

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, FORREST
March 23rd, 2025,
9am
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT



Mario Sánchez Nevado: Forgiveness: Emotional Illustration

We began Lent (Lent 1) with the account of the Temptations. In that account, we learnt that as all humans, Jesus suffered from a certain disorder – that which St Ignatius of Loyola in his “Spiritual Exercises” referred to as “disordered attachments”. The Temptations are all about Jesus’ struggle to re-order his attachments, to discipline his internal psychology and spirituality. In short, the demand is to creatively deal with his weakness for populist power: the power of economics (bread), the power of politics (Jesus abasing himself to political ambition – to inherit the earth), and the power of religion and religious spectacle (Jesus throwing himself from the temple pinnacle).

In Lent 2, the readings centred upon the particular power of nationalism and its complex and problematic relationship to religion and faith. In Psalm 27, we sense that the king, first praises God with full confidence in Yahweh’s nationalistic-patriotic agenda, but then utterly surprisingly graduates into a reflective prayer where he shows a deeper maturity not to mention greater humanity, understanding that God may *not* automatically support him after all. Hebrew Biblical thought - especially the prophets - and Jesus himself, were clear that nation and God must always be distinguished one from the other, not “joined at the hip”. Our current global circumstances suggest that little has been learnt.

Today, Lent 3, we move onto the challenge of yet another ‘power’ in the Bible: “public or civic religion”. This is a difficult Gospel reading, but for all that fascinating, where Jesus sees justice not as retributive, but its opposite - restorative. The contrast between Jesus reading of justice and that of Jewish ‘public religion’ where people who suffered were deemed guilty of one offense or another – the response to the disaster of the Tower of Siloam – speaks volumes about how religion can become a tool of social vindictiveness.

THE GATHERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE

We Prepare Ourselves

Acknowledgement of First Nation's People

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples,
the first inhabitants of this place.

**We honour them for their custodianship of the land
on which we gather today**

Our Rich Diversity and Mutuality

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God, and so we accept every individual regardless of race, age, creed, sexuality and gender.

Announcements

Lighting of the Community Candle

The liturgist welcomes the people present in the church and others on-line

Greeting

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And also with you.

Call to Worship

Children of God, what has God done for you?

God saves, provides, and holds us in God's steadfast love.

Consider and remember: in the joyful times and in the sorrowful times, what has God done for you?

God covers us and lifts us up, protecting and empowering us with steadfast love.

When you have been like the fig tree in Jesus' story that seems unable to produce and that everyone has given up on, what has God done for you?

God tends the soil and waters the ground, nurturing us into life with steadfast love.

Children of God, come, let us worship God who never gives up on us!

We come to worship and cling to God, for God's steadfast love never fails!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, September 2024.

Welcoming Song Growing Gardens Malcolm Gordon

You are leading me further than I've followed before

Lead me on, my Lord.

And my hunger for you it only grows ever more.

Feed me now, my Lord.

You are growing gardens in the desert,

laying feast in times of famine.

Hallelujah, God is here!

Ever loving, ever near.
 Hallelujah, God for us
 braves the wilderness and draws us home.
The Prayer of a Sceptic about Christians

A prayer which in unison with the Gospel reading, serves as a warning against our human propensity for tribalism, when even as we mouth God's unlimited grace and generosity, we limit this very same grace and generosity to those who look, think and worship like us.

Drink from these waters and you will never thirst again.

Unless of course we circumscribe just who God's grace and love may reach, and who it will not: those we consider the deserving and the undeserving.

Drink from these waters and you will never thirst again.

Unless of course we circumscribe to whom we will extend our grace and love. We receive it with joy and gratitude, but we offer it to those with whom we feel comfortable.

Drink from these waters and never thirst again.

Not too much water now! Too much, and we will be overwhelmed. Too much, and we may just do what Jesus asks of us.

Confession

God we are grateful that your thoughts
 and ways transcend ours. If you were like us, we would be without hope.

We thank you for the inescapably
 generous gift of forgiveness and freedom.

We thank you for new mercies of life each new day,
 even as we see no reason to reflect that mercy to others.

We thank you for always welcoming us back into community with you. Thank you for providing
 waters from which we may drink and never thirst again.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Insufficient to even ourselves,
 you forgive us even as we refuse to forgive others.

Thanks be to God!

The Peace

The peace is shared either through the taking of the other's hand, by placing our right hand over the heart, or clasping our hands together in a prayerful gesture with a slight bow.

LISTENING AND THINKING TOGETHER

A Chat with the Children

A Song with the Children

Blessing Song

Trad. Hindi song

Jesus, loving Lord;
 Jesus, strength and stay,
 in your mercy bless us all
 and keep us night and day.

