

INTROIT: TiS 772 Worship, honour, glory, blessing

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather in this sacred space,
to offer our thanks to God with all our hearts.
We gather with this community of faith,
to follow Jesus, who longs to lead us into life.
We gather in these moments,
to learn all we can of grace from the Holy Spirit.

OPENING PRAYER

God who is mystery, and yet made known,
we come to listen for your voice to each one of us,
that we may deepen our faith in you.
Shape our hearts and our loving,
our minds and our living, we pray. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I wish to acknowledge the custodians of this land, the Bangerang people of the Yorta Yorta nation and their Elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

WELCOME

HYMN Be still, for the presence of the Lord

LITANY OF PRAISE (based on Psalm 111)

Praise the Lord!
I thank the Lord with all my heart
in the company of those who do right,
in the congregation of God's people.

How amazing are the works of our God!
They are treasured by all who love and serve him.

Everything he does reveals his glory and majesty.
His righteousness never fails.

Who can forget the wonders he performs?
How gracious and merciful is our God!

All he does is just and good,
and his commandments are trustworthy.
They are forever true,
to be obeyed faithfully and with integrity.

He has paid a full ransom for his people,
guaranteeing his covenant with them forever.
What a holy, awe-inspiring name he has!

Reverence for the Lord is where true wisdom begins,
and the rewards of wisdom come to all who obey him.

Praise God's name forever!

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God who seeks goodness and wholeness,
you have imbued all of creation with love,
and shown us paths of love.

Love builds up, creating communities of wellbeing.
Forgive us when we do not walk the ways of love.

When harsh words are spoken, or patience runs short,
when hurtful paths are followed,
forgive us, and show us a better way.

Turn us to you that we may restore places of brokenness.

Help us to build others up in love, to weave together communities of wellbeing,
to remove stumbling blocks that all may encounter you.

Come, Jesus Christ, source of truth,
show us the ways of truth.

Where fake news corrupts and trust is eroded, call us to account to reshape the
world around us with honesty and justice.

Plant discerning spirits within us that we may seek your truth and listen for your
teaching for us this day. Grant us wisdom.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God does not abandon us.

Jesus, teacher and guide, offers wisdom and truth.

We are forgiven, built up in love.

The ways of truth and love are open for all to follow.

Thanks be to God.

AN EARLY WORD

HYMN TiS 236 Jesus hands were kind hands

BIBLE READINGS: Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Mark 1:21-28

REFLECTION

He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

What do we mean by the word “authority”? We have heard this word used quite often over the past 12 months, and we’ve seen authority used for both good and less reputable ends.

According to the Oxford dictionary, authority means:

The power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.

The right to act in a specified way, delegated from one person or organization to another.

So - during the Covid19 pandemic we’ve seen governments enforce the wearing of masks, and police given orders to close borders and turn people back. These are examples of authority being used for the common good. We’ve also seen authority used to call a pandemic a hoax, and incite followers to violence.

Let’s turn our minds back to the setting of today’s gospel story, and think for a moment about the people who were trying to exercise their authority in Jesus’ day.

First there were the Romans, who were the occupying power at the time, and who liked nothing better than to show off that power. The governor and his minions pushed their weight around, with

even the lowest soldier acting high and mighty, ordering people around, shoving people out of their way, scaring the children by pulling out their weapons and glaring at them. Then there was the leadership of King Herod and his family. Herod was so insecure with his power and so sensitive to the fact that he was really just on the throne because of the Romans, that he had to push his authority to the limits.

And what about the religious leaders, who could at times be as bad or worse than the political and military leaders. They were so wise, so righteous, so holier-than-thou. They went around with their eyes and ears wide open for any infraction of one of the 600 plus rules they had memorised, so they could wield their authority to bring the appropriate punishment for the lawbreaker. All the while, people were laughing at them behind their backs, because everyone knew they crossed the line more often than anyone else.

