

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, FORREST
 March 30th, 2025,
 10.45am
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT



Family Procession on ‘Corpus Christi’

The theology of the Temptations of Jesus, which we read in Lent 1 sets the mood and themes for the following Sundays of Lent. In the first week, the challenge for Jesus was to clarify his mission, and to do this by ‘sorting himself out’, or as St Ignatius of Loyola put it centuries later in his Spiritual Exercises, clarifying his “disordered attachments”, by which he meant, eliminating his narcissistic and solipsistic tendencies – we all have them. In Jesus’ case, these were his desire for power through populism: specifically, through economic power (bread), political power (Jesus abasing himself to political ambition – to inherit the earth), and religious power and spectacle (Jesus throwing himself from the temple pinnacle). To be frank the nature of the temptations are pretty horrifying and serve the purpose of underpinning Jesus’s psychology, warts and all.

In Lent 2, the theme of power was underscored through the lens of *nationalism and irredentism and their identity with religion and faith*, especially in Psalm 27, where the Hebrew king first praises God with total confidence in Yahweh’s nationalistic-patriotic agenda, but then, surprisingly graduates into a reflective prayer where, thank God, he shows a deeper maturity not to mention greater humanity, understanding that God may *not* automatically support him after all. Jewish ‘interests’ are not necessarily God’s interests.

In Lent 3, Luke 13:1-9 criticized another ‘power’: *public or civic religion*. The insight was that public religion is generally conformist. Justice always runs the risk of being retributive and vindictive against outsiders and minorities. Today’s Gospel reading exposes and criticizes the oft held view in Jewish tradition that people suffer because they deserve it, are guilty of one offense or another – hence the reference to the disaster of the Tower of Siloam. Jesus holds to the idea that justice is restorative, always offering grace and generosity to the victim, not offering a double punishment.

Today, welcome to the fourth Sunday of Lent. Attention now turns to the story of the Prodigal Son. Here criticism is directed *to the family*, about which Jesus and early Christianity had reservations. What is interesting is how through history, Christianity in its various iterations, Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical, all raise the family to a level of untouchability. The Gospels beg to differ.

THE GATHERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Prelude Prelude in D minor, BWV 554 *J.S. Bach (1685-1750)*

Introit Whence Shall My Tears Begin?

Music: Joseph Barnby (1838-96), Words: St Andrew of Crete, tr. John Neale

Whence shall my tears begin?

What first-fruits shall I bear

Of earnest sorrow for my sin?

Or how my woes declare?

O Thou! the merciful and gracious one

Forgive the foul transgressions I have done.

My guilt for vengeance cries;

But yet Thou pardonest all,

And whom Thou lov'st Thou dost chastise,

And mourn'st for them that fall:

Thou, as a Father, mark'st our tears and pain,

And welcomest the prodigal again.

Lighting the Community Candle

Acknowledgement of Country and Our Mutuality

We are fortunate to be meeting on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, who have been the stewards of this country for generations. We recognize their deep connection to the land, waters, and the stories that are woven into the fabric of this place.

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.

The liturgist welcomes the people present in the church and others on-line, introduces today's theme and then greets the people in the name of the Holy Trinity

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 and Prayer of Adoration

When we struggle to live as you teach us, and we fail to answer your call...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When the truth clogs up in our throat, and we fear what will happen if we speak or if we keep silent...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When we open our hearts and let the truth of our sorrows, our sin, our joys, and our doubts flow freely...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us.

When our intractable minds and hearts encounter the grace that teaches and guides us into a life of calm even in the face of chaos and pain...

God, your steadfast love surrounds us today and every day. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Hymn 210 O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*Music: Thomas Jarman (1778-1861), Words: Charles Wesley (1707-88) alt**A prayer of adoration in which the liturgist and congregation share***Opening Prayers – An Act of Confession and Introspection**

The word “grace” is a problem in contemporary language in as much as it has been consigned to the religious sphere. Another word which is more secular, but which stands in its stead is generosity. The Gospel reading before us, is about generosity, but perceptively presents the complex responses that people and communities make to generous acts. In the Story of the Prodigal, generosity provokes resentment, because it is interpreted as favouritism: that which we refer to today as “affirmative action”. In essence the Prodigal is the recipient of affirmative action on the part of his father, receiving an angry response from the elder son, even though the father assures the elder son that all that he has is also his. This drama is played out in families, communities and whole societies, where the competitive drive between siblings, social classes and economic groups is always rife. From a Christian theological and ethical point of view, the problem is that the elder brother fails to understand the desire of the *father to restore* the younger son while in the same breath maintaining his love for the elder son. The elder son fails to comprehend the meaning of restorative justice: something foundational to the Gospel.

