence

All this we ask and pray in the name of our beloved Saviour, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen,

Song *Fill my whole life, O Lord, my God*

Fill my whole life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise,
that my whole being may proclaim your being and your ways.

Not for the lip of praise alone nor ev'n the praising heart
I ask, but for a life made up of praise in every part:

praise in the common things of life, its goings out and in;
praise in each duty and each deed, however small and mean.

Fill every part of me with praise: let all my being speak
of you and of your love, O Lord, poor though I be and weak.

So shall you, Lord, receive from me the praise and glory due;
and so shall I begin on earth the song for ever new.

So shall no part of day and night from sacredness be free;
but with you, Lord, in every step my fellowship will be.

TiS 596 Horatius Bonar. Public Domain

Benediction

Go forth into the week ahead knowing that you are loved by a God
who created you to be in God's image.

Go forth into the week ahead knowing that you are loved by a God
who has shown himself in Jesus.

Go forth into the week ahead knowing that you are loved by a God
who, by her Spirit, is with you in everything.

And the blessing of God: Creator, Son and Spirit
be with you this day and in the days to come.

Amen!