

SUNDAY 21st June, 2020. Pentecost 3. 43rd Anniversary of U. C. A.

CALL to WORSHIP :

We journey in faith on many different roads; we worship God who is always with us.
We know there is pain in the journey; we worship Christ who goes before us.
We know there is joy in the journey; we worship the Spirit who brings us life.
God of the journey, past, present and future, we worship you. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of COUNTRY : We respectfully acknowledge that we are gathered on Bangerang country of the Yorta Yorta nations. We honour the custodians of the lands & waterways; & pay our respects to their elders – past, present & emerging.

HYMN : “Where wide sky rolls down.” TIS. 188

*Where wide sky rolls down and touches red sand,
where sun turns to gold the grass of the land,
let spinifex, mulga and waterhole tell
their joy in the One who made everything well.*

*Now, people of faith, come gather around
with songs to be shared, for blessings abound!
Australians, whatever your culture or race
come, lift up your hearts to the Giver of grace.*

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION : Holy & wonderful God, we say thankyou for the breath we breathe at this moment – for your gift of life to us.

For the beauty of our world – seashore & outback, valley & mountain, forest & farm, dawn & dusk – we give thanks. .. For the first people of this land, their ways of belonging in this place, of caring for the land & their communities – we give thanks.... For those who have come to these shores from many countries & traditions, whose diversity teaches us more about you – we give thanks... For the beauty of courage in disabled people who defy the odds; in those who rise above neglect & abuse, to make their contribution; in elderly people who bear their difficulties without complaint – we give thanks. ... For every faithful person who has used the gifts you gave to serve in quiet & humble places – we give thanks.... For the beauty of your grace: for your true nature shown to us in Jesus, who lived as our teacher, friend, healer, lover, & Saviour – we give thanks.

God of mercy, in you there are no shadows, no imperfections. We wish we could say the same about ourselves, but it isn't so. Despite your faithfulness, your loving care, your countless gracious gifts, we have fallen short. We confess that we hide aspects of ourselves that need to be brought into the light, to be named before you.....

We confess the numerous regrets in our hearts: opportunities wasted, hurts inflicted. And sometimes these regrets turn into self-pity, rather than repentance.... So we come again in simple trust to you. Thankyou that you are not a harsh God who invites us into fear, but a loving parent who believes our prayers. Help us to remember that in you we are offered a new beginning, a new day. Lead us forward, & help us to risk ourselves for your sake.

In the name of your Son our Saviour we pray. Amen.

ASSURANCE : Hear the good news : we are invited to leave our burdens here, for in Christ *we are forgiven*. **Thanks be to God.**

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Genesis 21 : 8 - 21; Matthew 10 : 26 - 31.*

MESSAGE : In my extended family this week, 2 baby boys have made their entrance into the world. Their parents' circumstances are quite different; but the excited anticipation & welcome is the same. Parents-to-be these days receive so much information, from scans, tests & measurements! And *fathers* are closely involved in the process...

That's all a far cry from what we read about in today's story from *Gen. 21*; so it's hard for us to put ourselves in the situation of the key players - Abraham, Sarah & Hagar. Their lives became complicated when God promised Abraham, in his old age, that he'd become the father of a great nation. Since they heard this, Sarah's seen *years* pass by; her chance at motherhood is disappearing fast.

So it's not surprising that she turns to a common solution for her time... Sarah gives her Egyptian slave girl Hagar to Abraham as his partner. Sarah *owns* Hagar; family tradition says any child born to Hagar will become Sarah's adopted child.

Soon Hagar is pregnant, & she taunts Sarah. When the son Ishmael is born, the family situation festers...

It's some years before the promise of a son to Abraham & Sarah is fulfilled. Probably when Isaac finally arrives, Ishmael would be a teenager. At the celebration when Isaac is weaned & Sarah sees the 2 boys playing together, reality hits her - as Abraham's older son, Ishmael stands to inherit the majority of Abraham's wealth.

Sarah's response is to tell Abraham. *[Gen. 21 : 10] "Cast out this slave woman [no name] with her son [no name]; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with MY SON Isaac."* Hagar & Ishmael receive no dignity as persons.

Abraham is very distressed: he loves both his sons. Sarah's earlier 'solution' to her childless-ness has come badly unstuck for all concerned.

