

ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



12 FEBRUARY 2023

EPIPHANY 6



WORSHIP AT HOME

This time is an opportunity to be still, seeking to be aware of the presence of God within.

Carve out a time for this practice; prepare yourself, as you might for a usual Sunday morning and remember that there are others from the congregation gathering at the same time as you. There are also many from the church around the globe who are gathering to seek the presence of God as we are.

Prepare a space in the house; find a comfortable chair, light a candle, turn off distracting noises and close the door if that will help you to be still. This is something that does not need to be hurried.

HYMN TIS 127 Holy God, we praise your name...

Prayer for today

Lovely Being Loved

God,
What a gift it is to be loved.
What a gift it is to be cared for and supported.
What a gift it is to have others work for our best.
What a gift it is to for others to see the best in us, and encourage it out of us, even when we don't see it in ourselves.
What a gift it is that you love us,
So much that you became one of us in the person of Jesus,
And through you we can enter into eternal life.

God,
What a gift it is to love
What a gift it is to show love and be love for others,
What a gift it is to care and support others
What a gift it is to work for their best.
What a gift it is to see the best in others, and to encourage it out of them, even if they don't see it in themselves.

Help us to love.
Help us to love all people deeply and really.
Help us to be a gift each day,
A gift of love to the world and all in it.
Just as you offer the gift of love to us and all others.
May this be something that we love to pray.

Amen.

Jon Humphries

Confession

Prayer adapted from Psalm 86 #1

Hear, O Lord, and answer me;
for as rich as I may think that I am,
I confess that I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am devoted to you.
You are my God;
save your servant who trusts in you.
Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant,
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
You are forgiving and good, O Lord,
abounding in love to all who call to you
in their time of desperation and need.
Hear my prayer, O Lord;
listen to my cry for mercy. Amen.

Prayer of Confession Collection | Faithward.org

Assurance Of Forgiveness

Here is Good News! God is willing to cleanse us from our pride, our blindness, our stubborn insistence on having things “our way”. Through God’s grace we are washed and forgiven.

Thanks be to God

Amen.

HYMN: TIS 554 If we will trust in God to guide us...

Scripture

From the Hebrew scriptures

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

From the New Testament

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

On Divisions in the Corinthian Church

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, 'I belong to Paul', and another, 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

HYMN: TIS 164, The Great Love of God...

A Pastoral Letter:

Sermon to be preached at Ormond Uniting Church on Sunday, 12th February 2022. Refer to the reading from Deuteronomy above.

Choose life!

There are ministers who prefer to preach only from the New Testament. There are two main reasons for that. One is that The Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures) is it is just plain hard to understand and the other we have been instructed that the New Testament (or New Covenant) is said to supplant the Old Covenant. Put simply, whereas God had chosen the Jews (the Nation of Israel) to be his people, now he is said to have chosen the followers of Jesus (the Christians) to be his special people. Thus, it is argued, there is no need for the Old Testament. Reading it will only cause confusion.

An early writer, Marcion by name (born 85CE), in fact produced a version of the scriptures which excised the Old Testament completely. Marcion did not succeed in getting the fledgling church to follow his lead, and so our church presents us each week with selections from the Old Covenant as well as the New.

The word "testament" or "covenant" refers, of course, to an agreement. The Old Covenant refers to an agreement made between the nation of Israel and their God. The Jews don't use the term "Old Testament". For them the scriptures are an account of their dealings with God - with the ongoing development of a relationship which, like a most relationships has its ups and downs.

Sometimes God is portrayed as an old grump, and sometimes he is portrayed as a father, or friend or even, a lover. The Jews then, today, devote a lot of time to working out how they should relate to their God, and how, indeed, God chooses to relate to them. How, for instance to make sense of the Holocaust. How could God let that happen? Or their relationship with the Palestinians - or with Muslims generally - or with Christians. The development of Christianity has not been "good news" for the Jews. We talk blithely of "Interfaith dialogue", forgetting that we (the "Christian" church) have been, and still are, the enemy. Anyway, let's put that aside for the moment.

Early this week Margaret and I were reading the selection of scripture set for today by *The Revised Common Lectionary*. For this week our attention is drawn to the book of *Deuteronomy* and in the section selected for our consideration in that book I noted the words: "choose life". Not a bad theme for a sermon, I thought. Not a bad "hook" to hang a bit of preaching on. But I felt I needed to know more about the book of *Deuteronomy*. I have enough Greek under my belt to know the word means "second law" but the Jews did not, and do not, use that title. They do, however, recognise that it is apt.

Since it is a Jewish book I thought it appropriate to approach it through Jewish eyes - so I sought out a commentary by Rabbi Jonathan (Baron) Sachs (1948-2020) - Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. The Rabbi made it clear that the book purports to be written by Moses, in which he (Moses) re-affirms the covenant (or agreement) the people of Israel have with God. It is in the form of a treaty. In the ancient world, there were two forms of treaty. One was between forces that are equal, and the other between unequal forces. We have a name for each. Between equal forces we speak of a "parity" treaty, and between unequal forces, a suzerainty treaty.