A Man had Two Sons: Between Generosity and Favouritism

A man had two sons,
loved them both.
The younger one
was eager to leave.

‘My inheritance;
give me my share now, before
I become too old.’

When your years are few,
the party goes on and on;
while the money ‘lasts’.

But all good things end.
The cash gone, the boy must work;
he starves, while the pigs eat.

Heading for his home,
practising his ‘sorry’ speech:
‘I am unworthy’!

Dad is delighted,
his son is back. ‘Let’s party;
kill the fatted calf’!

The older brother
spits the dummy.
‘All these years, not even a goat!

I am deserving,
 my useless brother is not; you are favouring him.
 What happened to equality?
 I won't celebrate!

'You know I love you.
 Son, you're always with me;
 all that's mine is yours'.

'Your brother was lost,
 now he's been restored to us:
 we must rejoice'.

What to do with the 'unworthy',
 the 'undeserving'
 who receive their moment of grace.

**Remember, we too,
 though unworthy,
 have profited from moments 'in the sun'.**

The Prayer of a Sceptic about Christians

A prayer which raises questions about the way in which some Gospel accounts should generate offense in our minds as we hear them, but they often do not, as we subconsciously sequester them to another world, failing to apply them because of the trouble they may cause.

There is not a page in the Gospels where grace is not mentioned.

We confess that we spiritualize it, stripping it of any relevance to daily practice or social and political policy.

There is not a week that passes where we are offered the possibility to make a practical difference, to restore someone, or to some group who trip into our lives.

We confess that it becomes exhausting, a puzzle, altogether too difficult, as we privately differentiate between the deserving and the undeserving.

There is not a day that passes where we trade on our self-sufficient identity, the pride that comes with success.

We confess that we forever ask the question: why can he, she, they be not like me?

Loving God, it was said of the Prodigal Son that he "came to himself."

Help us to wake up to ourselves, and to You.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Our self-sufficiency is no more than a psychological mask.
 Insufficient to even ourselves, as difficult as it is to admit it,
 you restore us even as we refuse to restore 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.

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD**Collect**

Merciful Lord,
 you know our struggle to serve you:
 when our sin and brokenness spoil our lives
 and overshadows our hearts.
 Come to our aid
 and turn us back to you again;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Prayer for Understanding

Open our ears and minds to the readings. Enable us to avoid escaping their power through removing them from the real world with which we daily struggle. That we may balance a sense of self-critical self-awareness with real hope, as we listen to Scripture, its interpretation and application, this morning.

Readings

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

Hebrew Bible: Joshua 5:9-12, p.171.

Brief Commentary: In Joshua 5 there is the sense that the Lord is beginning again with a new generation of the people after the first generation, who had escaped Egypt, had died. A new generation now in the promised land makes a fresh commitment to the Lord. Within this framework, two rituals are important: male circumcision – which apart from medical necessity, we moderns find puzzling – and the celebration of Passover. These two rites are linked closely together, as a sign of identity as a free people. The two rituals are now practiced for the first time in the promised land, and in such a way that draws their past stories together. Since the people left Egypt, the Passover ritual had not been observed. In the wilderness, the only 'bread' available was the 'manna' provided by God. Now that they are in the land promised to them, they have grain to make unleavened bread. The Passover was now to be celebrated as a commemoration of the Lord's rescue of the people from bondage.

⁹The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹²The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Psalm 32 (International Children's Bible): A "Maskil" – Contemplative Poem of David
 Psalm 32 is a mixed type of psalm. It has elements of lament (e.g. vv. 3-4), aspects of penitential psalms (e.g. vv. 1-2, 5) and elements of wisdom psalms in vv. 1-2, and 8-9. The psalm is often classed as one of the seven penitential psalms but is really of a mixed type. As a whole, the psalmist revels in

the Lord's forgiveness (vv. 1-5) and urges other faithful ones to offer prayer to God (v. 6). The theme of forgiveness fits well with today's Hebrew and Gospel readings.

32 Happy is the person

whose sins are forgiven,

whose wrongs are pardoned.

² Happy is the person

whom the Lord does not consider guilty.

In that person there is nothing false.

³ When I kept things to myself,

I felt weak deep inside me.

I moaned all day long.

⁴ Day and night

you punished me.

My strength was gone

as in the summer heat.

⁵ Then I confessed my sins to you.

I didn't hide my guilt.

I said, "I will confess my sins to the Lord."

And you forgave my guilt.

