

ORDER of SERVICE, Shepp., 24th Jan. 2021. Epiphany 3 /'Day of Acknowledgement'

INTROIT : TIS. 449, vs. 1 & 4. *'Stand up & bless the Lord.'*

CALL to WORSHIP : Our land is alive with the glory of God;
desert sands hum and gum trees dance.

Brown grasses sing and mountains breathe their stillness.

All created things add their rhythms of delight.

Let our voices mingle with those of the earth;

may our hearts join the beat of her joy,

for our triune God is with us; the Source of all being surrounds and upholds us.

Christ Jesus walks beside and before us.

The Spirit moves within and between us.

Blessed be God, our wonder and delight. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of COUNTRY : We respectfully acknowledge the Bangerang people of the Yorta Yorta Nations, the sovereign First Peoples of this place.

We honour their elders, past, present and emerging, together with all the descendants of these Nations, for their care for these lands and waters since creation.

HYMN : TIS. 188 *'Where wide sky rolls down.'*

PRAYERS of THANKSGIVING and CONFESSION :

Loving Creator God, you have loved this ancient land since it was formed.

We offer you our thanks & praise, and our pleas for our country...

We praise you for the diversity of this land and her peoples. For its mountains, valleys and plains, forests and seas. For the First Nations people who know and love the land with a deep sensitivity; who had already encountered you as you nurtured and sustained them through their law, custom and ceremony.

We acknowledge the courage and sacrifice of early European settlers; and give thanks for the diverse races of ppl who now call Australia home. How blessed we are!!

Thank you that, like those who've lived here over thousands of years, we too can renew our spirits as we walk among towering forests; sit by a river and listen to birdsong; stand on a headland and listen to waves crashing on the rocks; or venture out to marvel at the starry night sky. ...

We also bring our confession for the damage we have done to this country and her people. We recognise the injustice and abuse which marked the treatment of the First Peoples. Their

land was taken, their language, law and culture were suppressed. They were treated as inferior; we refused to accept how deeply they understood this land and her needs. Instead, we have often imposed material values, exploiting the earth for her riches. We have struggled to welcome newer immigrants; we have demonised those seeking asylum in this land, falsely claiming it as ours.

Gracious God, have mercy on us. Forgive the failures of the past and the present; and give us the grace to start afresh. By your Spirit, lead our nation towards the higher destiny which you desire for us. In Christ's name, this is our prayer. Amen.

ASSURANCE : Hear the good news: When we are disheartened, God is compassionate. When we are wounded, God brings healing. When we confess our sin, God forgives. In Christ, through Christ, because of Christ, our sins *are* forgiven. **Thanks be to God.**

EARLY WORD : 'Celebrating our nation.'

HYMN : TIS 253 '*O Lord Jesus, Marrkapmirr.*' *Sung twice.*

SCRIPTURE READINGS : *Jonah 3 : 1 - 4 : 4 ; Mark 1 : 14-20.*

MESSAGE : '*Agents of grace.*'

The story of *Jonah* sure is a rollicking tale – it's only 4 short chapters , and I'd recommend you read it all. Scholars tell us that it takes the name of a prophet in the northern kingdom, Jonah, but is written about 300 years after he lived. So it's not a historical story; but a story to teach a moral, and a very difficult one at that!

When God calls Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, Jonah heads in the opposite direction. That's not surprising – Ninevites are feared and hated. Their warriors brutally behead their opponents, then place the heads on spikes and march to the next city. Is it fear that prompts Jonah's attempt to escape? He catches a ship to Tarshish, as far away as possible; but a violent storm comes up. The sailors are convinced the gods are angry. Jonah admits he's escaping from God, and they reluctantly throw him overboard. The storm subsides; a big fish swallows Jonah.

After the fish vomits him up on dry land, Jonah reluctantly sets off for Nineveh. There he calls the people to repentance: with an 8-word sermon!

'40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'

Astonishingly, the king rouses his people to repent, turn their lives around – did you notice the story has even the animals joining in??!!

Now we see why Jonah didn't want the job: he hates evil, thinks evil-doers should be destroyed. What's more, the Ninevites are not only evil but they're foreigners for goodness' sake. Jonah is furious!

'I knew it,' Jonah is saying. 'I knew they might repent! And you are gracious and merciful, full of love. At the drop of a hat you're ready to change your plans – instead of punishing, you forgive!!'

