

Shepparton Uniting Church Sunday
21st February 2021

INTROIT TiS 477 verse 1 Jesus calls us here to meet him

CALL TO WORSHIP

Welcome this day to the beginning of a journey.

Where will this journey take us?

It will take you to the Cross of Christ and beyond.

How much time do we have to get ready?

The time is now at hand for this journey.

Help us to be ready for this, O Lord. AMEN.

OPENING PRAYER

All-knowing and all-caring God,

we gather this day drained by another week.

We are like a parched desert, empty and in need of replenishment.

Visit us with your presence, saturate us with your Spirit,

and prepare us for our journey through Lent,

in the name of Christ, **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 TiS 154 Great is your faithfulness

RESPONSIVE PSALM - Psalm 25:1-10

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²**O my God, in you I trust;**

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we confess to you our reluctance to enter the wilderness places where we face our true selves. Places where we are tempted to put the world's values before your kingdom values of love, peace and justice.

God forgive us: **and increase our trust in you.** (*silence*)

When we are tempted to use the gifts you give us to benefit ourselves at the expense of serving others.

God forgive us: **and increase our trust in you.** (*silence*)

When we are tempted to take shortcuts in our faith, rather than being guided by the humility of Christ.

God forgive us: **and increase our trust in you.** (*silence*)

When we are tempted to use bribery to influence and control people.

God forgive us: **and increase our trust in you.** (*silence*)

Loving God, when we are tempted to manipulate you, to satisfy our own needs.

God forgive us: **and increase our trust in you.** (*silence*)

Compassionate God, save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. Forgive us our sins and fill us with the joy and peace of your salvation.

Strengthen us with your Spirit during this Lenten season so we can trust in you as confidently as Jesus did. **Amen.**

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." (1 Peter 3:18)

And so I declare to you: Our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

AN EARLY WORD

HYMN TiS 609 May the mind of Christ my Saviour

BIBLE READINGS:

Mark 1:9-15

1 Peter 3:18-22

REFLECTION

We have already dipped several times into the first chapter of Mark's gospel this year during the season of Epiphany. Early in January we remembered Jesus baptism, and two weeks later came the call of Jesus' first four disciples - fishermen Simon and Andrew, James and John.

What you may not have realised at the time is that the lectionary skipped over two vital verses – 12 and 13 - which have now been included in today's gospel reading. The thing that is particularly noticeable in the passage from Mark, compared with the other gospels, is the scarcity of detail. Mark describes the movement from baptism, to wilderness, to ministry in a deliberately quick paced fashion, whereas Matthew and Luke give distinct and rich descriptions of Jesus' baptism, his temptation, and the beginning of his ministry.

Here's Mark's succinct style again:

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

It's as if he's saying – I don't want to waste your time with too much story – just go and preach the good news of the kingdom of Christ.

In spite of its brevity there's a lot happening in this passage and I draw your attention to a couple of interesting points...

In the gospels of Matthew and Luke Jesus was **led** into the wilderness by the spirit. In Mark the Spirit did not *lead* Jesus into the wilderness, but *drove* him there.

And once Jesus emerges from the wilderness - almost always a place of testing in Israel's history - his public ministry is announced, coinciding with the terrible news of John the Baptist's arrest. It's in that context - emerging from a testing time in the wilderness, and hearing some terrible news - that Jesus declares that God's kingdom is near which in turn invites repentance and belief. But Jesus doesn't just say God's rule is coming, he also says "the time is fulfilled." We're not talking here about time as in seconds and minutes, but God time which cannot be contained by any timepiece. Interestingly, the only other time Jesus utters the word "fulfilled" is at Gethsemane when, after he has been betrayed and is about to be arrested, he says, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled" (14:49), even as all of his disciples then desert him in fear.

Jesus baptism and his time in the wilderness always comes at the beginning of Lent, that period leading up to Easter during which we are invited to give ourselves some space for a spiritual health check. This season is a sobering time and an opportune time to make room in our lives to reflect on the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

There is so much going on around us which distracts our gaze from God's work in our lives.. The season of Lent is a gift which makes room for us to refocus and recognize God at work. God's work and activity, Lent can remind us, is not limited to Jesus' road to Jerusalem so long ago, but can animate and illuminate our lives today.

This passage for the first Sunday of Lent is helpful because it is *realistic* – reminding us that life is filled by challenges, testing, moments of feeling overwhelmed, sobering news, and loss. Equally important, however, this passage is also important and helpful because it is *hopeful*. The Spirit present at Jesus' baptism propels him into the wilderness, but does not leave him unprepared or alone. Indeed, it is critical to note that the Spirit does not drive him forth until he has received the affirmation at his baptism that he is God's beloved Son, well pleasing to his Father, and recipient of the power of the Spirit. And he was not abandoned in his testing, but received the attentions of angels. And when he comes forth to begin his ministry at the occasion of John's arrest, he does so aware that the time - God's time – is ripe, indeed full to overflowing.

So also with us! We received in our baptism the affirmation and acceptance and promise of the company of God - God, who created the heavens and the earth, the One who causes light to shine in the darkness and raises the dead to life. Of course we too, like Jesus will know times of testing and challenge and suffering and growth.

This past year with COVID and its implications, this past week with its snap lockdown - have been difficult periods - a wilderness experience for many people in our communities.

We have been cut off from one another in so many ways, yet there have also been bright moments of connection and a clarity about what is truly important. Whatever the struggle, wherever the wilderness. God has called us to be part of it, as agents of love. We do not enter this alone. The same Spirit that conveyed God's promises also drives us into a world desperate to hear of and experience God's love.

As we commence our path through Lent let us ask for a dose of Lenten courage that will remind us that we are not alone but that God is with us - calling all of us to embrace the opportunity to continue the work of God's reign, and sharing the hope we have been given. Amen

HYMN TiS 564 O God of Bethel by whose hand

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OFFERING and Dedication of offering

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Gracious God, trusting in your love and care,
we bring before you the concerns of our hearts and minds this day.
We pray for our world:
for honesty in politics, compassion in communities,
healing for those who are suffering, and hope for those who are oppressed.
We pray for our nation:
for Indigenous peoples, for farmers and industry,
for those who are homeless, for people who feel lost.
We pray for our community:
for the sick and the dying, for those seeking new work,
for children and parents.
In all things, O God, move us to be your hands and feet in the world
that our lives and our prayers dance together and are one.

We pray in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying:

*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, and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.*

HYMN: TiS 468 We are your people

Blessing

The first step on the journey, that of readiness, is one of the hardest.
Yet God has called you by name, to this journey into Lent.
We will have all that we need.
So we go in peace, knowing that God is going with us. AMEN.

HYMN TiS 477 verse 3 Jesus calls us to each other