

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 9th August 2020



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

Call to Worship

As you come to this time of worship I invite you to settle into your chair or lounge, or wherever you might be sitting.

Close your eyes and breath gently in and out for a few minutes.

As you breathe in, imagine you are breathing in the life-giving power of God's Spirit. As you breathe out, expel all that is clogging up your mind; all that is preventing you from being more deeply in touch with God.

(Silence)

**Let's worship our God who made us in God's image
Let's worship our God who seeks to allay our fears
Let's worship our God who is with us in everything.**

Song *God himself is present*

God himself is present, let us now adore him
as with awe we come before him.
God is in our midst, now in our hearts keep silence,
worshipping in deepest reverence.
Him we know, him we name,
come and let us make him our renewed surrender.

O majestic being, I would praise you duly
and my service render to you
in the self-same spirit as the holy angels,
ever standing in your presence.

Grant me now so to strive
evermore to please you, dearest God, in all things.

Let your glorious light, Lord, permeating all things,
reach my face and eyes to touch them;
as the tender flowers open out their petals,
to the sun their hearts unfolding,
so may I, calm in joy, hold your rays from heaven,
power within me working.

Lord, make me your dwelling, let my heart and spirit
be for you an earthly temple:
come, Immediate Being, my whole life illumine,
so I'll always praise and love you,
so where'er I may be
there I may perceive you, ever bow before you.

TiS 121 Gerhard Tersteegen

Prayers

I invite you to bring your own prayers of confession to God.

As you do this you might like to consider the following:

Have my eyes, ears, mind and heart been open to see Jesus in the world around me?

Have I been fully present to those in my life who are hurting in some way?

This week have I been concerned about the welfare of this precious world
of which I am part?

Have I been fully aware of and open to God's Spirit working within me?

Silence for your own prayers

Declaration of Forgiveness

Know that you are loved by a God who is with you at all times and in all situations.

Know that you are loved by a God whose generosity and abundant grace
are given to you freely.

Hear then God's words of forgiveness:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Thanks be to God!

The Gospel *Matthew 14:22-33*

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, ^[a] for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw

him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." ²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, ^[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Message

Just before I sat down to write this message I was watching 'The Drum' – a nightly news programme on the ABC which includes a number of panellists as well as the presenter. Monday's programme was devoted to the Stage Four level of restrictions in Victoria and what they mean for Victorians. It was a sobering and rather depressing hour that I spent, as I listened to panellists talking about the effects these very repressive lockdowns will have on people's lives and the economy.

People affected were given a voice as well and there were small business owners talking about how they had managed to get started again after the first lockdown – one said they thought they would survive this one as well but it would be tough going. Another said that they weren't sure how things would go and that it was really, really hard. One panellist said that, given the fact that the state plays such a big role in the Australian economy, the ramifications of the lockdown would extend far beyond the borders of Victoria. Another said that many businesses would struggle to start up again as any capital they had, had been exhausted by the first lockdown.

A young student doing her final year's schooling spoke about the difficulties faced by herself and her classmates, and another panellist talked about the challenges that students finishing school and university would face as they tried to enter a workforce where the jobless rate is extremely high and those with little experience would find opportunities shrinking.

And on it went in much the same vein for an hour.

I'm not sure why I continued watching as I usually turn depressing programmes off.

There was one connecting thread amongst all the stories and reports and that thread was the total lack of certainty we have as we look into the future. Even if the curve is flattened will there be further waves? How will businesses which have had rent and mortgages suspended for the time being, be able to pay these back when the day of reckoning comes? How will this second, harsher lockdown affect people's mental health and sense of purpose? Where are we heading as this difficult, aggressive and wayward virus affects us all in one way or another?

I looked at the programme after returning to Tamworth from Orange. During the trip I spent a fair bit of time reflecting on our passage for today and what might be the message from it. One of the aspects of the story that my reflections led me to think about was to picture the disciples sitting in that boat being tossed about by wild waves and strong winds and to ask questions such as: How would they have been feeling? Were they scared out of their wits? Did they suddenly think about what their future might be - that is, if they had a future? Do you see the correlations between this gospel story and my earlier comments about 'The Drum'?

When Matthew wrote his gospel, he did so for a small Christian community which had only just separated from the local Jewish synagogue in Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee. For most of the first century Jewish followers of Jesus saw no reason to go off and start their own religion. They saw their belief in Jesus as a fulfilment of their Jewish faith, and other Jews

were, on the whole, quite happy for Christians to remain part of their communities. But things changed dramatically with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70. Jewish leaders started to believe that the destruction of the temple was a punishment from God for their lack of faith. So reforms began within Judaism - reforms that sought to take the community back to a more strict following of the Mosaic law than it had become accustomed to. This meant that the Christian groups within Judaism began to find themselves on the wrong side of the reform. Eventually, after years of tension, the Christians were finally expelled from the Synagogues in the early nineties of the first century.

This left the Jewish Christian communities in a rather vulnerable situation. Suddenly they were no longer able to practice their faith as part of the living, breathing community that was Judaism. No longer could they rely upon the support, economic as well as spiritual and moral, of that community. They were out on their own, exiles from the promised land, cast out and shunned for their sins. But they were in a more vulnerable position before the Roman power as well. Jewish communities were just tolerated by Rome but were still free to practice their faith under the pax romana. However, the Christian communities - no longer part of institutional Judaism, did not enjoy such privilege. Increasingly, in the period when Matthew writes, the Roman authorities took a very dim view of the fledgling Christian religion. They were a minority group, out there in the open and, pretty soon—perhaps only a year or two after Matthew wrote his gospel—the Christians were subjected to a devastating wave of state-sanctioned persecution.