It is in this context that we meet Jesus, who was so different. Jesus taught not with loud words but with gentle teaching, sometimes in such a soft whisper that you had to strain to hear him. It wasn't with a clenched fist that Jesus made an impact on people, it was his touch of healing, his hand upon the children blessing them, his reaching out to lift up someone who had fallen. He didn't surround himself with an army of thugs, but with everyday people. People who knew what it was like to work hard, long hours; people who knew what it was like to be forgotten and left by the side of the road; people who had been bossed around, when all they wanted was someone to appreciate them. There's authority that can break a person, and there is authority which can make a person whole, and there was no doubting which kind of authority Jesus exercised.

The very first story about Jesus' ministry which Mark records in his gospel, after Jesus has called the four fishermen, is this story about freeing a man from an unclean spirit. We don't know the exact nature of this man's illness, but we can easily imagine its impact and effects on the life of this man. He had most likely become a danger to himself and others, and if he hadn't been already, he was probably on the way to being socially ostracized. And we can imagine the distress of those who loved him – experiencing anguish over his plight, and fear about his future.

The first thing Jesus does is free this man from the hold of his unclean spirit and restore him to himself, his loved ones, and his community. The very first thing. Clearly it was important to Mark to show that Jesus had authority over the forces that seek to rob us of abundant life. We don't know the next part of this man's story but we can assume that he was restored with a clean bill of health to his family and his community. What we do know is that the onlookers were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching - with authority!"

What are the forces that rob people of abundant life in our own day? Addiction? Loss of gainful employment? Unsafe working conditions? Situations where power is abused or harassment and discrimination tolerated? Lack of access to housing, education, or medical treatment? Conditions devoid of the hope of a better future?

The church once had a voice that could address with authority some of these social issues, but sadly, in many instances, the community is no longer listening. That should not stop the body of Christ addressing those issues which rob people of abundant life. Indeed, it is our calling to do so. If we can recall the dictionary meaning of authority with which we began...can it be that you and I have been delegated by Jesus Christ himself to not only reflect but exercise his gentle yet powerful authority in the communities in which we live? Today we pray that with discernment and courage and compassion we may discover opportunities to assist people towards abundant life in our community and beyond. Amen

Let us pray:
Speak with authority in our lives, Christ.
Speak to us, and to what is in us,
so that we might be whole.
Speak to us, with love, with hope, and with strength,

so that we might hear you, and know, deep inside,
that we are your people, and that you are our God.

Let it be so. Amen.

HYMN Tis 235 A man there lived in Galilee

OFFERING and DEDICATION

Generous God,

you have given to us love, wisdom, understanding – intangible gifts of life.

You have given us tangible and concrete gifts – money, resources, time and skills.

We open our hands to you that we may offer such gifts to others and to the world.

Bless our lives and our offerings this day, we pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

God of life's journey, today we give thanks for our teachers.

We give thanks for teachers who shape young hearts and minds,
listen to stories and tend to scraped knees.

We give thanks for teachers who patiently encourage young people to find their gifts,
who teach kindness and life lessons, alongside mathematics and history.

We give thanks for teachers who push the boundaries of knowledge,
Guide experimentation and inspire new discoveries.

We give thanks for unexpected teachers, those who speak wisdom at kitchen tables,
show paths of right living, or speak truth in moments of uncertainty.

Jesus Christ, truth-teller and eternal teacher,
for the gifts of teaching and learning, we give thanks.

As we give thanks for teachers, we pray for places of learning.

May these be places of kindness, truth, beauty, knowledge and understanding.

May breakthroughs progress society to be a place of wellbeing for all.

We pray for places of healing. Loving God, hear the cries of people, communities
and families, where division, pain or suffering, dominates each day.

May love be made known here.

We pray for places of leadership. God of light and life, where leaders are given
authority and responsibility, may they act with justice. Reveal wisdom and speak
truth into places of authority. Guide leaders to see the needs of the oppressed, that
they may act with empathy and understanding.

Holy God, gather our prayers this day, spoken and unspoken. Hold them in
tenderness and guide our living, that our paths may be shaped in love. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN Tis 210 O for a thousand tongues to sing

BLESSING

Let us go now into the world, not with power tightly grasped,
but with the humility to know we do not have all the answers.

Let us go now into the lives of others, not to direct,
but to share in their brokenness as well as their hopes.

Let us go now into our communities, not with loud voices,
but with gentle whispers of grace and mercy.

HYMN Tis 782 Go now in peace