In contemporary terms, the treaties proposed with Aboriginal and Islander people are of the unequal "suzerainty" type. A treaty between Russia and Ukraine, should it occur, would be more of a "parity" treaty. From the Jewish point of view the book we know as *Deuteronomy* is a re-statement and summary of the agreement between the people of Israel and God established during the Exodus.

A treaty lays out a set of mutual rights and duties. God, as Rabbi Sachs sees it, agrees to limit his power and to provide for the people. What does he provide most of? Well, LOVE. And what does he get in return? Well, obedience and devotion and respect - summed up by a living out of the law. The book of *Deuteronomy*, according to the good Rabbi, is:

"...in essence a programme for the creation of a moral society in which righteousness is the responsibility of all"

The deal is this: "I (God) will limit myself and devote myself to this people. I will let them be free, but I expect in return an understanding that it's my way of the highway. My people if that is indeed what they are to become, are a people who will use their freedom wisely. I (God) have laid down a set of expectations about appropriate thought and behaviour (law) and, as their part of the deal this people must adhere to those expectations."

Now Rabbi Sachs is at pains to point out that *Deuteronomy* is not a Christian book. He says as much ver bluntly. "It is not a Christian Book". He does not say that we Christians should not read it. "Make yourself at home", he might say. But try to remember that it is not written for you. It

doesn't address your issues, nor does it address your concerns. Why? He doesn't tell us, but we might guess. It's probably because we have this thing about salvation and free grace.

Since Luther in 1517 we have accepted the line that we are in a very one-sided relationship with God. We talk of a new testament, a new covenant, a new treaty if you like. We have become taken with the idea that in this "new" agreement God has agreed to do all of the work. We are saved by God's grace. God makes minimal demands and allows us unrestricted freedom. We have a lot of "rights" but not so many duties." That, Rabbi Sachs would say, is not what Moses is on about in his speech just before the first invasion of the promised Land.

Moses is saying that during the long hard forty-year slog in the wilderness of Sinai an agreement was cobbled together between God and his people. God would provide land and prosperity. The people would provide loyalty and an undertaking to behave appropriately. Of course, the people don't always fulfil their side of the bargain and the Hebrew scriptures are a catalogue of false starts and new starts. Two steps forward. One step back. Sometimes two or three steps back.

We Christians have received a new message about God's grace and about our freedom from the law. Especially those of us who live in relative comfort and security have a religion that we might characterise as "Christianity Lite". A low energy, low calorie, low effort, undemanding faith. Yes, we sin, but we don't murder and we don't steal. We obey the ten commandments (well, most of them) and we have a set of excuses for the ones we break. OK, we do hurt each other. We betray trust, we love badly, we don't always love our neighbour but do we really need to? We just have to ask and God forgives us. We don't even need to go to church. In Christianity-Lite God's grace is available anyway.

Maybe the good Rabbi is only partly right when he insists that Deuteronomy is not our book. We read, for instance, "Choose life! And maybe choosing Life is not the same as choosing Lite. What does Deuteronomy mean by choosing life? It seems to be about sticking to the terms of the agreement. Do we have an agreement with God. Do we have a treaty where mutual obligations are accepted and adhered to. Do we have any duties to God, and what do they look like?

Listen to this:

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.16If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

If we stick to our part of the agreement, then God will bless us in the land we have entered to possess.

Grace, no matter how freely given, does not let us off. Grace does not make it any easier. Maybe it's time to get rid of the idea that we live in what Bonhoeffer called "bargain-basement grace! Maybe, *Deuteronomy Speaks* to us as well as the people of Israel.

Are we on the borders of a promised land? What would life be like there? What sort of life will we choose? What will be required of us. Not *Christianity-Lite* but *The Real thing* ". Will we make a new treaty with the Lord, or maybe dust off the previous one. Will we reject Christianity-Lite in favour of a Christianity that makes demands on us?

May it be so.

HYMN: TIS 417 Loving Spirit, loving Spirit...

Prayer – Prepared by Heather Baxter

Today we pray particularly for the people who are lost, and have lost.

Let us pray

Father, we pray for the people who are lost in your world

For the families that have lost loved ones in the Turkey/Syrian earthquakes, and for those who are still searching in the rubble. Some are grieving and hoping in far away places – their grief magnified by the distance from their original place of birth

We pray for people from the north island of New Zealand as they assess flood damage and wonder at the loss of all their possessions that have been swept away or made useless in the unseasonal torrents of water.

We pray for people everywhere who have lost their minds through drug use, disease, mental illness. In the dark spaces of their minds we know that they find it impossible to see your promise of light.

