

ORDER of SERVICE, Shepp. U.C., 29th Nov. 2020. ADVENT 1.

May the grace & peace of Jesus Christ be with you all.

CALL to WORSHIP :

We come as scattered people, tossed about like leaves in a storm.

Gather us in, O God.

We come as worried people, minds filled with headlines of disaster.

Gather us in, O God.

We come as waiting people, longing to see the face of God.

Gather us in, O God.

Joining all the cosmos, the angels of heaven and the peoples of earth, we come to worship you.

Gather us in your faithfulness, O God; and call us your people once more. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of COUNTRY : We respectfully acknowledge that we gather 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. ...

Today is the 1st day of the church year, as we begin the Season of **ADVENT**.

It's also the 11th anniversary of the day several congregations came together to form Shepparton U.C.'s one congregation.

HYMN : TIS. 272 Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free,
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION :

Holy and wonderful God, we come to celebrate that now, and always, you are present with us.....

We cannot imagine your splendour, contain your wisdom, manipulate your power, nor earn your love.

We are amazed that you have created us out of love. And that you have granted us the gift of faith, & offer your grace to constantly transform our lives.

Although we're gathered today in many places, we are worshipping you together. We offer our thanks for people who've accompanied us on our faith journey, & set us an example.

Thank you for those who had the vision of one U.C. congregation here in Shepparton. All through the challenges of recent years, your Spirit has continued to work through faithful people. May our witness to the community always bring honour to you.

In the time of anticipation that is Advent, we look for your action across the world, and here among us. Open our eyes to see, and our ears to hear, so that we may share the good news : Christ is always coming among us in new ways.

Gracious God, sometimes we do not find waiting easy.

We would like to be sure that what we do is part of your plan.

You call us only to be faithful, but we still look for success in our efforts; we prefer to see the results *now*...

And often we don't recognise the small, vulnerable beginnings of good in ourselves and other people....

There are times when we walk with our eyes on the ground, as though angel songs will never be sung....

Forgive us, O God, when we are anxious or hurried or pre-occupied. Set us free to hear your word of love, so that every day we grow more like you. In Christ's name, Amen.

ASSURANCE : Scripture assures us, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.' Through Christ, in Christ, because of Christ, our sins *are* forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

WITH the CHILDREN : lighting the **Advent Wreath** – the 1st candle for HOPE.

'Christ, be our light!' liturgy for Advent 1

Leader: We wait for the coming of Christ, the light of the world.

All: **Come, Bearer of HOPE.**

The first candle is lit :

Reader: The true light, which enlightens everyone is coming into the world.

All: **Come, Bearer of HOPE.**

Reader: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.

All: **Christ, shine in your church today.**

Sing:

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.

*Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Isaiah 64 : 1–9; Mark 13 : 24 – 37.*

MESSAGE : 'Longing for HOPE.'

This year we enter the Season of Advent with plenty of practice in *waiting, hoping* for change. For many months we've waited for news about Covid-19... for numbers to go down, for lock-down to ease, for a vaccine to become available.

It's been an active waiting, as we've done our part to protect ourselves from infection, care for neighbours, & keep in touch with friends in new ways.

Even during Victoria's worst times, we're aware of our relatively privileged position. As we learn of the world-wide suffering, we've glimpsed the lives of people who live in over-crowded housing, & have few if any medical resources.

During Advent our thoughts turn towards Bethlehem, anticipating Jesus' birth. It comes as a shock to realise that Palestinian Christians are among those struggling most in the pandemic. Many Christians across the world, including those who've visited the Holy Land, have no idea of what's happening at the moment in the cradle of Christianity

What do we know of the lives of the 'living stones' whose families trace their faith back to the Day of Pentecost? A Presbyterian minister at a meeting in Jerusalem said recently, 'Tell Christians we're here!'

