

ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



18 FEBRUARY 2024

LENT 1



Jesus' ministry begins

WORSHIP AT HOME

TIME OF GATHERING

First Sunday in the season of Lent – a season of 40 days (not counting Sundays which are “little Easter’s”) during which we hear stories that guide our preparation for Easter.

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

Set aside 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. We join with them all.

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.

Focussing ...

From the splash of the stone the ripples move out, wider and wider until they touch the edges: all the edges, and some bounce back. Memories entered and trusted can ripple through our lives, to the edges and sometimes back, and in the ebb and flow memory nurtures hope, becomes living water – gifts of a loving and bountiful God. Thank you God!

Acknowledgement of Country: We come to meet this morning from all manner of places, and on the Country of diverse Clans and Nations of First Peoples’, and pay our respects to their Elders, past, present, and emerging, and commit ourselves afresh to the journey of justice and reconciliation.

Joining the scattered community

Here we begin another week, weaving together the fabric of our lives, in all their different textures and colours, their changing forms and flows.

Here we mark the things that have gone before and hope for newness to come.

Here we celebrate each other’s place as one thread in the weaving and cherish the moments when the fabric of our lives become whole.

Focussing for worship

Christ be with all who gather today. Lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth. Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace. Let peace fill our hearts, our world, our universe, and all its peoples.

Greeting: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Call to worship

Everything that happens on earth happens at the time God chooses.

God sets the time for birth and the time for death, the time for sorrow and the time for joy, the time for tearing and the time for mending, the time for scattering and the time for gathering, the time for seeking and the time for losing, the time for silence and the time for speaking. Everything that happens on earth ...

Happens at the time God chooses!

First song: TiS 465 Father in heaven, grant to your children

Prayers: A time for saying “Thank you!” to God, for recognising those acts that hurt us and others, and for hearing again of God’s love and forgiveness – the ‘new start’ God makes possible. *Take a few moments to look back on the highlights of the week past ... however small or insignificant they seem ... then consider what you might be looking forward to in the week ahead ... thank God for those moments, people, occasions ...*

Confession: Glorious God, your thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are your ways our ways. You look at the ugliest soul and see, still unstirred, the wings of an angel. We scan the finest of our neighbours, often seeing only flaws.

You view time in the context of eternity, and so find a place for waiting, for yearning, even for suffering, and even dying. We demand instant results; and look for tomorrow before savouring today.

You know that only one who suffers can ultimately save, that is why you walk the way of the cross. We fear that vulnerability which defies our power; that is why we allow for callous behaviour, responses, even death and destruction.

Your thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are your ways our ways.

So we pray ... Forgive in us what has gone wrong, repair in us what is wasted, and reveal in and to us what is good. And God, nourish us with better food than we could ever purchase: your word, your love, your inspiration, your daily bread for our life's journey, in the company of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!

In the words of the apostle Peter, I declare to you the good news: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people God claims for God's own to proclaim the glorious works of the One who called you into his marvellous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once there was on mercy for you, but now you have received God's mercy.* **Amen. Thanks be to God.**

TIME FOR LISTENING

Readings from our heritage: Read by Gary Richter

Your Word, God, is a lamp for our feet, a light for our path

First Testament - Genesis 9.8-17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

From the Good News named Mark 1: 9-15 (3 episodes in 7 verses)

The Baptism of Jesus - ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. ¹¹And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Testing of Jesus - ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry - ¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”

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In these readings may we hear the Word of God: **thanks be to God!**

Song: TiS 494 In water we grow

To think about ... Tony Floyd

In an old edition of "Sojourner's" magazine the title of a book review caught my eye. It was GRACE FOR EVERYONE. The review was of a new book by Will Campbell (an author unknown to me) called *Soul Among Lions: Musings of a Bootleg Preacher*.

