



Order of Service
14th August 2022

TiS 659 The Lord is my shepherd, and I want to follow

Call to worship

God of all living, we have seen your presence in the rhythm and surprises of our years.

You have journeyed with us in the past. We offer our thanks.

We recognise your closeness in this day.

You challenge and encourage us in each act and decision. We offer our praise.

Now we look for you in the promises that stretch before us.

You meet us with hope. In this we trust!

Opening Prayer

O God, source of all beauty and goodness, your grace is new to us every morning. In each new day, your light gives guiding hope. Make your presence known to us in this time together, as we remember your steadfast love and constant care. Amen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of this region.

Welcome

TiS 102 Praise to the living God

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:1-2, 8-19 Prayer for Israel's Restoration

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,

you who lead Joseph like a flock!

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

² before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.

Stir up your might, and come to save us!

⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it;

it took deep root and filled the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,

the mighty cedars with its branches;

¹¹ it sent out its branches to the sea

and its shoots to the River.

¹² Why then have you broken down its walls,

so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it,

and all that move in the field feed on it.



- ¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven and see;
have regard for this vine,
¹⁵ **the stock that your right hand planted.**
¹⁶ It has been burned with fire; it has been cut down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
¹⁷ But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Prayer of Confession

God of grace and mercy, you know us better than we know ourselves.
We are believers and doubters, disciples and dissenters, compassionate and complacent.
In your company, we have confidence to know ourselves as you know us.
We all have times when we live in ways that reveal your goodness and compassion,
and other times when we may fail to reflect your love and mercy.
Search us, O God, and know our hearts and our troubled thoughts.
Forgive us any wrongs, and transform us by your Spirit to live for you each day.
We breathe in deeply of your grace and mercy and healing.

(A time of silence as we reflect on these words for ourselves)

Words of affirmation

***This is the best of all: when we are empty, God fills us;
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 and because of Christ, our sins are forgiven.
Thanks be to God.***

AN EARLY WORD

AHB 551 I sing a song of the saints of God

Bible Readings: Luke 12:49-56 Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Reflection

Last week we spent time in the first part of the letter to The Hebrews, remembering with the author some of those amazing people of faith from the Old Testament. We took particular note of Abraham, who at the call of God left his country, not knowing where he was going.

In today's reading, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews continues to address a community needing to hear that it belongs. Perhaps worn down by external pressures, some in the community are struggling with their faith and others are even neglecting to meet together. After previously enduring hardship and having shown great love for one another, the community has over time become less confident, less enthusiastic, and less cohesive.



So in this passage, the writer continues telling the stories of those who had gone before, those who had lived out their faith in God's promises, and laid the path of endurance for others to follow. The letter recounts over and over again how it was "by faith" that Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, endured. This list of names, clearly intended to inspire and encourage the letter's readers, surely would have caused them to recall the stories of these biblical figures in all their complexity. Even though messy and flawed human beings, their lives of faith are shown as great examples for others.

Along the way, the letter specifically mentions "Rahab the prostitute" who by faith "did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace." As a Canaanite woman who welcomed the spies by faith, she represents the letter's insistence that outsiders like Rahab can also live out the example of Christ.

The letter continues to recall story after story, recounting moving memories of both triumph and hardship. Some conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, while others suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment and stoning to death. In fact as the writer almost breathlessly goes on, it seems that for these ancient characters, faith led more to difficulty than to victory. Destitute, persecuted, tormented, considered unworthy, they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet, he adds, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, for God had provided something better. The something – or someone - better is Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, in a nutshell, the writer is thinking... OK Hebrews - I know you are going through tough times, but others have been there before you, and they hung in there and persevered. Now you Hebrews are in a better space because you have the example of Jesus to follow. You have Jesus to call on for support and strength.

And so we arrive at the writer's final exhortation: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith". With these words the writer connects the community's story to the stories of those who have come before them, signalling that they, too, belong and that they, too, can live out lives of righteousness "by faith."

Like a delicate piece of cloth, the stories of the community members are woven together with both the ancient stories of faith, and with Jesus' own story. For the writer and the community, Jesus is the model of faith. In the same way that he endured the shame that accompanied his suffering on the cross, so can those who seek to follow "by faith" set aside shame and endure the kind of suffering that can accompany the life of discipleship.

A contemporary theologian called Luke Johnson suggests that the author of Hebrews is comparing the life of faith in this chapter to an ancient Olympic marathon, and he comments on the role of the cloud of witnesses in this race.

"The runners begin far away from the city in some remote place with few observers, move through growing crowds and greater fatigue, and finally emerge in the stadium before a massed assembly of spectators who watch and applaud as the runners complete their final lap."

The cloud of witnesses in Hebrews is this joyous, exuberant crowd of spectators; they are the faithful who have gone before us, who are now witnessing our race of faith, and are compassionately cheering us on. They are our fathers and mothers in the faith who are calling to us from *their* place of victory, encouraging us to keep moving forward and to keep trusting God, even on desert days when our throats are dry and our feet are weary.

We all have our own personal cloud of witnesses.

They are the ones who have given us the gift of their testimony, of their lives well-lived, imperfect and feeble as they may have been. In fact, even their weakness has been a gift to us, because it reminds us that no one is able to finish the race on their own strength.

Think for a moment - who are the people in your cloud?

The biblical characters honoured by the Hebrews author may seem far removed from us and from our stories, but they are also our mothers and fathers in Christ. They belong to our cloud of witnesses, along with all the faithful who have come before us.

There will be a day when you and I join the cloud of witnesses for someone *else*.

May those who come after us testify that *our* lives were lived as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, the greatest witness of all, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who ran his own race, won the victory, and is also now cheering us on. Amen.

TiS 609 May the mind of Christ my Saviour

Offering and Dedication

As you share your blessings with us, Gracious God, you show great faith that we will use them wisely and offer them generously to others. So, by faith, may our gifts bring healing to the broken, hope to the despairing, and laughter to those who mourn. This we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Announcements

Prayers of the People

TiS 578 How firm a foundation you people of God

Blessing

Let God kindle a fire within you for God's radical and costly way of love.
Stay true to the path, love without ceasing,
though it hurts, though it costs, though it is hard.

We know that God is with us, our divine source of love.

We trust that God is with us always, our divine source of faith.

Amen.

TiS 781 Father, bless us as we go

