

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship for Sunday 27th September 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

When the people of Israel were thirsty, God provided water in the wilderness.

Praise God for the water of life.

When the people were lost without direction, Jesus came to show the way.

Praise God for the water of life.

When we cry out in need, God listens to us and responds.

Praise God for the water of life.

Come, let us worship God!

OPENING PRAYER

Holy and mysterious God,

grant us the courage to dive deep into the teachings of our ancestors, that we might fathom the depths of the dark sayings of old.

For we see in the stories of our ancestors the truth we would deny in our own story.

We see your presence amidst their hopes and fears.

We see the courage it takes to truly lead.

We see the humility it takes to follow in faith.

We see life finding a way when all hope seems lost.

The whispered truths of the dark sayings of old haunt our waking dreams, telling us what our lives would become if we but had the faith to believe.

We believe, Great Spirit. Help our unbelief. Amen

HYMN: TIS 134 “Praise my soul the king of heaven” Tune: “Praise My Soul”

Praise my soul the king of heaven; to his feet your tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise should sing?
praise him, praise him, hallelujah, praise the everlasting king!

Praise him for his grace and favour to his people in distress;
praise him still the same forever, slow to chide and swift to bless:
praise him, praise him, hallelujah, glorious in his faithfulness!

Father-like he tends and spares us; well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands he gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes:
praise him, praise him, hallelujah, widely as his mercy flows!

Frail as summer’s flower we flourish, blows the wind and it is gone;
but while mortals rise and perish God endures unchanging on.
Praise him, praise him, hallelujah, praise the high eternal one!

Angels in the height adore him, you behold him face to face;
sun and moon bow down before him, dwellers all in time and space:
praise him, praise him, hallelujah, praise with us the God of grace!

Henry Francis Lyte 1793-1847 alt. based on Psalm 103

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of second chances,
forgive us when we grumble and groan, about our situation in life like the children of Exodus;
forgive us when we see your power in others as a challenge to our authority, like the chief priests
and elders of old;
forgive us for saying we will work in the vineyard, when we know we will not, like the son in Jesus’
parable.
Make us one in your Spirit, and renew us in your compassion and grace, that our eyes may be
opened to your presence and our minds may be filled with the very mind of Christ. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Hear the good news:
No matter who are are, or what you have done, Christ welcomes us into God’s kingdom with open
arms.
When we open our hearts and our lives to Christ, God’s forgiveness is truly ours.
Thanks be to God!

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: Exodus 17:1-7

WATER FROM THE ROCK

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.

I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 21:23-32

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS QUESTIONED

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you will tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

“What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your mind and believe him.”

HYMN TIS 154 “Great is your faithfulness” Tune: “Faithfulness”

Great is your faithfulness, O God my Father, in you no shadow of turning we see;
you never fail and your love is unchanging: as you have been you for ever will be.

*Great is your faithfulness, great is your faithfulness,
morning by morning new mercies we see;
all we have needed your hand has provided:
great is your faithfulness, Lord God, to me.*

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in unspoken witness to your great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Great is your faithfulness....

Pardon for sin and a peace that’s enduring, your living presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow – these are the blessings your love will provide.

Great is your faithfulness...

*Thomas Obadiah Chisholm 1866-1960 alt. based on Lamentations 3:22, 23
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MESSAGE

How do you react when things do not turn out as expected? How do you react when things go pear-shaped? How do you react when the things you have always done and the way you have done them are severely challenged?

Do you try to work out what went wrong and why?
Do you try to do something about it?
Do you play the blame game? Blame those in authority?
Do you take some kind of punitive action?
Do you try to do anything to avoid looking at any part you may have played in causing the situation?
Do you ask where God is in all of this?

As we look at our nation and beyond at this time we see all of these responses to the situations confronting people and nations. We see similar things in our churches.

All of the reactions we see are nothing new – just different issues! We find similar reactions to situations in both of the lectionary readings today. The Exodus text and the Gospel text have the common theme of ‘questioning authority’. In the case of the Israelites, they were challenging Moses out of their thirst for water. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt....to die with thirst?” They were physically desperate, but their confrontation ultimately was a theological one: “Where was God in the midst of their suffering?” Likewise, the Pharisees and the religious officials came challenging Jesus on the basis that he was performing his ministry. Their antagonism was essentially an exploration of how they might trap him; instead, they wound up trapping themselves. Both texts teach us that when times are at their most desperate, the temptation to test God must ultimately take a back seat to trusting God. Even though we cannot understand God’s ways, we must learn to trust God’s presence, power and authority over our lives.

The power of God is a fearful thing! Consider the wonder and terror of water gushing from a rock on the mountain of God simply because Moses struck it with his staff! Consider the terror of a stiff-necked people who walked between the dangers of dying from hunger and thirst in the wilderness and of dying from snakebite at the hand of a God angered by their contemptuous lack of faith! God’s power and authority are not hidden from those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Yet we often shut our eyes and close our ears to the truth before us, as the chief priests and elders did in the presence of John the Baptist and Jesus.