Campbell, a Mississippian by birth and a white Southern Baptist by faith community, became an activist in the civil rights movement and ever since has taken his own peculiar delight in scandalizing those more rigid in their faith. At 75 years of age, Campbell is still caught up in the mystery of it all. He has little use for ideology or creed – "the baggage," (he calls it) of those apostles of certainty who proclaim to their own congregations and the world "God told me, and I'm telling you and if you don't believe as I do you're doomed."

Campbell believes in grace, the undeserved shower of divine forgiveness that rains on us all, and he includes everyone – even the members of the Ku Klux Klan hidden away behind their hoods, burning their crosses in the Mississippi night – are the children of God. ... The faith, (Campbell) insists, was never meant to be easy. It is, instead, a call to do better – to recognise our common humanity and to resist the temptations of our selfishness and greed.

(Sojourners pages 54-55 January/February 2000)

While none of that was about the Gospel of Mark, it could have been as we have been discovering these past weeks. For this gospel makes it clear from its simple beginning that mere belief is not sufficient – the gospel must be lived out. In just a few verses in the very first chapter, Mark begins the literary destruction of the unjust world and the introduction of a new world, through the person and ministry of Jesus.

This morning's reading tells us about the precipitating moment for Jesus' proclamation of "good news" – the arrest of John the Baptist. Mark knows that the gospel/good news is about a clash of two different realities: God's reign versus worldly empire. They cannot co-exist – and we must make our choice.

And that is precisely what Jesus is up to in this story today – making choices about those two different realities.

This story is a preparation story – Jesus is getting ready for his public ministry. The preparation begins with John the Baptist attempting to get the people ready by preaching a baptism of repentance in verse 3: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*. John tells people what is to come in verse 8 – *I have baptised you with water; but [the Messiah] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit*.

Now if this kind of preparation is difficult to understand, think about Jesus' own participation here. After Jesus himself is baptised *to fulfil all righteousness* [as Matthew tells it], and a voice comes from heaven *You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased*, Jesus leaves home!

He doesn't go to a resort, or to a nice hotel, but to a wilderness. Rather than a car full of clothes, food and entertainment, Jesus goes with nothing but the clothes on his back. There were no golden arches in the desert place! That time in the desert could be likened to a Recruit camp rather than a holiday, equipping God's servant for the ultimate battle between those two realities - God's reign versus worldly empire.

Just as Noah's obedience and faithfulness were tested in building the ark **before the rains came**. So Jesus fidelity to his Messianic task is tested and strengthened by the wilderness **before his public ministry begins**.

In **verses 14 and 15** we see the immediate outcome of Jesus' time of preparation in the wilderness, John the Baptist was arrested. Jesus immediately takes up the theme of *the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel!*

Those who answered this call to discipleship seemed to do so rather imprudently, to the point of leaving families, jobs, and friendships behind. They were financially vulnerable. Jesus took up a ministry that left him nowhere to lay his head. He was misunderstood – constantly! Scribes and Pharisees challenged him, and he was misquoted, betrayed, and finally crucified by those for whom he came to bring Good News.

Those who followed all the way to the cross found that their preparation was for a career of *afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, and hunger* (2 Corinthians 6.4-5), as well as unimaginable blessings, joys, and delights in the presence of a living God and an ever-present Spirit. The world of God's intentions, or reign of God that is the Good News from Jesus according to Mark is the practise of faith, the act of living in Christ; it is active discipleship!

Jim Wallis, in an article *Faith Works* writes: *What do I mean by faith? I like the definition used by the biblical writer of Hebrews: 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'* Simply put, *faith makes hope possible. and hope is the single most important ingredient for changing the world.*

Many people today would like to find some way to practise their faith or spirituality, despite the excesses, corruption, or narrow regulations or religion that have turned them away. I believe the making of the modern Christian, Jew, or Muslim will be through action. When put into action, faith has the capacity to bring people together, to motivate, and to inspire, even across former dividing lines. We demonstrate our faith by putting it into practice and, conversely, if we don't keep the power of faith in the actions we undertake, our efforts can easily lead to burnout, bitterness, and despair. The call to action can preserve the authenticity of faith, while the power of faith can save the integrity of our actions. As the biblical apostle James put it many years ago, 'Faith without works is as {lifeless as a corpse}.' Indeed, faith shows itself in works – faith works.