Significantly, in 1977 the U.N. declared today, **Nov. 29th**, as the '*International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.*' [Could this be an admission that despite many resolutions that condemn the Israeli government's abuse of Palestinians' human rights, no action is taken against Israel?]

The scriptures for Advent 1 challenge us to remain alert & vigilant in every circumstance. Our *hope* for change is grounded in who God is, & what God is constantly doing.

The prophet *Isaiah [64 : 3]* reminded the people that God '*did awesome deeds THAT WE DID NOT EXPECT.*' While the people were still enslaved in Egypt, God was working towards their rescue.

Where else might this be happening? I'd like to share some of the current concerns of Palestinian people, who spend their lives waiting for positive change & praying for

God's intervention. The words from today's *Psalm 80 : 3* could well be theirs: *'Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.'*

Palestinian people in what remains of their land [West Bank, East Jerusalem & Gaza] have lived under Israeli military occupation for 50+ years. Their Christian leaders issued a 'Cry for Hope' this year. They asked fellow-members of the Body of Christ to stand with them in their non-violent action for justice & peace in the Holy Land. Grounded in the 'logic of love', they advocate for the liberation of both the oppressed & the oppressor.

Life under Occupation has been especially difficult during Oct.–Nov. this year, the time of the annual olive harvest. *'Olive oil is like water for Palestinians – we can't live without it'* said Abu Issa, a Palestinian farmer, recently. One of his olive trees is thought to be 1000 years old! Palestinians are deeply connected to the history of their olive trees & the land, & rely on olives for their income. But this year the pandemic has meant a travel ban on visitors to Israel–Palestine. So there are no internationals to provide the usual protective presence & assist in the olive harvest.

Many olive groves are near illegal Israeli settlements. The settlers harass & attack Palestinian farmers at harvest time. Israeli soldiers, on duty to protect settlers, stand by while these attacks occur!

In just 2 weeks in October, there were 19 serious incidents. Large amounts of harvested olives were stolen; 23 Palestinian farmers were attacked & injured; & more than 1000 olive trees were burnt or damaged.

But one bright note comes from an Israeli organisation called *'Rabbis for Human Rights'*. I met several of them when I was in the West Bank in 2015, as they & the Ecumenical Accompaniers were called to witness the same incidents. 2020 was the 18th time *R.H.R.* has assisted at the annual olive harvest. They took 200 volunteers, many of them young people from synagogues and Christian churches in Israel, to assist Palestinian farmers with the harvest. One said, 'This gives me a glimpse into the future – where Israelis & Palestinians could share the land in peace, with equal rights.' A sign of hope for the future!

A Catholic bishop in Jerusalem reminds us that we have the power of prayer available to us. 'We need to make the Lord tired from our prayers' he said recently. Have you ever prayed that much? Not only are we called to pray, but to be

informed; to advocate wherever we can for peace with justice for all people, including in Israel–Palestine.

As Jesus reminded his followers [*Mark 13*], when times are difficult, our task is not to focus on the timing of his return. Our task is to keep alert to the ways in which God is bringing God's kingdom on earth now; & to discern how we may participate in that work.

Prayer: Creator God, you are always transforming our world & her people. You do this in partnership with humanity, despite our failings.

May we wait on you with openness & trust, all the while nurturing your life within us. Keep us alert to your activity so that we work beside you, to challenge oppression & injustice wherever it occurs today. Amen.

NOTICES ; JOYS and CONCERNS. OFFERING & DEDICATION.

PRAYERS for OTHERS : conclude with *The Lord's Prayer*.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your 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, & deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

HYMN : from TiS. 282 The voice of God goes out to all the world...

' With power, with justice, he will walk his way.'

WORD of MISSION and BLESSING :

You are God's 'tomorrow people'. Go and live out your HOPE in daily life with grace and courage.

As you go, may the Lord bless you & keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.

BLESSING SONG: TiS 781 Father, bless us as we go,

Jesus, walk beside us, Holy Spirit guide us.