

**ORDER OF SERVICE FOR SHEPPARTON UNITING CHURCH AND SHEPPARTON RURAL
CONGREGATIONS – 3RD January 2021**

Introit: 693 (TiS) 'Come as you are'

Prayer:

Voice of love and centre of our lives be known to us this day in spirit and in truth. Touch the depths of our waiting souls with your life that we may become children of God.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

Welcome/Introduction:

Peace be with you.

And also with you.

Acknowledgement:

I pay my respect to the traditional custodians of the land in which I live, work and worship. To the elders and members of the Yorta, Yorta nations past, present and emerging.

Call to Worship:

The child of God is earthed in human life, making real within the world the heartbeat of God, with its endless gifts of grace.

Immanuel, God with us!

The Word is found among us, brave truth in liberating kindness deeper and wider, yet nearer than we have ever known.

Jesus Christ, God with us all. We will sing praises to you this day. We will lift up our souls in faith.

Hymn: 303 (TiS) 'Hark! The herald angels sing'

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession:

The angel songs, singing of the coming of the Christ, still echo in our hearts, O God. They ring in joy down the years and into our time. They sound in the winds of heaven and travel like melodies of life into the centre of our questions and doubts.

The light of Christ's life shine into the shadows of our loneliness, opening warm touches of love around us, and making clear the way for new possibilities.

O God, even as our longing hearts reach out towards you, we know that we fall far short of our own hope and your holy hope for us. You have trusted us with the wonder of your life among us and we betray that trust in ways which are too many to name.

We grieve the times when we have not been as gracious to others in the face of your understanding of our stumbling journeys. We regret the moments when we have chosen lesser paths while we have seen the vision of your way before us.

We are sorry when we, as your church, have failed to bring the witness of your love for us and for all people to a world which waits and struggles and loses hope.

Be gracious to us, O God.

Remind us of our calling, Jesus Christ, and forgive us in our human frailty, we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance:

The word to us in Jesus Christ is never less than grace. This is the miracle of the hope which Christ brings. We are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

Doxology: 772 (TiS) 'Worship, honour, glory, blessing'

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-14, John 1: 10-18.

Message: 'Returning home, the reality at home, and rebuilding of home'

- Jeremiah spent much of his ministry proclaiming God's judgement upon the people of God. The people that were supposed to be a light to the nations.
- But Israel was far from being a light to the nations. They have forgotten God's covenant and the Book of Jeremiah, for most parts sets out the devastation that God will serve as judgement upon God's people.
- Chapter after chapter this prophet preached a message of doom and gloom saying to the people of Israel...God is far from happy with you.
- God is saying to Israel 'You have not loved me, you have run after all these other gods, you have filled your life with other things that neither satisfies nor give life.
- Jeremiah likened the people of God to an adulterous wife, and now look at the wreckage it has wrought in your lives.
- If that had been the end of the story between God and God's people it would be a most terrible judgement that sees Jerusalem reduced to rubble, and thousands dead or taken into exile.
- But, in our reading from the Old Testament today, Jeremiah makes it clear that it is not the end. Because regardless of the unfaithfulness of the people, God loves them with an everlasting love and God has continued God's faithfulness to them. (v.3)
- Because God loves them with an everlasting love that never runs out, God will provide a future beyond the rubble of their lives.
- That future says God, "Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!"

- The exiles from Babylon will return home and the land that lies in ruin will rise again. That is a remarkable promise after many years in exile in a foreign land.
- If that is not remarkable enough, notice what God is calling them. God calls them 'Virgin Israel' which is extraordinary.
- Israel the wife who has been getting into bed with whichever god they can get into bed with is scarred and shamed but in God's eyes, you are going to be a virgin again!
- I will remove your shame, and restore your honour, and you are going to be like a bride, dressed in white coming down the aisle to her husband.
- That is the kind of returning home that God is preparing for God's people. They shall return home and find a new reality.
- That reality says Jeremiah the nation will flourish. 'Again, you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.'
- 'Again, you shall plant vineyards...and the planters shall enjoy the fruit.' They shall come and sing aloud in Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of their flock and herd.' (v. 12)
- The reality at home will be, it seems one great party in contrast to being orphaned in exile, under the rule of a foreign government.
- This new reality is spelled out in verse 6, 'For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.' And more dancing in verse 13, Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, give them gladness for sorrow.'
- Planting vines, drinking wine, singing, dancing, being radiant. Even though I am not a good dancer, my feet start tapping when I hear of such reality.
- Now, God is going to rebuild whilst all this party is going on. God is offering them a new covenant!
- Just like what God had done for them in rescuing them from Egypt and entered with them into a covenant in Sinai, God is going to lead them home from Babylon and make a new covenant with them.
- This rebuilding will be different, this covenant will be different from the old covenant.
- This time, rather than God's law being written on tablets of stone, v 33, I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts'. In other words, in the future, my people will obey me, but not out of a sense of duty, but because they want to.
- Then, 'they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.' God is bringing God's people home into a new intimacy they'd never known before.
- It's not just going to be for the educated, or for those types that read complex theological books and high-brow spiritual books; or for the uneducated who don't know any better than getting caught up in fundamentalism and emotionalism.
- 'From the least to the greatest, they'll know me', God says.
- This is some promise of a homecoming with a new reality of freedom and joy and a rebuilding based on a new covenant of peace and harmony between God and all of God's creation...

Hymn: 447 (TiS) 'Lord, your almighty word'

Notices, Joys & Concerns:

Offering:

In gratitude and hope, we bring you our gifts, O God.
Hold them in your hands that we may be wise in their use.
This we pray in faith.

Amen.

Prayers of the People:

O God, you have called your people to be a light to the nations in every age, following you out into the world in courage and claiming the ground for justice and truth.

Show us the way, Jesus Christ, and help us to hear all whose voices are silenced in despair or oppression.

As we wait on you today, we are aware of many people who need to be embraced by your hope and held fast in your love. We name them before you in silence.

Raise up among us the prophetic voices for our day and open our hearts to hear them above the sounds of those who would lead us away from your calling into the familiar and comfortable paths.

Give to us all that we need to be more faithful to you.

Jesus Christ, come and call us on to your way that we may be your people.

This we pray in your name. **Amen.**

Hymn: 305 (TiS) 'Let earth and heaven combine'

Commissioning:

Let us leave this place of word and prayer in faith, moving into the world with the vision of God's justice before us.

Blessing:

Go with the courage of God to challenge fear, with the clarity of Christ to confront confusions and the comfort of the Holy Spirit flowing over our lives. **Amen.**

Recessional hymn: 779 (TiS) 'May the feet of God walk with you'