(Sojourners – March/April 2000 pages 18-19)

Modern day Christians might want to distance themselves from Mark's gospel. After all, this isn't the oppressive Roman Empire. Christianity, far from being persecuted [in Australia at least], has won acceptance in many free societies – though often equated with western colonialism.

Perhaps Mark isn't for us – we'll look for another gospel somewhere else with a kinder gentler Jesus – like the one in our hymns.

Mark does not let us off the hook so easily! Mark will not permit Christians to sit back and to pray to a massive artistic cross at the front of our church sanctuaries. We cannot know Jesus by going to church – that is part of what got up the noses of religious leaders in this gospel. We can only know Jesus by committing ourselves to active discipleship and following him – discovering his life and way on the way of the cross, which is ultimately the way of resurrection!!!!

TIME FOR RESPONDING

Song TiS 693 Come as you are, that's how I want you

Prayers of the People – Prepared by David Northwood

The Offering of our prayers for others, the world, ourselves

"As we prepare for our prayers for others, we light this candle to remember all those who are part of our church community but who are not at worship with us today."

Light the candle.

These are our prayers today

At this time, in this new church at the beginning of Lent

Let us pray

At this time, at the beginning of Lent

Lord we pray today

A pray for others

And for ourselves

Psalm 34 says 'The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.'

Lord in my busy days, give me a sense of peace and calm. Help me not be worried, or stressed by the problems I see around me. Instead, give me a sense of peace and calm that comes from knowing you take care of issues and situations that I can't. Please help me keep my eyes on You today, not the negativity in the world around me."

We pray today for all whose lives have been touched by the tragedy of war,

For those who suffer and mourn, immerse them in your love

and lead them through this darkness
into your arms, and light.
For those who comfort,
be in both the words they use
and all that's left unspoken;
fill each heart with love.

We pray especially for the people of Palestine and Israel
And for the war makers

Help us to understand that often conflict arises through a misunderstanding of other people and nations and their legitimate needs and concerns.

Help us and others to realise that lasting peace comes through more communication, rather than more submarines.

Through talking rather than more tanks
and reconciliation more than weapons.
We are moulded, each one of us,
in the image of God,
and within our souls there is a fingerprint
none can erase.

We pray for those who have no regard
for anyone but self,
who put no value on human life.
For nations and individuals who abuse and kill.
We are not called to be the judge

but we are called to be agents of change,
And somewhere within the world
reach into the hearts and souls of those
for whom we pray, and reveal to them
how precious are those
for whom they have no love,
and how precious are they
who now bring tears to the eyes of God.

Help us to care more deeply, live more simply and share more fully.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer – please pray this in whatever version you are most at home with.

Lord's Prayer. (Please feel free to pray that version you are most familiar with)

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.

The peace of Christ – given and received

TIME FOR SCATTERING

Song: TiS 568 O for a heart to praise my God

Prayer –

Lord God, in this world where goodness and evil continue to clash with each other, instill in us, and in all your people, discernment to see what is right, faith to believe what is right, and courage to do what is right. Keep us aware of the subtlety of sin, and preserve us, body, mind, and spirit, through the power of your Holy Spirit.

Benediction –

The love of the faithful Creator
The peace of the wounded Healer
The joy of the challenging Spirit
The hope of the Three in One
surround and encourage you
today, tonight, and forever.

Go in peace ... **to love and serve the Lord. Amen!**

Postlude

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

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Presider: Rev Dr Tony Floyd

Music: Peter Hurley

Church Office

Tuesdays, 9.30am-1.30pm

Fridays, 9.30am-2.30pm

Phone: 0411 958 127

office@ormond.unitingchurch.org.au

Website: www.ormondunitingchurch.org

NEWS & NOTICES