We pray for the people who have lost their family roots – the first peoples of this land who have often lost their languages, land and family, the people fleeing from their homelands in terror and unable to find a new place called home, and those cut off from their families through disagreement.

We pray for those recently bereaved – the loss of a loved one expected or unexpected cuts like a knife and consumes our thoughts and actions.

We know that loss is an experience that we all have to a greater or lesser extent through the years, and that Christians are not immune from the hurt it causes our hearts. We pray that your tender arms will enfold those who are experiencing loss so that they will again be able to embrace life in its fullness. Help us to remain alert to the possibility of being the compassionate ear or hand that listens and attends to to the hurt and loss of others.

In Jesus name we pray

Amen

We say together

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

Blessing

(May) Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17-19

**HYMN: TIS 572 O thou who camest from above... (1st
tune: Wilton)**

Thoughts for the week to come

I have been reading a book about a dozen or so remarkable people. We might call them modern saints. They all lived during the last century, and their lives have shown us the various ways our faith might be lived out. We look at their lives in wonder. We should not try to copy them but allow them to find our own unique ways to live out our faith at this time and in our own place.

This week, I am going to look at a woman we know as Peace Pilgrim. (**Born 1908, Mildred Lisette Norman. Died 1981**)

Peace Pilgrim, in her late 40s decided to relinquish all possessions, except for the clothes on her back and what she could carry in her pockets. She had no money, and no shelter. She gave up eating meat and asked for nothing. People offered her shelter from time to time and offered her food, but she never asked for these and she never accepted money. She walked like that for close on 25 years. She determined to walk until the world came to its senses and embraced peace. She walked across the United States six times and was (paradoxically) killed in a car accident while on her seventh crossing. She walked over 40,000 kilometres. And she talked to anyone who would listen, about peace. Of course, the world did not come to its senses, as we well know, but a great many people did change their lives because of her. Some changed a lot. Some changed a little.

Some of us in the church might ask “Was he a Christian?” I’m not sure. She did talk about God from time to time. Does it matter?

Here is some advice from Peace Pilgrim:

Four purifications

Purification of the bodily temple Are you free from all bad habits? In your diet do you stress the vital foods—the fruits, whole grains, vegetables and nuts? Do you get to bed early and get enough sleep? Do you get plenty of fresh air, sunshine, exercise, and contact with nature? If you can answer “Yes” to all of these questions, you have gone a long way toward purification of the bodily temple.

Purification of the thoughts. It is not enough to do right things and say right things. You must also think right things. Positive thoughts can be powerful influences for good. Negative thoughts can make you physically ill. Be sure there is no unpeaceful situation between yourself and any other human being, for only when you have ceased to harbor unkind thoughts can you attain inner harmony.

Purification of the desires. Since you are here to get yourself into harmony with the laws that govern human conduct and with your part in the scheme of things, your desires should be focused in this direction.

Purification of motives. Obviously your motive should never be greed or self-seeking, or the wish for self-glorification. You shouldn't even have the selfish motive of attaining inner peace for yourself. To be of service to your fellow humans must be your motive before your life can come into harmony.

Four relinquishments

Relinquishment of self-will. You have, or it's as though you have, two selves: the lower self that usually governs you selfishly, and the higher self which stands ready to use you gloriously. You must subordinate the lower self by refraining from doing the not-good things you are motivated toward, not suppressing them but transforming them so that the higher self can take over your life.

Relinquishment of the feeling of separateness. All of us, all over the world, are cells in the body of humanity. You are not separate from your fellow humans, and you cannot find harmony for yourself alone. You can only find harmony when you realize the oneness of all and work for the good of all.

Relinquishment of attachments. Only when you have relinquished all attachments can you be really free. Material things are here for use, and anything you cannot relinquish when it has outlived its usefulness possesses you. You can only live in harmony with your fellow humans if you have no feeling that you possess them, and therefore do not try to run their lives.

Relinquishment of all negative feelings. Work on relinquishing negative feelings. If you live in the present moment, which is really the only moment you have to live, you will be less apt to worry. If you realize that those who do mean things are psychologically ill, your feelings of anger will turn to feelings of pity. If you recognize that all of your inner hurts are caused by your own wrong actions or your own wrong reactions or your own wrong inaction, then you will stop hurting yourself.

Sources:

- Epperly, Bruce G., 2020, *Mystics in Action: Twelve Saints for Today*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books.
- Peace Pilgrim, *Steps towards Inner Peace*, Available on Kindle.
- Wikipedia ([Peace Pilgrim - Wikipedia](#))
- Some videos are available on the New Jersey Hall of Fame web site ([Peace Pilgrim – New Jersey Hall of Fame \(njhalloffame.org\)](#))

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Postlude

You can find a copy of today's sermon along with other congregational information on the church website.

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Presider: Karel Reus

Music: Peter Hurley

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