



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
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Celebration of Worship
Easter 5

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come and know that God is good.
We come seeking God's shelter.

Come and know God's mercy.
We come seeking wholeness and God's peace.

Come and abide in God's steadfast love.
Receive us as we are,
As we come to worship you, O God.

HYMN: "THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION" (TIS 457- vv1, 4&5)

The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ her Lord:
she is his new creation
by water and the word;
from heaven he came and sought her
to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her,
and for her life he died.

Through toil and tribulation
and tumult of her war
she waits the consummation
of peace for evermore,
till with the vision glorious
her longing eyes are blessed,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.

Yet she on earth has union
with God the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion
with those whose rest is won.
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give to us the grace
like them, the meek and lowly,
in heaven to seek your face.

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PRAYER

God of this new day,
we praise you with joy!
You take our weary lives and
refresh us with your Spirit.
Lord we greet you this morning
with our many morning moods.
Some of us gather eagerly, some more reluctantly.
Some in anticipation, some perhaps with indifference.
Still, something calls each of us to come and worship you.
As we come we remember before you and thank you for
all that has made life good in recent days.
the daily love of family and friends;
re-engaging with some simple pleasures;
the delight your creation brings to us.
We also remember all people who do not share our rejoicing:
the lonely, the sick, the anxious, the frightened;
Lord we pray your strength and peace
would find and sustain them.

In our confession we admit to each other and to God,
that our lives are not what we would want them to be,
nor what we often pretend they are,
but that we need God's mercy and renewal.

*God of truth and God of grace,
we confess that too often we are nondescript Christians,
we rarely do anything terrible bad
and yet we seldom to anything radically loving.
We drift along in the stream of Australian life,
we can find ourselves sharing in the general indifference
and the all too common general selfishness of our society.
We embrace the popular fashions
and are drawn in to the delusions,
following Christ rather timidly, from afar.*

*Lord we acknowledge our share in community evil,
we seek your kindness and mercy,
and for our many private faults and inactive faith
we seek your forgiveness.
Through Christ Jesus our Saviour.
Amen!*

In Christ, there is life.
With Christ, there is freedom.
Because of Christ, there is hope.
Hear then the words of Christ to us:
"Our sins are forgiven"
Thanks be to God.

ENCOUNTERING

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16
1 Peter 2:2-10

PRAYER

Lord,
your word is wisdom in our lives,
let us open our heart.
Amen

MESSAGE: “REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE”

From time to time we all need a word of encouragement to keep us going. There are times when the going gets a bit tough in life and the road ahead is anything but smooth. Living through these times when the response to the Corona virus pandemic has significantly changed the way we live, when our normal patterns are disrupted, is perhaps one of those times.

But it is not only in times such as these. We need encouragement in all sorts of areas in our lives: in our work, our families, our friendships, or just to get through a normal day we need a word of encouragement.

It is because people need encouragement that the little letter of 1 Peter was written. When the author of 1 Peter wrote his little letter he was addressing several groups of people, who because of their faith, had been persecuted. As a result they had been displaced and dispossessed, being scattered throughout Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. The opening of the letter indicates that these early Christian communities were experiencing severe suffering for their faith at the hands of an empire, the Roman Empire, who viewed them with suspicion and hostility.

To give them encouragement and hope this little letter was written. In their difficulties it would be easy for these communities to be overwhelmed by all they had going against them. Put yourself in their situation. You have embraced this faith as a follower of Jesus, and what has happened? You've landed in a whole lot of trouble.

But 1 Peter was written to remind them of all they still had that can sustain through the dark days they are experiencing. He reminds them of the gifts of God which have upheld God's people through countless generations and now upholds them: gifts of identity, security and purpose.

Identity

The first gift of which Peter reminds them is that they are a people who have a particular identity.

The early Christian communities may well have felt out of place in their world. Because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ they could easily have felt alienated spiritually or religiously, as well as socially, geographically, economically and politically.

Many of the early Christians were people of the Jewish faith who had felt drawn to follow the way of one of their kinsmen, Jesus. For a while they could coexist with others of the old faith, but eventually there came a separation. Now, that as followers of Jesus, they were cut off from their history and traditions, who were they? These early Christian communities were sometimes accused of being atheist, after all, they didn't anything any self-respecting religion should have; temples, priests or sacrifices. Possibly some of these early

converts felt something was missing in their new faith. When you don't have those markers of a faith, who are you?

The writer of 1 Peter, in this part of his letter, becomes quite effusive in his description of them. You are living stones being built into a spiritual house; you are a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices. In other words, you, the people, are God's temple, all of you are the priesthood and the sacrifices are now the spiritual sacrifices of your daily lives.

