

SUNDAY 23rd August, 2020. Pentecost 12.

CALL to WORSHIP :

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!
For from him and through him and to him are all things.....
Holy Creator God, we come to 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 and waterways; and pay our respects to their elders – past, present & emerging.

HYMN : TIS. 105 *Let all the world in every corner sing: 'My God and King!'
The heavens are not too high, his praise may thither fly;
the earth is not too low, his praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing: 'My God and King!'*

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION :

Great God, you are far beyond our imagining. We worship you in awe and wonder. Since before time began, you are. Your Spirit hovered over the waters of creation, and brought forth life. In Jesus Christ you took on our humanity and lived among us.
And you have promised to be with us to the end of time.

We thank you for all we can see and hear and smell and touch, that teaches us about who you are. Thank you for the rich and diverse world of nature around us. And thank you also for the richness and diversity of different people and their cultures, diversity which is your plan. In the wonder of life that you are always creating, we catch a glimpse of all that is holy and true and good.

We bring you our praise and thanks, because you graciously continue to reveal yourself to us. You want us to know you and love you, not just to worship you from afar.
You want us to know that even though you are beyond us, the evidence of your creative power is all around us. And amazingly, your life also grows within us.

Loving God, sometimes we have closed our eyes to the possibilities for transformation in our community, our nation, or the world. Forgive us, and restore our sight we ask.

Sometimes we've closed our hearts to the opportunities for renewal within ourselves or within our church. Forgive us, and reshape our hearts we ask.
Sometimes we've held back our gifts, or resisted the gifts that others bring. Forgive us, and grant us courage and grace.

Help us to live as your followers we pray, in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

ASSURANCE : As we make our confession to God, we are forgiven, and God continues the work of transformation in us. Hear Christ's word of grace to each of us: "Your sins are forgiven."

Thanks be to God.

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Matthew 16 : 13 – 20; Exodus 1 : 8 – 2 : 10.*

MESSAGE :

Picture the scene– the descendants of Jacob had fled famine at home & made a prosperous life on Egypt’s Nile delta. But many years have passed & the new pharaoh doesn’t know their story. As their numbers increase, he sees them as foreigners, a threat. The pharaoh puts them to hard labour, in the hope of diminishing the population. When that doesn’t work he embarks on a new plan – enlisting their midwives to kill any male Hebrew baby.

Let’s face it, the Hebrew midwives & pharaoh are at opposite ends of the power spectrum. But Shiphrah & Puah are not deterred, because they fear God rather than the pharaoh. They refuse to carry out his orders; & even come up with a novel excuse when summoned to account for their actions! Next, the pharaoh resorts to enlisting the whole Egyptian population in ethnic cleansing: they are to drown all male Hebrew babies in the Nile River. What fear must have spread among the Hebrew people!

The biblical writers have set the scene for the birth of one whom God will choose to lead his people out of their slavery. How could he survive these circumstances?

In a priestly family, a male baby is born, his life spared by the Hebrew midwives. His mother Jochebed hides him for 3 months when she sees he is a ‘fine’ or ‘good’ baby. It’s the same word as the one used in the refrain from the 1st creation story : *‘God saw that it was good.’* It’s a clue that God is about to do something creative here too.

Jochebed, hoping to prolong Moses’ life, then puts him in a reed basket on the River Nile, watched over by big sister Miriam. Even if she did choose a place near the palace, imagine Jochebed’s heart in her mouth as her baby floated away on the river.....

Now more women come to the baby’s aid – while the princess is bathing she sees the baby’s basket & takes pity on him. Her attendants bring him, & she realises that he’s a Hebrew child. She chooses to preserve his life in direct opposition to her father’s command! And Miriam plays her part, offering to find a nurse & enlisting the baby’s mother. What joyful relief for Jochebed!

In retrospect, God’s hand is evident in this chain of events that preserve Moses’ life. And growing up in pharaoh’s court will help prepare him for his future calling.

Given that this story comes to us from a patriarchal society, it’s remarkable in its portrayal of the agency of the women who make up this ‘chain of resistance’ Shiphrah & Puah; Jochebed & Miriam; & the princess. They weren’t planning a revolution; but each one chose to do the next right thing, to be faithful in the moment. They refused to divide people into ‘us & them’ as the pharaoh wanted. Most likely they didn’t live to see the Hebrew people gain their freedom, but they had each played a critical part.....

Today we find ourselves in a situation we couldn't have imagined. From our lives of relative security, & our confidence in medical know-how, a pandemic has caught us unawares. It not only threatens our basic survival, but changes the world we were familiar with.

If we're not careful the fear around us becomes contagious, especially when we can't meet to encourage one another.

The women in Moses' story also lived in a time of fear. They couldn't foresee the future, but they made faithful, life-giving choices in their current circumstances. Can we learn from their focus, & how God might call us to make each daily choice? Can we too be willing to take risks, because we live in the present in the light of God's future?

The current lock-down gives us more time - to nourish our spiritual life; to immerse ourselves afresh in Scripture; to learn to wait on God in our prayer life. And to take more note of God's work of renewal in the world of nature, & give thanks for this.

Like the Hebrew women in Moses' story, we Christians have a different world-view from our neighbours. Our faith gives us a long-term view, finding defiant hope in the 'now' because we trust that God has plans for our future.

Just as God's sovereignty worked through the compassion & care of ordinary women back in Egypt, so God's sovereign plan for our time & place can work through us. As the people of God, we are God's sign of hope for the world's future! Let's bless those around us by taking up the challenge to live in the light, to act with compassion & care, & help bring God's future into the present. Amen.

HYMN : TIS. 609 *May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling all I do and say.*

*May the peace of God my Father rule my life in everything,
that I may be calm to comfort sick and sorrowing.*

OFFERING and DEDICATION : Gracious God, from you comes all that we have, and all that we are. We bring our gifts as a sign of our commitment to live as your people and be a blessing in our world. Amen.

PRAYERS for OTHERS : Wise and compassionate God, thank you that you invite us to bring to you the needs on our hearts; and that you hear & respond. Thank you for the places where we have seen your love at work, transforming lives and bringing good out of difficult situations.

We pray for the leaders of our world, and our nation. More and more we realise that we are part of a global community; that our actions have far-reaching effects on those who share our planet home, now and in the future. We ask wisdom and clarity of thought for our leaders, in the responsibilities we have given them and the difficult choices they face. Please strengthen them to act with justice, generosity and compassion.

We pray for the vulnerable people of our world.

May those whose lives have been turned upside-down in recent disasters, be given courage to face the huge task of picking up the pieces of their lives. We pray for the suffering people of Beirut; and give thanks that nearby countries have responded quickly, helping with the urgent needs.

May those who long for justice, encounter the faithfulness and action of your people.

We think of thousands of people grieving the deaths of loved ones through Covid-19, unable to be beside them in their final hours. May they know the deep solace that your presence brings in this difficult experience. Please give strength to all front-line workers in this pandemic, & comfort to their families.

We bring before you the faith leaders of our nation & ask you to grant them the gift of wise leadership in these challenging times.

In our presbytery, we remember the congregations of Yarrawonga & Bundalong.

O God, you entrust your life to *us* in many ways. May we always trust you, and follow in the way of your Son, who came not to be served but to serve. May our lives reach out in love to the least and the last, as Jesus did.

Now we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples..

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be yr name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as 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 forever. Amen.

WORD of MISSION and BLESSING :

I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, set aside and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may test and discern what is the will of God.

And may the love of God enfold you, the grace of Christ Jesus enable you, and the friendship of the Spirit accompany you, now and forever. Amen.