



**Seacliff Uniting Church**  
**Worship Notes**  
**Service conducted by Mr Max Howland**  
**SUNDAY 19<sup>th</sup> JULY 2020**



**Call to worship**

Lord, you have examined me –

***You know everything about me.***

You know all my secret wishes and desires.

***You know my dark secrets.***

Where can I go to get away from you?

***You are everywhere, even within me.***

Where can I go to get away from you?

***Why would I want to anyway? You are life itself to me.***

A song of quiet confidence, of just that sort:

**TiS 87      You are before me, Lord**

**Ian Robertson Pitt-Watson**

1

You are before me, Lord, you are behind,  
and over me you have spread out your hand;  
such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too high to grasp, too great to understand.

2

Then where, Lord, from your presence shall I go,  
and from your Spirit where, Lord, shall I fly?  
If I ascend to heaven you are there,  
and still are with me if in hell if I lie;

3

and if I take my flight into the dawn,  
or if I dwell on ocean's farthest shore,  
your mighty hand will rest upon me still,  
and your right hand will guard me evermore.

4

Search me, O God, search me and know my ways;  
try me, O God, my mind and spirit try;  
keep me from any path that gives you pain  
and lead me in the everlasting way.

**Prayers      Adoration**

A prayer used by Rev Diane Bury, beginning a meeting last week:

Lord God, God of past, present and future, we worship you.

We pause, at the end of the week now past –

***and remember how you were with us all last week.***

We pause, on this first day of the coming week –

***in the sure and certain hope that you are already ahead of us in this next week.***

We pause, in this moment of this day –

***knowing that you are around us, beside us, within us.***

A prayer based on Ps 139, the psalm set for this week:  
You know us through and through; you know all about us;  
***yet still you surround us with your love and your  
reassuring hand rests on us.***

This wonderful knowledge is beyond our understanding;  
***it surpasses everything; it is beyond our grasp.***

For the stories we share, for our life together,  
***and for the breath of your life among us, we  
thank you, creator Spirit, Breath of Life.***

***Amen***

### **Confession**

In the New Testament reading for this week, the apostle Paul contrasts the life of unreconstructed human nature with life filled with the Spirit.

Gracious and loving God, we confess how easy it is for us to just do what our human nature wants, and how difficult we find it sometimes to let you into our lives.

And when we do get some sense that we are getting closer to what you want of us, how easily that falls over into self-satisfaction and judgement of others.

***Forgive what we have been;  
help us amend what we are;  
shape what we shall be;  
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways;  
in Jesus' name we pray. Amen***

### **Assurance**

In this constant cycle of rise and fall, there's another constant – the infinite grace of God: whenever we make a mess of things, and fall on our face, this gracious God will be found beside us, a hand held out to help us up, with an invitation to choose again.

This is how we know – our sin is forgiven.

***Thanks be to God***

### **The Hebrew Scriptures – Genesis 28:10-19a**

A little context: chapter 27 tells the story of Jacob's fraud against his father Isaac, and the theft of his birthright blessing from his brother Esau. Unsurprisingly, Esau is consumed with murderous rage; not unreasonably, Jacob flees for his life.

From Genesis chapter 28, verse 10:

Jacob left Beersheba and started toward Haran. At sunset he came to a holy place and camped there. He lay down to sleep, resting his head on a stone. He dreamed that he saw a stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and coming down on it. And there was the LORD standing beside him. "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac," he said. "I will give to you and your descendants this land on which you are lying. They will be as numerous as the dust on the earth. They will extend their territory in all directions, and through you and your descendants I will bless all the nations. Remember, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done all that I promised to you."

Jacob woke up and said, "The LORD is here! He is in this place, and I didn't know it!" he was afraid and said, "What a terrifying place this is! It must be the house of God; it must be the gate that opens to heaven." Jacob got up early next morning, took the stone that was under his head, and set it up as a memorial.

### **The Gospel – Matthew 13:24-30**

Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel is the parables chapter: there are seven of them, together with the explanation of why Jesus used them as a teaching tool. Ours is the second one in the set.

From Matthew 13, verse 24:

Jesus told them another parable: "The Kingdom of God is like this. A man sowed good seed in his field. One night, when everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the plants grew and the heads of grain began to form, then the weeds showed up. The man's servants came to him and said, "Sir, it was good seed you sowed in your field; where did the weeds come from?" "It was some enemy who did this," he answered. "Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" they asked him. "No," he answered, "because as you gather the weeds you might pull up some of the

wheat along with them. Let the wheat and the weeds both grow together until harvest. Then I will tell the harvest workers to pull up the weeds first, tie them in bundles and burn them, and then gather in the wheat and put it in my barn.

### **Message**

When I first moved into this area, I had a neighbour whose father had a simple philosophy about weeds – if in doubt, pull it out: if it's a weed it'll come back. [Not all that useful, eh!]

What do most organisations do with identified trouble makers?

Amos the prophet, a trouble-making northerner working in the south, was told to go back where he came from.

Joseph was a spoiled-brat Daddy's boy and made sure his brothers knew it – they sold him off into slavery. In contemporary Australia a whistle blower can expect a trial in secret, or a life sentence, for exposing the uncomfortable truth.

*What shall we do with trouble makers?* Universally we get rid of them. But – if the Church is going to be as true to the Bible as it tells other people they should be, *we actually won't do that.*

"Your wheat crop's full of weeds – what shall we do?" they ask. "Leave them," said the owner. "If you pull them out, all you'll do is wreck half the crop; leave them – their time will come."

And it's true – evolution has made weeds masters of survival: their roots are all-too-often entwined with the roots of the plants we want, so they get to survive, at least long enough to propagate.