Far from being no people, they are God's people. They are not a people without identity. They may not have all the trappings of their former faith, but that doesn't mean they are not a community of God. Knowing who you are and whose you are can have a transforming impact on your life.

You may recall in the movie, 'Fiddler on the Roof', there is a scene where the family are celebrating the Jewish Passover. They are all gathered together, dressed in their best clothes, the table is set and all is ready. As was and is the custom in with this celebration the children query.. "Why do we do this?" And the answer is, "Because we are Jews." This meal is tied up with who they are; it is central to their identity. They are Jews in Russia and there is a danger they'll forget who they are and what's really important. But in this meal they remember who they are and whose they are.

Peter is reminding his readers that in a world which would deny it, they are God's living community.

Security

From the beginning, Israel's faith has turned to God in situations of acute trouble. In so turning, the story Israel told was that God was utterly reliable and able to help. That is the theme for the Psalm we had today. It is a Psalm which recalls God's absolute dependability in times of distress. In doing so it paints two complementary pictures. One picture portrays the trouble and danger the community faces. The other is a picture of God ready, willing and able to lead Israel to a safe place.

Similarly, the Gospel for today John 14: 1-14, which we didn't read, addresses a similar concern. It starts out with Jesus offering words of comfort: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled*" words which, no doubt, many people in 2020 would be encouraged by. And Jesus goes on, "*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.*" Like the Psalm, the Gospel offers a place of safety and well-being, not a physical place, but a place which is in God.

Peter offers his readers a similar assurance of security. While the circumstances in which they find themselves are hard, they do not have to be overwhelmed, and for two reasons. Firstly, they have God, or perhaps better, God has them. To reassure them Peter reminds them of the parallel between Jesus' life and their lives. He was living stone; they are living stones. He was rejected, they are rejected. God honoured him; God honours them. Their situation does not mean they are abandoned.

And secondly, they have each other. We're hearing the expression, "We're all in this together" a lot lately aren't we? I don't think Peter's audience knew it was a Ben Lee song, but they did know the reality of being in tough times together. Notice how the wonderful descriptions of this group are collective, they are communal. They are a spiritual house, living stones and a holy nation. Because the going was tough Peter, was encouraging them to stick together, to grow stronger in their community ties with one another. They need one another; they need the support, the encouragement, the strength that could only come in community. Someone has said, a family is "*A group which possesses and implements an irrational commitment to the well-being of its members.*" That pretty much describes the community about which Peter is writing. In the hard times, we have each other.

We all know trees can stand up to quite strong winds without being blown over. This is usually because their root system goes deep into the ground offering strength and stability. However, one of the world's tallest

trees, the Redwood, has a very shallow root system, not penetrating deep into the earth but spreading out just under the earth's surface. Consequently, a single Redwood is easily blown over. But Redwoods that grow together have their root systems intertwined and in this way they support, uphold and strengthen each other to stand against harsh conditions.

That is what Peter is hoping for in these dispersed communities; that they will stick together and strengthen each other.

Purpose

Those early Christian communities must have felt uncertain; a small group of people who were on the outer of society and harshly dealt with. How could they hope to have any meaningful place in the world or role in society? Surely they were inconsequential to those around them.

Whilst we do not experience, at least in Australia, persecution as the early followers of Jesus did, following Jesus today has become an alienating pursuit. Can anyone be a Christian today without conjuring up the jokes and stereotypes plaguing anyone remotely associated with organised religion? How can we hope to be a significant voice in our society given the onslaught of cultural disdain for Christianity? Are we inconsequential to the world around us?

Far from it, Peter reminds us. They, and we, are still people with a purpose. After he rambles off an extensive list of descriptors of these early communities; spiritual house, chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's own people, Peter tells them this is not for their own aggrandisement, but (in his words), "*in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of (God)*". His readers, and us, are people with a purpose and knowing we have a purpose can be transforming. As the philosopher Nietzsche said, "He who has a 'why' to live for can stand almost any 'how'."

It must have almost seemed laughable that this small group of Jesus followers should have any substantial place to play in the Divine drama of history, but Peter has a different view. They are, indeed, central players in God's drama, as are we.

During World War Two, the Cathedral in Strasbourg was bombed and almost totally destroyed. One feature of the Cathedral which escaped almost unscathed was a statue of Jesus. It did suffer some damage in that the hands were blown off. After the war a sculptor offered to repair the statue and replace the hands. The congregation, however, decided against the repair. Instead they placed the handless statue in the new cathedral with an inscription from Teresa of Avila on it, reading: "Christ has non hands but yours to do his work today."

We, as followers of Jesus in 2020, may feel similarly insignificant. But the reminder to us is that we too are Christ's hands and feet and voice today. We too, still have a purpose.