⁶ For this reason, all who obey you

should pray to you while they still can.

When troubles rise like a flood,

they will not reach them.

⁷ You are my hiding place.

You protect me from my troubles.

You fill me with songs of salvation.

⁸ The Lord says, "I will make you wise. I will show you where to go.

I will guide you and watch over you.

⁹ So don't be like a horse or donkey.

They don't understand.

They must be led with bits and reins,

or they will not come near you."

¹⁰ Wicked people have many troubles.

But the Lord's love surrounds those who trust him.

¹¹ Good people, rejoice and be happy in the Lord.

All you whose hearts are right, sing.

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, p.940.

Brief Commentary: This passage is rich with theological imagery and contains some memorable statements, including, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (5:17); and "God was in Christ"

(5:19). It is however, far from a set of doctrinal statements. Rather, it forms part of Paul's struggle to win over the Corinthians who have been unsettled by other Christian preachers who have been discrediting Paul and claiming that they have more impressive credentials. In the heat of defence and attack Paul engages in some of his most profound theological reflections. The famous statement, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation", belongs to Paul's argument that we approach people with a totally new system of values. The Greek word is better translated "creation" than "creature", but the effect is the same. The focus is not so much upon conversion and personal change, although we have often used the text to illustrate that. That is not incorrect, but we need to see that its immediate reference is a change in value systems in the way we look at people and in particular, how we evaluate their ministry. Paul uses the idea of the 'new creation' to underline his point that his opponents who boast of their credentials and achievements are pandering to common human values, rather than to what matters before God.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Hymn 683 (Tune 101) God! When Human Bonds are Broken

Music: from David Corner's Gesangbuch (1631), arr. William Rockstro (1823-95), Words: Frederik Kaan (1929-2009)

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, pp.850-851.

Brief Commentary: The issue between the pharisees and scribes was not that Jesus associated with the sinners or outsiders: Indeed that, they would have applauded. The point was rather the order of things: what comes first repentance – becoming a pious insider – or loving the one who still has not seen the 'error of their ways'. Jesus put the loving first, rather than keeping it till after repentance: in other words, people matter more than rules. Jesus clearly saw the inclusiveness of people as both theologically and ethically correct and psychologically valuable. Through being embraced, not demonized or ignored, people rebuild their lives. Instead of arguing from the tradition which only the knowledgeable could appreciate, Jesus starts his theological comment - that's what the parable is - with common daily experience and observation. This is a way of 'democratising' religious tradition; making it accessible to all. In this context he turns to the story of the Prodigal - an example of dramatic generosity and restoration, which re-embraces the younger son while keeping the older son 'in the fold'. We know however that for the elder son, such restoration of the younger reeks of favouritism. Grace, generosity is a dangerous thing which some – more often those who have occupied a position of favour, will always interpret as injustice.

¹⁵Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable

¹¹"There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to

himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

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

Anthem I Will Arise and Go

Music: Samuel Wesley (1810-76), Words: Luke 15: 18-19

I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him,
 Father, I have sinned against heav'n and before thee,
 And am no more worthy to be called thy son.

Preaching

"Hymn 136 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

Music: John Stainer (1840-1901), Words: Frederick Faber (1814-63) alt."

Offering

Meditative music is played as the offering is made. The people stand as the stewards bring the offering forward and prayers are offered

Prayers of the People

We pray for the people of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. We also remember and give thanks for Martin Luther King Jnr. (April 4th). We continue our prayers for the peoples Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Gaza and Sudan, amid the unpredictable 'shifting sands' of nation states.

Liturgist: Lord, by your Spirit

Response: **hear our prayers.**

SENDING OUT THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Announcements

Hymn 217 (Tune 590) Love Divine, All Loves Excelling
Music: William Rowlands (1860-1937), Words: Charles Wesley (1707-88) alt.

Blessing

May God's grace go ahead of you,
 trail behind you, and encircle you
 each and every moment,
 that with every move you make
 you would know with absolute assurance
 that God's steadfast love
 will never leave you alone. Amen.
 Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ

Amen

Postlude Fugue in D minor, BWV 554 J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Liturgist: Rev'd Dr. Geoff Dorman | **Preacher:** Rev'd Ian Diamond

Music Coordinator: Jade McFaul

Organist: Esther Arthur

Wesley Music Scholars: Evangeline Osborne, Martin Magill, and Phoebe Bourke (choir)

Bible Reader: Jan Sismey

Duty Elder: Kathie Potts

Stewards: Elizabeth Chan, John and Jacqui Landos

Video and Sound: David Benger & Simon Cowling

Flowers: Pam Swaffield