**Jacob** was just about as big and nasty a weed as anybody could not want: a schemer, deceiver [his name sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for cheat], his mother's favourite child [mind you, both parents played that one: Isaac favoured Esau].

In our story, Jacob is on the run for his life. But this rotten louse gets the message that he is the one through whom God will keep the promise made to Abraham. As Jewish history is told, that is indeed how it turned out.

What shall we do with the weeds again?

***But that's assuming*** we can correctly identify them.

And this is the point at which it dawned on me that everything I remember hearing and saying about this parable, all my life, has probably missed the point.

See here's the thing – in Jesus' time and place, when the plants were just shooting, it was almost impossible to tell wheat from weeds. By the time you can tell the difference, it's too late, the damage is done.

So actually this parable is not about the people elbowed out just because they're a bit different, or even the obvious bad and destructive elements: they are irrelevant to this story. It **is** about the ones who seem quite harmless, who are just like everybody else – everything seems fine – and you can't spot the damage they do until *after* it's done. But note that in the parable, *and* its explanation half a page later, a) nothing happens to the weeds until harvest time, but also b) nothing is said about just who the weeds are: that's left to us to work out.

### ***So what does that do to how we interpret this parable?***

I think this is a positively scary story, because the weeds are us, or some of us, anyway. We in the church probably like to think of ourselves as the good plants, and weeds as being somebody else. Not in this story. We who are friends, community members, fellow labourers in the church – some of us might be weeds. Can you even contemplate the possibility of that?

It's true that this parable is about the error of standing in judgement – but not for the reasons we've customarily thought. The truth is, it's not about somebody else (which is where we like to think trouble always is); the trouble is with insiders – it's us.

The biggest error religious people make – in all religions – is to assume that they are OK just because they are insiders. This story is a caution against that kind of complacency. Just as the biggest threat from the pandemic at the moment is complacency, so it is in our life as Christian people.

This story is a call to constant vigilance, self-examination, honesty with ourselves. In its unassuming way, this is one of the most difficult and challenging of all the parables. Amen.

You will have noticed that I haven't offered any thoughts about how we stay true, just left you with the problem. I think that's precisely the point of the story.

But if you're looking for some guidance, you could try this song: the great love of God.

1

The great love of God  
 is revealed in the Son,  
 who came to this earth  
 to redeem everyone.

2

That love, like a stream  
 flowing clear to the sea,  
 makes clean every heart  
 that from sin would be free.

3

It binds the whole world,  
 every barrier it breaks,  
 the hills it lays low  
 and the mountains it shakes.

4

It's yours, it is ours,  
 O how lavishly giv'n!  
 The pearl of great price,  
 and the treasure of heaven.

### ***Pastoral prayers***

I will offer you some thoughts, topics, ideas – I invite you to pray in whatever way comes to you at this time.

#### *Our world on the sick list*

The unwell – corona virus, other illnesses, mental health in lockdown

The social conditions that have accentuated already existing qualities in people:

Abusers taking advantage,

words of extraordinary meanness from commentators using yet another excuse for racist vilification or blaming the victim;

rich nations exploiting their economic power;

and yet – the most wonderful acts of kindness: food delivered, compassion demonstrated by officials in charge,

phone calls,

kind words

#### *The ones the world sees as weeds*

Rejected and excluded because they're different or a bit heterodox;

judged because of some failing real or imagined

Ignored because they don't make enough noise or because to take notice would cost us too much ...

but the respectable weeds going unrecognised – judgemental and uncaring, using law to entrench injustice

#### *Our local sick list*

#### *Our response*

So now we pray for ourselves – we who have the capacity to be healers, compassionate, visitors, forgiving, prophets and defenders of those who have no other defender: can we say to God, "Grab me by the scruff of the neck and put me to work for the sake of your suffering people"?

Do we dare pray these words:

Lord's Prayer

1 God sends us his Spirit to befriend and help us,  
re-create and guide us, Spirit-friend:  
Spirit who enlivens, sanctifies, enlightens,  
sets us free, is now our Spirit-friend.

*Spirit of our Father, Spirit-friend,  
Spirit of our Jesus, Spirit-friend,  
Spirit of God's people, Spirit-friend.*

2 Darkened roads are clearer, heavy burdens lighter  
when we're walking with our Spirit-friend:  
now we need not fear the powers of the darkness:  
none can overcome our Spirit-friend.

3 Now we are God's people, bonded by his presence,  
agents of his purpose, Spirit-friend:  
lead us forward ever, slipping backward never,  
to your re-made world, our Spirit-friend.  
*God sends us his Spirit.*

### **The Blessing**

Go from worship into the wider world.

Know that God is with us.

Grace, mercy and peace from the One God who encounters us as  
Father, Son and Spirit, always with us.

Amen.

### **Some thoughts and/or questions**

1 Is there anything that particularly strikes you from anything in the video?

2 How do you react to the notion that you could be a weed, not a wanted plant? Or me??

3 How can we tell – at the time or at any later time? What is the test?

4 There's a parallel with Hebrew tradition here – a prophet was declared to be so if the things he said came true; that is, you could never tell at the time – only with hindsight. You'll remember that almost all the prophets recorded in Hebrew Scripture were opposed at the time of their work. Is that a helpful comparison?

5 Think of the church faction you most "love to hate", as we say, or the church policy you most strongly oppose: what should we do with these disruptive or unpleasant or just plain wrong things, according to the parable? Are there limits to how far we can take that teaching? What other words of scripture could support taking action to remove a disruptive influence? Now what do we do?