We find the ancient Hebrews wandering in the wilderness led by Moses. The Lord has delivered Israel from Egypt and the once enslaved people now have the responsibility of political freedom without the benefit of country, because the Lord frees Israel into the wilderness. This turns out to be a mixed blessing for it means that the people of Israel are still a people at risk. It could be said that enslavement in Egypt had been replaced by an enslavement to God., for just as they could not live without Egyptian favour in Egypt, now they cannot live without divine favour in the wilderness. Their new enslavement becomes all too clear when the water runs out in the midst of the desert. This crisis underscores how this first wilderness generation is a people in training and raises the question of how the people of God will conform to the risks of their new environment. In this story, Israel tests God with the question: Is God in our midst or not?

The wandering Hebrews set up camp at Rephidim and discover that there is no water. Their reaction is a familiar one – they lash out at Moses. How could they be sure that God was still with them? In spite of their deliverance from Egypt, their reliance on God’s sustaining presence falters once again. They confront Moses with a question ‘Did we go up from Egypt simply to die?’ You can imagine Moses’ frustration. God had delivered the people from Pharaoh’s army. God delivered them from starvation. And yet, when thirsty, they doubt yet again that God will see them through. He berates them, “Why are you testing the Lord?” Lack of water in a desert seems an occasion more appropriate for panic than for trust. And notice Moses. He, like the people, is in danger from thirst, and he fears their anger. “They are getting ready to stone me.”

In fact, while the people complain to Moses, Moses complains about them to the Lord. One begins to wonder if Moses is more concerned that the people doubt the Lord or that they're on his case. Moses is of no help in answering this question – he simply passes it over to God. “What shall I do?” Finally God answers the question by directing Moses to draw water from a rock. This makes clear two things about the nature of Israel's salvation:

- * they were not liberated for death in the wilderness.

- * liberation is transferred dependency from Egypt to God.

This provides the people with a valid reason to test God. This is shown by the place names allocated to the area “Meribah” to engage in a dispute with someone and “Massah” to test.

Thus, Moses and the Hebrew people are not left alone in this wilderness of frustration and anger. God responds with grace and the journey resumes. “Go on ahead of the people...I will be standing there in front of you.” God's faithful presence and provision sustains them once again. God's faithfulness prevails over the Hebrews' lack of trust and faith.

The issue in this story is not the faith of Israel but rather the reliability of God. “Is the Lord among us or not?” and the answer is a resounding Yes!”

Let us turn now to the Gospel reading from Matthew. The story follows the Cleansing of the temple in which Jesus drove out the buyers and sellers and overturned the tables of the money changers. Later, he returns to the temple and starts teaching. This brings him into further conflict with the religious leaders, the chief priests and elders, over Jesus' authority to do what he did. What right did Jesus have to interfere with the way things were running? The question put to Jesus about the source of his authority is not an innocent one. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' powerful words and works made it plain to Jewish leaders that Jesus' authority was from heaven. But they are less perceptive than the crowd they presume to lead, since even the crowd regard John and Jesus as prophets. The leaders' question is motivated by animosity and probably by desire to trap Jesus into saying something that could be construed as blasphemous.

(The religious upper-class was composed of the priestly Sadducees (centred on the rituals of the temple) and the righteous and scholarly Pharisees (centred on the synagogues) and they were not favourably disposed to this prophet from the irreligious province of Galilee. They had a vested interest in their old ways which gave them great moral status, influence and power. Many of them closed their minds to protect their achievements and reputations. They had been water resistant to the baptism of John and closed the shutters against the light of Jesus. As they saw it with their blinkered vision, they had much to lose and little to gain by really listening to what Jesus was saying.)

Jesus countered the question of the Jewish authorities with a question of his own, a question which placed them in a dilemma. He asked them if John's whole ministry came from heaven or from men...Were those who went out to be baptised at the Jordan responding to a merely human impulse or were they in fact answering a divine challenge?. If they answered that the ministry of John was from God, they had no alternative to admitting that Jesus was the Messiah, for John had borne unmistakable witness to the fact. ... On the other hand, if these authorities denied outright that John's ministry came from God, then they would have to bear the anger of the people, for they were convinced that John was a messenger from God....They were silent.... Then they said “We do not know.” They condemned themselves with this answer. They ought to have known. It was their duty to know. That was their role.

Jesus followed this up with a very simple parable demonstrating God's authority. Two sons express willingness or unwillingness to work in their father's vineyard and the degree of willingness is reversed in practice. The vineyard is the standard image of Israel, One son represents the chief

priests and elders; the other the prostitutes and tax collectors. The former engaged in a rhetoric of obedience, but failed to do God's will. The latter disqualify themselves, but then turn to God. The key to understanding this parable is to recognise that it is not really praising anyone. It is a picture of two imperfect sets of people. Both sons were unsatisfactory but the one who in the end obeyed was incalculably better than the other. The ideal was for a son who said yes and then proceeded to do what he said he would. The parable is warning that we need to practice what we preach. But it also tells of a God of second chances.