Peter's words are just as powerful and meaningful to us today as they were to his original readers. As we seek to faithfully follow Christ we will encounter much to discourage us, perhaps to the point of wondering if it is all worth it. But we, too, are reminded that we are still God's people, God is with us as we are with each other, and God still has work for us to do.

Knowing this is enough to sustain us, enough to support us and enough to empower us for the days ahead.

RESPONDING

OFFERING

Jesus said, “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving”

God, our unshakeable foundation!
So much in our lives is in a constant state of change,
the new becoming old so quickly.
We need to be reminded of that which is the cornerstone
of our lives – the Risen Christ!
As we offer our gifts to you, remind us that your love,
and the compassion, humility, hunger for justice the Christ
taught us as disciples are constants.
Help us to be open to new things, new ideas,
and new ways to serve you, keeping Christ as our cornerstone!
In his wonderful name, we pray. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Let us pray (i.e. responsively)

Each morning when we wake to life and health, friends, family and food
We thank you eternal and loving God

For your steadfast love at this time of great uncertainty, unspeakable suffering and unimaginable death in the
World
We thank you eternal and loving God

For our very good fortune in living in our country of Australia at this time
We thank you eternal and loving God

For the ability of some of your sons and daughters to think and work in logical, inquisitive and creative ways
to solve medical and other problems that we encounter
We thank you eternal and loving God

For our elected Local, State and Federal leaders who listen carefully to these Health Professionals and act
upon their advice when necessary
We thank you eternal and loving God

For a society where our food supply and medical facilities are adequate and secure
We thank you eternal and loving God

For a society where almost everyone is law-abiding and compliant with regulations
We thank you eternal and loving God

For our friends and families as we encourage and help each other, even though spatially separated
We thank you eternal and loving God

For our Church community here at Seacliff who have stood by each other in times of loss and grief and in
times of joy and celebration for a 100 years or so.
We thank you eternal and loving God

And so, as we recall Easter which commemorated the loss and grief of the Crucifixion and death of Jesus, we were reminded of the illness and death of so many hundreds of thousands of your people in all countries around the world.

And as we then celebrated the Resurrection, we were be inspired when we were reminded that from grief comes joy, from anxiety comes confidence, from uncertainty comes certainty and from death comes life eternal.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

HYMN: "I AM CARRIED"

Day by day and hour by hour,
Your love for me from heaven flows.
Like streams of water in the desert
Living waters flow.
You walk beside me, gently guiding,
Leading me through every storm.
Ever lasting, never changing,
grace and love divine.

Mercy's healing grace relieving
Every spot and every stain.
Forgiven freely, no more guilty,
Love has conquered shame.
The broken mended, night has ended,
Lost and lonely, lost no more,
For I am carried in the arms of
grace and love divine.

I am carried in the arms of grace and love divine.
I am held by hands of healing, washed by water pure.
Lifting up my heavy heart, held in grace scarred hands.
I am carried in the arms of grace and love divine.

Never worthy, never earning,
All my works now left behind.
Ever onwards, ever upwards,
You've called me on to rise.
Above my darkness, all my failure,
Every fear and every pain –
Always carried, always covered by
grace and love divine.

I am carried in the arms of grace and love divine.
I am held by hands of healing, washed by water pure.
Lifting up my heavy heart, held in grace scarred hands.
I am carried in the arms of grace and love divine.

JOURNEYING

BLESSING

This service is ended. The larger service begins.

Go on your separate paths never forgetting the treasure you hold in trust

*We are a chosen race, royal priests, God's own people,
called to declare the wonderful deeds of the One who called us
out of the darkness into glorious Light.*

The nurturing, fatherly love of God always hold you in strong, everlasting arms.
The costly, brotherly love of Christ ever walk beside you and deliver you from all evil.
The dependable, motherly love of the Spirit ever enfold you with holy warmth.

FOR REFLECTION

- How does this time of being church in a new way, apart from one another, lead to new perspectives about who we are as a community called and "gathered"?
- In 1 Peter the author describes the Church in a number of ways: "*living stones*", "*spiritual house*", "*chosen race*", "*royal priesthood*", "*holy nation*" and "*God's own people*".
What do you understand him to mean in using these descriptions?
What do they say to you?
Is there any assurance in the descriptions?
Is there any challenge in them?
- In what ways might we as a community of God's people, "*proclaim the mighty acts of (God)*"?
- *Dorothy Day, 20th century*
"We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."
- *William Shakespeare, 16th century*
"We know what we are, but not what we may be."
- *Brennan Manning, 20th century*
"Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."
- *Sister Joan Chittister, 20th century*
"The Church is the gathering of seekers who celebrate the continuing presence of Christ among them, in them, and through them."