So the community of Christians to which Matthew wrote were rather vulnerable. The religious and social foundation on which they had built their lives suddenly began to crumble. The once friendly environment in which their day-to-day lives had taken shape turned cold and indifferent.

In the first century the image of a boat came to stand for the church. From the image of the disciples are out on the lake in a boat Matthew's readers/listens would have known that he was talking about a small church community trying to find its way to where Jesus is waiting. Similarly with the storm, which here functions as a symbol of chaos - the kind of chaos which Matthew's community was actually experiencing. To them, the fear and the uncertainty of their strange new situation was like being out on a stormy sea where all sorts of dangers lurked.

In today's world many people are facing an uncertain future. Many feel afraid. Many feel confused. Still more feel as if the very anchors on which they have built their lives have been violently upended. We – part of a small faith community, wonder whether things can ever be the same again. People feel buffeted about by the winds of the coronavirus that have so suddenly sprung up. And some wonder where God is. This morning's gospel story attempts to address these sorts of fears and questions.

In our story – in the midst of the chaos and the buffeting winds, the disciples see Jesus walking towards them. Whether we believe that Jesus actually walked on water is, I believe not of such great significance. What is important, is that Matthew's story represents Jesus being there in the middle of the chaos. He was with those scared, frightened disciples in such a way that brought them comfort and peace. He was there in such a powerful way that they acknowledged him as 'The Son of God'.

Jesus is no longer physically alive as he was for those first disciples and so we might ask ourselves:

'Where, in all the chaos and uncertainty that we are experiencing as COVID-19 buffets us, is Jesus today?

I invite you to reflect on this question for a short time.

Take time to reflect on the question

And a further question: How, as Jesus' 21st Century disciples in this chaotic and uncertain time, do we make his presence known, to those who are suffering the most?

Take time to reflect on the question

In our story Peter, when he saw Jesus, jumped out of the boat and started walking towards him – then his courage failed him and he started to sink and was rescued by Jesus.

I believe that if we are to make Christ's presence known today we have to be prepared to jump out of our boat. Jump out and be prepared to take on the waves of the chaos around us. Jump out - trusting that God will be with us.

To jump out – in order to meet Jesus in the lives of those around us.

At times we might find that our courage falters; that the storms that surround us will threaten to drown what we are trying to do but when this happens let's acknowledge that Jesus' presence will be with us.

When Peter's courage began to fail Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Song *When trouble strikes and fear takes root*

This song may be new to you, but I invite you to ponder the words as they seem to fit very well!

When trouble strikes and fear takes root, and dreams are dry and sense unsound,
when hope becomes a barren waste, then doubts like mountains soar around.

Our wandering minds believe the worst and ask, as faith and fervour fade,
'Has God now turned his back on us, forsaking those he loved and made?'

God says, 'See how a woman cares. Can she forget the child she bore?
Even if she did, I shan't forget: though feeling lost, I love you more.

'My dearest daughter, fondest son, my weary folk in every land,
your souls are cradled in my heart, your names are written on my hand.'

Then praise the Lord through faith and fear, in holy and in hopeless place;
for height and depth and heaven and hell can't keep us far from his embrace.

TiS 184 John L Bell and Graham Maule. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers of the People

(Prepared by Margot Hobson)

O God of love, our Saviour, we come with our hopes and our fears, our joys and sorrows, our strengths and our regrets – show us how to lay these concerns before you and so know your peace.

Father, we pray for our nation – for leadership that is just and responsible to lead us through this time of health and economic difficulties.

We pray for families everywhere who have been, and are being, affected by the Corona Virus – with no end in sight.

We pray for those whose lives are filled with fear, and for those whose lives are damaged by neglect or abuse, and have lost their purpose for life.

We pray for people who work and take enormous risks to help those in need – and sacrifice their own security.

We think of our church community, as we look towards our mission over the next years –
each member and the part they might play and be able to care for each other.
We thank you, Lord, for the Rev Betty and her thoughts on the Matthew reading for today –
we think of the winds and waves in our lives at the moment. God of grace, remind us to not
be afraid. Christ calls us to keep our eyes fixed on him, and our ears open for his
encouragement. Jesus, thank you that you have the power to calm the storms in our lives -
help us to trust you.
We turn to you, our God, for encouragement, for grace, for renewal. Let there be joy, peace,
hope and love in our lives.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Song *Faith will not grow*

Faith will not grow from words alone, from proofs provided, scripture known;
our faith must feel its way about, and live with question-marks and doubt.

The pattern Jesus showed, we share: life comes through death, hope through despair.
God is made known in brokenness, and faith feeds on God's emptiness.

The Church still tells how Jesus came through death to glorious life again
the strangest story! Yet, maybe, our faith will thrive on mystery.

Faith takes the little that we know, and calls for hope, and tells us: Go!
Love and take courage, come what may; Christ will be with us on the way.

TTiS 691 Elizabeth J Smith. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Blessing

Go forth into the world in peace.
May God the Creator, work new things within you.
May God the Son, fill you with his presence
And may God the Spirit, blow winds of hope within you.
Amen!