The children leave for their work together

Prayer for Understanding of Scripture

Open our ears and minds to the nuance and subtlety of following you. That we may balance a sense of self critical self-awareness with real hope, as we listen to Scripture and its interpretation this morning
Amen

Readings

We read the Hebrew reading alternately beginning with the leader and congregation reading together.

Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 55:1-9, p.598

Brief Commentary: This passage bursts with the excitement of an invitation to a banquet. It ends (vv. 12-13) with an unparalleled description of joy and peace. All that one needs to accept the invitation is a thirst. The magnificent poetry of the passage brings to life all kinds of scenes and images in our imagination. However, the background to the text reminds us of the very real problems addressed by the prophet. This chapter concludes the second part of the book of Isaiah (Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55). The people of Judah and Jerusalem have been in exile. They had been violently removed from their homeland by the Babylonians 40 years earlier. The prophet brings a word of hope of return. This hope is a fulfilment of God's promise to the people. Earlier the prophet had sought to comfort the Hebrews with the message that their servitude was over (Isa 40:1-11). But people who have suffered badly do not embrace hope easily. At the end of his message the prophet again returns to the themes of human frailty and the utter reliability of God's word (cf. Isa 40:6-8 with 55:8-11).

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9, p.848

Brief Commentary: This passage is one that speaks of how faith and its discourse, theology, can be hijacked to serve particular purposes. In it, we hear how ordinary faithful Jews come to Jesus, asking about the connection between sin and suffering. Tied to a particular view – common at the time – that suffering was due to a person’s or group’s sinfulness/lack of respectability, this popular public or civic theology functioned as a *closed circular* mental/spiritual process, establishing a clear delineation between winners and losers. Faith and theology were the way to ensure you figured among the winners. Here the story begins with an allusion to the death of some Galileans at the hands of Roman authoritarianism, and then moves onto the event of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam. The text then continues in reference to the image of the fig tree: a way of discounting the popular theological outlook and establishing the approach of Jesus, concerning the practice of forgiveness that breaks the self-righteous cycle: the constant danger of the religious mind-set. Perhaps the best way to sum this up is this: Jesus warns that if we insist upon furnishing tragedies such as the Tower of Siloam with religious, sacred meanings, then we will invariably get caught up in the world of reciprocal, retributive violence, of casting God according to our own perceived interests, prejudices and anxieties. This is dangerous ground.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

This is the Gospel of the Lord - **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ**

The Word is Offered

Offering Song

Father of Earth, Mother of Sea *Dave Brown, arr. C. Lees*

1. Father of earth, mother of sea,
 spirit who stands with the victims of greed.
 Vision of life, Christ's mystery.
 Stand with us Jesus, your children in need.
Stand with us Lord, stand with us Lord.

2. Father of hope, mother of love,
 spirit who prays with us while war goes on.
 Vision of life, knowing your love.
 Pray with us Jesus, so help us disarm.
Pray with us Lord, pray with us Lord.

3. Father of day, mother of night,
 spirit who visits the prisoners, the blind.
 Vision of life, prophetic voice.
 Visit us Jesus, so help us rejoice.
Visit us Lord, visit us Lord.
Stand with us Lord, stand with us Lord.

Prayers of the People

We pray for the people of Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. We also give thanks for the life of the Christian pioneers, Cuthbert, Aidan and the 'Venerable Bede', who contributed to Anglo-Saxon Christianity during the 7th and 8th centuries, in Northumbria, England, establishing monastic communities and contributing to scholarship and religious life. We also continue our prayers for the peoples Ukraine and Gaza amid the unpredictable 'shifting sands' of nation states.

Liturgist: Lord, by your Spirit

Response: **hear our prayers.**

SENDING OUT THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Announcements

Sending Song Now As You Leave This Assembly of Lovers

Amanda Udis-Kessler © 2019

1. Now as you leave this assembly of lovers,
 carry the gift that your heart has received.
 As you've been treated, go out and treat others,
 sharing the grace that is endlessly free.

Chorus:

*Keep on blessing the world as you do.
 Welcome the stranger and offer a feast.
 Work to bring justice, strive to show kindness.
 Surely the Holy will bless you with peace.*

2. Centre your mind on the things that are precious,
all that is sacred and worthy of praise.
Love all the world with a passion so reckless
you will know wonder the rest of your days.

Chorus

Blessing

May God bless you with the hope to cling to God,
knowing that in the highs and lows,
the joys and the sorrows,
the known and unknown of this life, God's love does not fail.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ

Amen

Liturgist: Rev'd Dr. Geoff Dornan | **Preacher:** Ann Sutton

Music Coordinator: Jade McFaul

Musicians: Caitlin Launt, Phil Knight, and Sonia Di Mezza (vocals), Zoey Haar (guitar)

Bible Reader & Duty Elder: Wati Savu

Comm. Elder: Sonia Di mezza

Stewards: Keith Billingham and Robert James

Video and Sound: Nancy Opdyke and Sam Launt

Flowers: Heather Hart

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