Some scholars call this one of the O.T. [Hebrew Bible]'s 'texts of terror.' There are terrifying stories for women & children who are acutely vulnerable in this patriarchal society. It's hard for us to listen to them.

Abraham does as Sarah tells him, sending Hagar & Ishmael out into the desert with some food & water. It's Hagar's second experience in the desert – she ran away when pregnant, after Sarah treated her badly. An angel appeared to her then & told her to return to her mistress; & that the son she would bear was to be named *Ishmael*, which means *'God hears.'*

The 2 competing oral sources being woven together in this story 'clash' with each other when one source describes Ishmael as a teenager at Isaac's celebration; now the other source describes him as a child being carried by his mother; then placed under a bush to die when their water supply runs out.

Hagar can't bear to watch her son die of thirst. As she weeps, we read [v.17] *"God heard the voice of the boy."* Remember, the boy's name means: *'God hears'!!* God may despair at our human choices. But God always sees & hears every child, every person, who is outcast or abandoned; because every human life has dignity & value. The angel says, as angels often do: *"Do not be afraid."* Hagar is shown a well of water nearby, which saves their lives. And God promises ongoing care for them both. Ishmael will become father of the Ishmaelite nation. [NB. Muslims claim Ishmael as their ancestor; so Jews, Christians & Muslims are all children of Abraham.]

"God heard the voice of the boy." Doesn't that remind us of our gospel reading? [Mt. 10 : 29 –31] *"Are not 2 sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head are all counted. So do not be afraid [there it is again]; you are of more value than many sparrows."* God sees, knows & cares for people & even animals that are designated insignificant!!

... In recent days we've seen horrific examples of ppl being dismissed as insignificant; not afforded even basic human dignity. It happens not just in the U.S., but here in Aust. We've been reminded of the worrying number of aboriginal deaths in custody, with no charges laid against those who contributed to those deaths. The rate of imprisonment of aboriginal people remains scandalously high.

As Christians, how are we responding? Some have joined the protests; others work locally, contributing to 'Closing the Gap' in education and health.

Each of us can read the 'Statement from the Heart' shared with the nation 2 & ½ years ago but dismissed by politicians without proper consideration. Until we acknowledge the mis-treatment of aboriginal people, & listen to their desire to be really heard & acknowledged, healing of our nation will not occur.

The God we know in Christ calls us to walk together, to value each person as made in God's image, and to treat everyone with equal justice.

HYMN : "There's a wideness in God's mercy." TiS. 136

*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea,
and forgiveness in his justice sealed for us on Calvary.*

*For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind*

OFFERING and DEDICATION : Gracious God, we bring these gifts realising that you know each of us, & where we are on our journey with you. Accept the gifts & the love we offer, thru' Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAYERS for OTHERS : *[based on Bruce Prewer's prayer...]*

God of love, you continue to call us into community. Enable us to accept one another in the love that reflects the great love at the heart of your being. Please bless us with the gifts of your Spirit.

We pray that our hearts & minds may be tuned to the needs of others. May our small but sincere concern unite with your immense love, & bring blessing to those for whom we pray...

Breathe life into your church, that we may desire to do your will, & share with others the peace that we find in you. We thank you for those who came before us, who had a vision for the Uniting Church in Aust. Bless the congregations, presbyteries, synods & assembly of the U.C.; may all the councils and agencies of the Church fulfil the ministries you give them. You are our God: may we live as your people.

We pray for peace across the world. .. in all places where violence & terror disrupt ordinary lives. We remember asylum seekers, & all those who are turned away. For the ongoing process of reconciliation, in our land & other lands, we pray. May those with responsibility for governing desire peace with justice; & work towards this end.

God of compassion, we bring before you the sick, the grieving, those who lack hope, the homeless, & all who are experiencing oppression... be their true helper, we ask. We thank you for your readiness to be with us; for you are our way, our truth, our life. In trust we offer our prayers, asking that we may join with you in their fulfilment.

Thru' Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be yr name.

.....For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

BLESSING :

Sisters & brothers, remember this: goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.

The blessing of the Trinity of Love be upon you: may God take your hand as you go, Christ be your constant companion, & the Spirit guide you on the Way. Amen.