

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship for Sunday, 1st November 2020

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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

Through stories of faith and acts of grace, we are reminded that God is always here.

By God's presence we are guided.

Through God's word, we are instructed.

With God's Spirit, we are formed.

Come, let us worship God by lifting our voices in praise and offering ourselves in service.

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, your abiding presence guides your people through the wilderness into the promised land.

Your steadfast love continues to abide with us, today, as we walk as your children, and as we serve others with Christ's love.

Strengthen us with your grace, that we might be pure, upright and blameless before others. In our lives may your word be seen.

In our world, may your word dwell forever. Amen.

RESPONSIVE PSALM – PSALM 107:1-9

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good,

and his mercy endures forever.

Let all those that the Lord has redeemed proclaim

that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

He gathered them out of the lands;

from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes;

they found no way to a city where they might dwell.

They were hungry and thirsty;

their spirits languished within them.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he delivered them from their distress.

He put their feet on a straight path

to go to a city where they might dwell.

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy

and the wonders he does for his children.

For he satisfies the thirsty

and fills the hungry with good things.

From "Uniting in Worship People's Book"

HYMN TIS 456 "Your hand, O God, has guided" *Tune: "Thornbury"*

Your hand, O God, has guided your flock from age to age;

the wondrous tale is written, full clear, on every page;

your people owned your goodness, and we their deeds record;

and both of this bear witness: one church, one faith, one Lord.

Your heralds brought glad tidings to greatest, as to least;

they bade them rise, and hasten to share the great King's feast;

and this was all their teaching, in every deed and word,

to all alike proclaiming one church, one faith, one Lord.

Through many a day of darkness, through many a scene of strife,

the faithful few fought bravely to guard the nation's life.

Their gospel of redemption, sin pardoned, earth restored,

was all in this enfolded: one church, one faith, one Lord.

Your mercy will not fail us, nor leave your work undone;

with your right hand to help us the victory shall be won;

and then by all creation your name shall be adored,

and this shall be our anthem: one church, one faith, one Lord.

Edward Hayes Plumpton.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Strong deliverer, it is not easy to humble ourselves before others and walk into the rivers of life, trusting that you will part the waters so others may cross on dry ground once we are wet.

We fear the ridicule of others if the waters are not cut off and we find ourselves looking foolish rather than faithful.

We fear the loss of power and prestige, if we forsake the places of honour to claim the role of servant.

Heal us of our fears this day O God, that we may live Christ's truth that the greatest among us are those who serve, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Sisters and brothers, draw near and know that miracles happen as surely today as they did in the time of our ancestors long ago.

Christ's grace saves us from our fears, and leads us into a freedom that the world cannot touch, much less take away.

Rest in the assurance of God's redeeming love.

Thanks be to God.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON: JOSHUA 3:7-17

The Lord said to Joshua, "What I do today will make all the people of Israel begin to honour you as a great man, and they will realise that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests carrying the Covenant Box that when they reach the river, they must wade in and stand near the bank."

Then Joshua said to the people, "Come here and listen to what the Lord your God has to say. As you advance he will surely drive out the Caananites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites. You will know that the living God is among you when the Covenant Box of the Lord of all the earth crosses the Jordan ahead of you.

Now choose twelve men, one from each of the tribes of Israel. When the priests who carry the Covenant Box of the Lord of all the earth put their feet in the water, the Jordan will stop flowing, and the water coming downstream will pile up in one place."

It was harvest time, and the river was in flood.

When the people left the camp to cross the Jordan, the priests went ahead of them, carrying the Covenant Box. As soon as the priests stepped into the river, the water stopped flowing and piled up far upstream at Adam, the city beside Zarethan.

The flow downstream to the Dead Sea was completely cut off, and the people were able to cross over near Jericho. While the people walked across on dry ground, the priests carrying the Lord's Covenant Box stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan until all the people had crossed over.

GOSPEL LESSON: MATTHEW 23:1-12

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples. "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees are the authorised interpreters of Moses' Law. So you must obey and follow everything they tell you to do; do not, however, imitate their actions, because they don't practise what they preach.

They tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they are not willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads. They do everything so that people will see them. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks! They love the best places at feasts

and the reserved seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the market-places and to be called 'Teacher'.

You must not be called 'Teacher', because you are all brothers of one another and have only one Teacher. And you must not call anyone here on earth 'Father', because you have only the one Father in heaven. Nor should you be called 'Leader', because your one and only leader is the Messiah. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great."

HYMN TIS 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

MESSAGE

Let us pray: Lord God, open our hearts and minds, our eyes and our ears to receive these words as more than just a human message, but as a message of you, our God. By your Holy Spirit, enable the message we hear today to continue to work in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Have you ever had occasion to look through a pair of binoculars? Whenever I have, the first thing that happens is a blur. It is necessary to adjust the focus to suit your eyesight. Then it is necessary to focus the binoculars on the view or object you wish to bring closer for a clearer picture.

