

SUNDAY 27th September, 2020. Pentecost 17.

CALL to WORSHIP : *from Psalm 78.*

My people, listen to my teaching, pay attention to what I say.
I will speak to you in poetry, unfold the mysteries of the past.
What we have heard and know, what our ancestors have told us,
 we shall not conceal from their descendants,
 but will tell to a generation still to come:
the praises of our God, his power, the wonderful deeds he has done. 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. 52 *Let us sing to the God of salvation, let us sing to the Lord our rock!
Let us come to his house with thanksgiving, let us come before the Lord and sing!*

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION :

Holy and wonderful God, we come to celebrate that you are present with us, now and always.
We praise and thank you for who you are, for your mercy is never to be doubted.
We bring our lives to you; all the joys and difficulties of recent days.
We long for you, and need to feel you close as we face each challenge. For your gifts of grace and patience are beyond words.....

You have blessed us, calling us your children, and inviting us to share the ministry of your Son.
He is your Word to us; our Saviour; and our Guide thru' life.
You have blessed us with the commitment and faith of those who have set us an example in the past; and those who worship with us now. Thank you for those who share the journey, encouraging us along the way.
You have blessed us with friends and neighbours who have kept in touch during these times of isolation. And blessed us with your beauty in the natural world, as Spring erupts around us, refreshing our souls.

We come in worship to praise you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity of love....

God of grace, sometimes we struggle with change, feeling insecure and wondering whether there are resources to see us through.
Sometimes we haven't claimed the gifts you offer us – gifts in ourselves, or in our neighbours.
Sometimes we haven't recognised you, beyond our circle of friends or preferences.
Sometimes we have forgotten that we are your children, and you love us. That this is your world, and you love all you have made. You provide its resources for everyone.

Have mercy on us. Set us free to hear your word of love; and help us to grow daily in your likeness. In Christ's name, this is our prayer. Amen.

ASSURANCE : As we make our confession to God, we are forgiven, and offered a new beginning. Hear Christ's word of grace to each of us: "Your sins are forgiven." **Thanks be to God.**

WITH the CHILDREN : *'The friend of little children'* from the Jesus Storybook Bible.

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Matthew 21 : 23 - 32; Exodus 17 : 1 - 7.*

MESSAGE :

Because we know that the Hebrew peoples' journey from slavery in Egypt ends in freedom in the land of Promise, it's difficult to imagine ourselves in their shoes along the way. How would it feel, travelling away from everything familiar to an unknown destination? It must have been frightening to be so vulnerable – did Moses know enough for them to depend on? How would they stay safe in uncharted territory? How could food and water be found in a desert?

Their former life was at least predictable, even though they were slaves. In retrospect it seemed attractive ... *'The good old days.'* Now as they complain to Moses, we glimpse their deepest fear [*Ex. 17:7*]: *'Is the Lord among us or not??'* Have they been abandoned in this strange place?

It seems to me something of our life in 2020 is reflected here. And because the Bible is God's living Word, there is truth and encouragement for us today.

Our life has changed in ways outside our control. In our western society, we like to think we're pretty much in charge of our situation, but the pandemic has exposed that as a falsehood. The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of *'Humans' collective amnesia about our createdness. We think we're more powerful than we are.'*

There's a resource available to us in our journey that wasn't available to the wandering Hebrew tribes, in their very early experiences as God's chosen people. We have access to the Psalms, the prayerbook / songbook of our ancestors in the faith. They were written over centuries, and collated even later. The Psalms reflect years of struggle to come to terms with life's biggest challenges. There are questions; cries of lament, pain and fear. And most often, the authors conclude that God not only hears their cries, but is a *'very present help in trouble'* [*Ps. 46 : 1*]. As they faced new hardships, each generation could refer back to this record of what their ancestors learned about themselves and about God at such times.

Psalm 103 is one of my favourites, and has brought me comfort in times of isolation and challenge. *'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.'*

In 2015 when I spent 3 months in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, I witnessed the daily struggles of Palestinian people against dispossession and oppression from Israel's military occupation of their land. It was often physically and emotionally exhausting. Those verses, *'Bless the Lord, O my soul'* became all I could manage in my daily prayer. But that was enough; and I relied on others who were upholding me in prayer.

Fast forward to today, and our responsibilities as Christians as we deal with the pandemic. We wear masks, sanitise our hands, keep a physical distance, as ways of caring for others. These are really important! But the constant awareness of the pandemic can take up so much space in our minds that we forget to praise God.

Despite how we may feel, if we develop the habit of praising God we become more aware of how much there is to be thankful for! The act of praising God helps to change our perspective.

My daughter Michelle this week talked about her regular catch-ups with work colleagues on Zoom, while they're all working from home. To quote her: 'We have all this wellbeing stuff going on at work. Everyone keeps talking about gratitude, and having a gratitude journal to write in each day. I have prayer!'

What helps to remind you to bless the Lord? Maybe it's going for a walk in the sunshine, identifying all the different bird calls. Maybe it's seeing the stunning colours of blossoms & bulbs. Maybe it's baking bread. Maybe it's a phone call from a family member or friend.

We can also bless the Lord because of who God is. *Psalm 103* reminds us of God's nature [*v. 8*] *'The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. [v.13 -14] 'As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear [revere] him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.'*

The One who brought us into being knows how we are made; remembers that we are dust.. made of the stuff of the earth. God understands our vulnerabilities; that some days can be a real struggle. We're creatures, after all, not the Creator.

We don't know what more we may have to endure in the future. But, neither do we know what joy and beauty we are yet to experience!

A well-known monk and scholar, Thomas Merton, said this: 'Everyone is loved by God. Some of us have the privilege of knowing we are loved by God.'

As *Psalm 103* reminds us: in life and in death, in health and in pandemic, we are the Lord's. God remembers us, God remembers this world, God loves us to the end. Thanks be to God.

OFFERING : Thank you to all who continue to contribute your offering through Direct Debit, bank transfer, or directly to our treasurer, Zane Streeter.

and DEDICATION :

O God, you are the One who invites us to share in your own life.

We bring these gifts to express our thanks for all you are to us, all you do for us. May they be used wisely, to bless those around us. Amen.

PRAYERS for OTHERS : *Today the National Council of Churches in Aust. invites national prayer regarding the pandemic...*

God of love, who took the form of a servant and lived among the poor and oppressed, we bring our prayers for your world and your church.

We pray for the peoples of the world; for those in places of oppression, war and civil unrest. For those who are exploited so that we may gain more than our share.

Gracious God, trusting in your providence & provision, we bring our prayer for an end to this world pandemic. Please strengthen those offering costly leadership and care during this crisis. We pray for all who are ill, and all who are anxious about becoming ill. We remember those who have died, and their loved ones who are full of grief. We ask for your grace to sustain us, as we do what we can in our part of the world. All this we ask as you encourage us to do, knowing that you hear & answer.

We pray for your worldwide church; and for churches in our neighbourhood. Bless and guide those who lead, and those who share your call to service.

In our Presbytery, we remember the congregations at Corryong and Walwa, along with their communities, still recovering from summer's bushfires.

Please bless our neighbours: all who are lonely or distressed, anxious or bereaved. May your healing presence sustain them.

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.

HYMN : TIS. 691 *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.*

WORD of MISSION and BLESSING :

As you leave this time of worship, be ready for our surprising God to provide your needs along the way.

And may the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer, be with you now & remain with you always. Amen.