And don't we sometimes respond the same way? 'He got what he deserved' we say. 'She had it coming.' We prefer to see wrong-doers punished instead of reformed. Do we claim God's grace and forgiveness for ourselves, but have great difficulty allowing that it's available for those who hurt us and our community? – – –

Jonah is an anti-hero, a very reluctant prophet. Sometimes we think of Biblical prophets as foretelling the future. But more importantly, their task was to call God's people back to godly living; back to being a 'light to the nations' as the prophet *Isaiah* expressed it.

In the Goulburn Valley during the 20th century, we had our own version of a prophet. After decades of dispossession, frontier wars and introduced diseases, *William Cooper*, a Yorta Yorta man, established the Australian Aborigines League in 1932. In 1937 he circulated a petition across Australia. calling on the government to improve the living conditions for Aboriginal people and to enact legislation to guarantee their representation to parliament. With the petition, Cooper even included a letter to King George VIth asking him to intervene for the preservation of the aboriginal race. [The letter went undelivered.]

On Jan. 26th 1938, Cooper and his colleagues marched together through Sydney streets after the celebration of 150 years of European settlement. At the meeting which followed, the first national meeting of aboriginal people, they expressed the hope that their actions would 'direct the attention of the people of Australia to the desire of the aborigines for full citizenship.' Pearl Gibbs, addressing the crowd, said, 'It's not ridiculous or silly for aborigines to ask for citizenship *in a country that is their own.*'

Another speaker said, 'You are the new Australians. We are the old Australians. We have in our arteries the blood of the Original Australians who've lived in this land for many thousands of years.' This meeting became the turning point in the struggle for the rights of First Nations people.

We are privileged to share the story of *William Cooper*, a man of faith, and remember him as a local. He was willing to be a prophet for his time, unafraid to call on those whom some saw as enemies to recognise the truth of our shared history; to be willing to journey together towards justice, healing and reconciliation. *Pastor Doug Nicholls* was also very much a part of this movement. Have you seen their portraits in the lane beside the G.V. Water office, off Fryers St? Or visited the statue to *William Cooper* in the Queen's gardens? These prophets of their time continue to challenge our attitudes to our First Nations people – indeed, to all those from the various nations who share this land with us.

The Uniting Church has responded to the call from First Nations leaders, with an Apology to the Stolen Generations in 1997. We recognise that past church organisations were involved in institutionalising children after they were taken from their parents. For years we had not realised what damage was done by removing children from their families, and from the land and customs that sustained them.

In 2009 the U.C. revised her Constitution by adding a Preamble, recognising the First Peoples and their relationship with God before Europeans came to this land.

In our 'Uniting in Worship' books there's a Covenant Service. The introduction includes these words:

'Christ has many services to be done: Some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both. ... Yet the power to do all these [services] is given us in Christ, who strengthens us.'

Prayer: Loving God, help us to be more like **William Cooper** than **Jonah** – to realise that as recipients of God's grace we must also be its agents. That what has been done for us must also be done by us. Strengthen us for this task, we pray. Amen.

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

NOTICES ; JOYS and CONCERNS

OFFERING and DEDICATION

Generous God, your gifts of creation
enrich and bless us every day.

We offer you the gifts you enable us to bring,
our money, our graces, our lives,
asking that they be used
to enrich the lives of others
making one great family on earth,
living together in love, joy and peace.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

PRAYERS for OTHERS

Holy God, you created all people in your image.

We thank you for the astonishing variety
of races and cultures in this land and every land.

As we pray for your church, your world and this land,

we are mindful of your gracious care for us all. *The prayer continues*

THE LORD'S PRAYER *We will sing the Aboriginal version*

HYMN : All Together OK 313 *'Christ, be our light.'* Verses 1, 2 & 5.

WORD of MISSION and BLESSING :

People of God, go out from here to act justly; to confront and challenge injustice wherever you see it.

Rejoice in the richness of our diverse cultures, and learn from them. Celebrate the unity we share in Jesus Christ, and work for God's promised reconciliation of the whole creation.

May God bless us as we leave this place, give us generous spirits and kind hearts to walk beside all people as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

BLESSING SONG : TIS. 781 *'Father, bless us as we go.'*