Both of our lessons today could be said to be about focus and about focusing on the right object. In the case of today's lessons, the focus needs to be upon God. This is especially important for those in leadership roles as is the case with Joshua and with the Pharisees.

When your leadership comes from God, stays focused on God, and is about pointing to God, things are likely to go immensely better. Notice what God tells Joshua: "Today I will make you great in the opinion of all Israel* (3:7) Then Yahweh instructs Joshua to command the priests to carry the ark of the covenant across the flooded Jordan River. When it is time for Joshua's first foray into leadership, notice what he tells the people. "Listen to the words of the Lord your God" (v.9) Instead of saying, "This is how you'll know that I have been chosen by God to lead you" (which is basically what God said to him), Joshua says "This is how you will know that the living God is among you..." (v.10) Joshua doesn't focus on establishing his own authority in this exercise of faith, and he doesn't command the priests to act out of his own authority. Instead, he keeps talking about Yahweh,

about God's role as the ruler of the earth, about God, the one who is among them. The principles of Joshua's leadership are simple:

- * let God shape your role;
- * stay focused on God's call for you in that particular place;
- * in all things seek to give God the glory.

At the heart of the crossing of the Jordan is the Ark a portable shrine which was a common feature of religious practice throughout Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan. Baker describes the Ark of the Covenant in the following words: A sacred cultic object in the shape of a box, that represented the presence of God among the Israelites. It was constructed of wood and transported by means of two poles inserted on either side. Its main features were the cover and the cherubim attached to the cover. Blood was ritually sprinkled on the cover which was the designated place of atonement. Only the Levitical priests could carry the ark. The ark of Israel contained the two stone tablets of the Law brought by Moses from Mount Sinai. It was present in the on-going life of the people signifying "God with us". It also was a source of divine power as the Israelites faced obstacles in the journey to define their political and religious identity. It was the physical manifestation of God's presence with them. The ark led the crossing of the Jordan amid dry ground, when carrying the ark into the river caused the waters to be swept into a heap. This depicted the supernatural relationship between the ark and the presence of God. The ark became so closely associated with the divine presence that the Israelites assumed that the presence of God resided within the ark.

At its best, the Jordan was never a large river. Nevertheless, when the snows of Mt Hermon melted, it became an awesome, raging, impassable torrent. In springtime it regularly overflowed its banks, flooding into parts of the surrounding valley. Joshua was there in flood season. He needed a miracle to get his army and people across. He got the miracle. At the right time, as the leading priests who were carrying the sacred Ark of the Covenant walked ankle-deep into the floodwaters, the river actually stopped flowing and the tribes of Hebrews walked across to the 'Land flowing with milk and honey'. This is one more typical miracle of the love of Yahweh. God had the right man of faith in the right position at the right time. (As Yahweh had been with Moses, so he was with Joshua. Remember when they crossed the Reed Sea? When they were fed with manna in the morning and quails in the evening? When Moses struck a rock with his rod to release water for his thirsty people? God had the right person in the right place at the right time. So it was with Joshua here.)

The motif of crossing through the water can be interpreted in two contexts:

a. The actual story of the crossing. Israel had no choice but to pass through the water. There were no bridges and there was no detour. The experience of passing through the water on dry ground confirmed to Israel that God was with them in general and more specifically in their leader Joshua. It also demonstrated that possession of the land of Canaan is God's gift and not something that Israel had earned. This point was underscored by the central role of the Ark in the story, which had come to symbolise the saving power of God. (The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant had to wade into the Jordan River before the waters part to enable the people to walk across on dry land.) The Ark is what stopped the flow of the river and as long as it was in the middle of the river Israel could cross safely. The

crossing of the Jordan was transitional between the wilderness leading and reaching the promised land.

b. In the larger context of salvation history. This was not the first time for Israel crossing water. The first account was the Reed Sea story where the passing through the water was a transition from Egypt to the wilderness. Thus we have a pattern to the salvation story:

Exodus (Reed Sea crossing) to Wilderness Leading (Jordan Crossing)) to Land. In these crossings God leads them miraculously on dry land. Passing through water is a significant step in the story of salvation – a story we can relate to baptism in our Christian rituals.

An interesting angle on this miracle comes from World War 1. A British officer leading his troops in the Jordan region, without the support of army engineers, wondered how on earth he was going to get his soldiers across the river. A guide told him to draw near to the banks, stay under cover and be patient. After a few frustrating days, the river stopped flowing for almost an hour and the troops crossed with safety. The Arab guide knew about the phenomenon, but could not predict the time. What happened was this: Early in the spring season, when the waters started to flow with vigorous current, they would at times undermine the tall cliffs in the region nearer Galilee. A mighty landfall would occur and the water would temporarily cease flowing.

Surely, however, this does not negate the miracle. God had his man of faith with his followers there at the right time. And God had promised Joshua, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage." And Joshua was there in trust and humility. The key point is about keeping the focus on God!