The religious leaders were so defensive in protecting their system (in the name of the people of God and the Scriptures) that they suppressed their inner cries and stopped their ears. Through confrontations such as this Jesus was really signing his own death warrant.

So we ask, "Where is God in all of this?"

Notice that God did not remove the "thorns" from the "bed of roses" scenario the Hebrews had expected out of their liberation from Egypt. Neither did God remove the "crown of thorns" from Jesus. BUT God was present – leading, guiding, providing and looking for trust. He was proving his faithfulness in all situations.

We look to the future of our congregation given our ageing and declining resources and the complete disruption caused by Covid-19 to our normal pattern of operation and mission. And this confronts us! Are we religious leaders and church members also guilty of having a problem with dealing with the need for societal change that we drag behind the general public? Are we bent on "protecting" God? Are we bent on maintaining the status-quo at all costs? Are we railing against our leaders and even against God for the situation in which we find ourselves? Where is God in the midst of this?

As always, we need to trust his faithfulness to lead us forward (despite our feelings of discomfort).

Amen.

HYMN 569 "Guide me, O thou great Redeemer" Tune: "Cwm Rhondda"

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore,
feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain whence the living waters flow:
let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee,
I will ever give to thee.

William Williams 1717-91

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

(Annabel Ashworth)

Over the last months of enforced isolation, we have prayed often for all those people whose lives have been affected in any of a million ways by the Covid-19 virus. Our church family is such a group of people. As we take one small step back towards normality, with the resumption of church services, I would like us to think about what we have learned and to ask God's help as we adjust to future changes.

Let us pray.

Loving Father, we pray today for our own Uniting Church Family as we face the many changes that still lie ahead. There is so much to deal with as a congregation from both the administrative and spiritual viewpoints, as well as personal reactions to the current, enforced restrictions. Remind us that you walk beside us all the way.

Throughout life there are many times when the way is unclear and we wonder why things are working against us. Yet in the future, you can look back at those times and see a pattern to it. A distinct path along which God has guided you. Often, the end result can be really worth having. Help us to look back over the last months in this way, Lord and to maybe find a reason for hardships we have faced.

Or were they hardships? Maybe they have been learning experiences? Are you using the Covid-19 pandemic to demonstrate to us that no matter what happens, you are always with us?

We are very attached to the physical church building and the rituals we have grown used to within it. This coming week, some of us are returning to it, but it won't be the same. There will only be a conditional welcome (if you have pre booked). You won't be able to lift your voices in song, or enjoy the companionship of others. Will being in the building under these circumstances make us feel any closer to God? How important is that building? Surely it is the relationship with God and our church family that is important?

Holy Father, help us think this through.

In the past months, we have been isolated, have longed for our church friends, the familiar Sunday services and all the aspects of being part of a congregation. Yet we have still kept our faith and our sense of your presence. You are not confined to a building or an activity. Through your guidance we have found other satisfying ways of doing things and other things to value such as the weekly written services and digital ministry. We also especially value Nicolette who has kept it all together. She, Rev. Betty and the various members of the church's administration have done an amazing job and we thank you Lord for giving them the will and stamina to do so. Keep reminding us Lord, that these are the things that matter.

Dear God, as we think back over recent Covid affected times, is there something you are teaching us here? Are you demonstrating to us that we can be flexible? Are you showing us that we needn't be anxious about change? Are you making us more aware of the importance of human companionship as a support through hard times? And are you reinforcing the fact that we have your love and support in all circumstances? Maybe learning to understand this has been one very good outcome from all this. We might find more good outcomes as time goes by.

No matter what happens or where we are, we know we can find an unconditional welcome in your presence Lord. Encircle us with your love as we reinforce our faith and join together in the reading of your Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, and the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever and ever. Amen.

HYMN TIS 231 “At the name of Jesus” Tune: “Camberwell”

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of Glory now:
this the Father's pleasure that we call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season to receive a name
from the lips of sinners unto whom he came,
faithfully he bore it spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious when from death he passed.

In your hearts enthrone him, there let him make new
all that is not holy, all that is not true.
He is God the Saviour, he is Christ the Lord,
ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.

When this same Lord Jesus shall appear again
in his Father's glory, there with him to reign,
then may we adore him, all before him bow,
as our hearts enthrone him King of Glory now.

Caroline Maria Noel 1817-77 alt

SENDING FORTH

No longer outcasts and sinners, but children of the living God, let us pour out our lives like living streams.

May we fill the world with the water of your grace, spreading the good news of God's love in the name of Christ, who is ever at work in us.

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious unto you;
the Lord lift up countenance upon you,
and give you peace. Amen