The Matthew text serves as a warning about what happens when leadership loses its focus on the things of God. Jesus scolds the scribes and the Pharisees for forsaking servant ministry in favour of earthly recognition: the best seats in the synagogue, honour at banquets, and respect in the market places. Leaders can have the right knowledge and the wrong practice, thereby throwing their authority out the window. Jesus said that the Pharisees of his time had become less about exalting and pointing to God and more about making sure people knew how great they were. They went beyond what God required for them and for the people, exaggerated their religious expressions, and sought to be honoured more than they encouraged God to be honoured. Jesus was not against the role the Pharisees were supposed to be perform, but he condemned them for the manner in which they carried it out. "Listen to what they say but don't do what they do." They needed to practise what they preached.

In v.8 Jesus speaks directly to all who see themselves as his disciples: No titles for the disciples. Their leadership is to be God-centred and servant-focused. They must keep the one with the ultimate authority at the top. They must point always to the one teacher, Father, and Christ by submitting to serve their community as God calls them to do. Like Joshua's leadership, their leadership is to be founded on the conviction that God will be with his people whatever happens.

Humility and gratitude for God's blessings lead to servant ministry and a recognition of our dependence on God, on one another, and on God's good earth. Our focus must remain firmly on God.

I'm reminded of the gospel chorus:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.

Amen.

HYMN AHB 535 "For the might of your arm we bless you" Tune; "Mountain Christians"

**For the might of your arm we bless you, our God, our fathers' God
you have kept your pilgrim people by the strength of your staff and rod;
you have called us to the journey which faithless feet ne'er trod:
for the might of your arm we bless you, our God, our fathers' God.**

**For the love of Christ constraining that bound their hearts as one;
for the faith in truth and freedom in which their work was done;
for the peace of God's evangel wherewith their feet were shod:
for the might of your arm we bless you, our God, our fathers; God.**

**We are watchers of a beacon whose light must never die;
we are guardians of an altar that shows you ever nigh;
we are children of your freemen who sleep beneath the sod:
for the might of your arm we bless you, our God, our fathers' God.**

**May the shadow of your presence around our camp be spread;
baptise us with the courage with which you blessed our dead;
O keep us in the pathway their saintly feet have trod:
for the might of your arm we bless you, our God, our fathers' God.** Charles Sylvester Horne

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Loving God,
receive the gifts we bring and the dedication of our lives.
Whatever it takes, may we be faithful in our service
and may your mission of reconciliation in the world
be realised in our discipleship. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Mighty and powerful God, creator of all things, ruler of all things, You know each one of us more intimately than we know ourselves and yet Lord you love each one of us with a love that none of us can fathom.

Loving Lord we come to you this morning with our prayers for our world, our nation, our families, our friends and ourselves.

We pray for our world, a world torn apart by bigotry and hatred, by natural disasters and disease. Dear lord may your spirit move through our world bringing healing and love to all. WE pray for our nation. We pray for our leaders as they steer us through this covid pandemic, give them wisdom strength and courage. We pray for all who are affected in any way by the lockdowns, may you bring people into their lives who can stand beside them and love and support them. Help us as your people to be neighbour to those around us who need our love and care for any reason. We pray for those in our community who care for us and keep us safe every day, our police, health workers whether they be doctors, nurses,

ambulance or others who keep these services operating, our firefighters, both paid and volunteers and SES. Protect them and keep them safe as they put their lives on the line to keep us safe. WE think of our students many who are still involved in the HSC, help them to have clear minds, and walk with these young people as they prepare to go out into the world. Be with the teachers as they teach and guide children through those school years.

We pray for our families. The last few months have been hard for many who have not been able to see family members and many of us have family in faraway places so dear Lord please keep them safe and draw them to yourself. Thank you lord for modern technology which enables us to keep in contact more easily. As each of us goes from this place this morning I pray we will all feel your spirit at work in us, and we will allow Him to lead guide and teach us. May we each feel God's loving arms around us as we step out into a brand new week.

Let us now join together in the Lord's Prayer,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

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, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN TIS 177 "In suffering love the thread of life" *Tune: TIS 514 "Belmont"*

***In suffering love the thread of life is woven through your care,
for God is with us, not alone our pain and toil we bear.***

***There is a rock, a place secure within the storm's cold blast;
concealed within the suffering night God's covenant stands fast.***

***In love's deep womb our fears are held; there God's rich tears are sown
and bring to birth, in hope new-born, the strength to journey on.***

***Lord, to our hearts your joy commit, into our hands your pain;
so send us out to touch the world with blessings in your name.***

***In suffering love our God comes now, hope's vision born in gloom;
with tears and laughter shared and blessed the desert yet will bloom.***

Rob W Johns

SENDING FORTH

Step confidently into the waters of grace.

God leads us into life.

Walk humbly in the service of others.

Christ leads into life.

Proclaim boldly the glory of our God.

The Spirit leads us into life.

BENEDICTION

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.