

CAMPBELLTOWN UNITING CHURCH

17 MARCH 2024

LENT 5

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come and seek God, with your whole heart:

*meditate on Christ's teachings,
fix ourselves on the ways of Christ,
and delight in God's Holy word.*

Come and worship God.

WELCOME

Welcome to worship at Campbelltown this morning.

My name is Rebecca Purling,
and the worship leader is Marian Eddowes.

Please join us in the hall for morning tea.

SING TIS 477 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'

OPENING PRAYER

Loving Jesus,
High Priest of our hearts, draw us close to you,
so we may glorify you and proclaim your goodness,
in all that we are, all that we do, and
all that we say. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy,
remove our transgressions,
take away our iniquity, and
smooth the paths that will lead us closer to you.

For we know that the brokenness of the world is all around,
separating us from you, creation, and each other.

Create in us a pure heart, O God,
and put a reconciling spirit within us.
Do not cast us away from your creation,
and do not take your Holy Spirit from us.
Restore your wonderful creation
and sustain your covenant with all Earth.
Amen.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

Be assured that God,
lives deep within our hearts.
God will never leave us.
and will forgive our iniquity.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

SING TIS 712 'Create in us a clean heart'

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

Travelling Jesus has some gardening tools and seeds with him today.

When a seed is buried in the ground it changes, from one seed of wheat, more than twenty stalks of wheat can grow. From one tiny little seed, a huge crop can grow!

I wonder if you have ever thought about what happens once seed is planted in the dirt. Did you know that some seeds should be planted in the autumn, some in winter?

Other seeds should be planted in the spring. Those plants don't need the winter's cold soil to reach their full potential. Seeds planted in the spring need rich warm soil to grow.

Temperature plays a big part in how a seed may grow. The way a seed is planted and taken care of also helps produce a bigger, better harvest. Today's scripture passage finds Jesus comparing life to a seed. *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*

Jesus teaches us that people, like seeds, need the help of proper care, including spending life with other people, and not alone. As a follower of Jesus, we must be willing to be with other people. It is important to have relationships with other people. It's in those relationships that we can help others and offer love and hope to the world. That is what this church has to offer! Our church offers a place for all of us to get together and worship God.

Jesus asks his followers, all of us to plant the seeds! If we never plant the seeds, they will never grow. Once planted and cared for properly, the seeds will provide a harvest. Let's plant seeds of love, kindness, and joy. When we do that, we create a world that will grow in the love of Christ!

PRAYER:

God of love: Help me to share the seeds of love, kindness, and joy that you have provided. Don't let me keep them to myself. Give me the opportunity to grow heaven here on earth. Amen.

SING TIS 624 'Christ be my leader by night as by day'

BIBLE READINGS Hebrews 5: 5-10
John 12: 20-33
In this is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

SERMON

'Some Greeks go to see Jesus', sounds like the title of a children's book, but it actually refers to an episode in Jesus' life recorded in the gospel according to John. It is one of many stories unique to the Fourth Gospel,

it is a story that raises many questions and includes further teaching about Jesus' ministry, death, and exaltation. The account also challenges followers of Jesus to 'lose our lives in order to gain new life', and to bear witness to God's promises to the world.

This story is set towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry; he has been very active, preaching and teaching, performing signs and miracles. During his three years of active ministry he has attracted a lot of attention, wherever he travelled crowds gathered to see and hear him, and many came to believe that he was the long-promised Messiah. He had a faithful band of close followers and many others who remained in their towns and villages and shared their experiences and belief with others around them.

But there were many others who did not understand Jesus' preaching and signs, people who went away from an encounter with him wondering, wondering what it all meant, what difference his teaching would make to their lives, they have seen and heard other miracle workers and teachers and not much has changed! And there was a third group of people who did not like Jesus and his message and as time went on became increasingly hostile towards him.

The tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders have recently reached a peak after the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus was a friend of Jesus, he became ill, and his sisters Mary and Martha were very worried, they sent word to Jesus hoping he would come to them and help their brother. But Jesus was slow to respond, and before he got to their home Lazarus had died and was buried.

After a few days Jesus arrived in Bethany, well after Lazarus had been interred. After greeting the sisters Jesus went to the tomb and, in the name of God, commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb. Lazarus emerged still wrapped in his burial cloths, but alive and well, and there was much rejoicing. Lazarus' sisters, Jesus, and the disciples, and many from the village were delighted to have him back.

Witnessing this miracle meant many came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he possessed divine power, they committed themselves to follow in his ways. But not everybody was happy to witness and hear about the miracle of healing, and the ensuing response.

Some the religious leaders were upset and angry, they had been keeping tabs on Jesus and his activities, and they were becoming increasingly angry about Jesus' popularity and his teaching. They believed he was undermining their authority and upsetting the delicate peace between the Jewish people and the Roman colonisers.

The raising of Lazarus was the final straw for the priests and the Pharisees, and they began plotting to kill Jesus, to silence him once and for all. Their anger about Jesus, his ministry and message was so strong that

they even threatened to kill Lazarus! They wanted to silence the witnesses and get rid of the evidence – it's quite the thriller this gospel account!

The raising of Lazarus occurred just before the Passover Festival, it was during that busy and festive time that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Many of Jesus' growing number of followers grabbed branches to wave and cheered him along as he rode into the holy city. This drew even more attention to Jesus and his ministry, piquing people's interest and further antagonising his enemies.

Next in the narrative we are introduced to 'the Greeks' who were seeking Jesus, a mysterious group whose role in the account seems to be to act as a catalyst for Jesus next speech. Maybe they witnessed the triumphal entry and wanted to know more about the one who brought on such devotion. Maybe they had heard of Jesus and about his ministry and wanted to know more, the narrator doesn't offer any explanation for their interest.

All we are told is that some Greeks went to one of Jesus' disciples and asked for assistance, Philip then spoke to Andrew and together they went to find Jesus to tell him about the visitors. We don't know if the Greeks ever had an audience with Jesus; we don't know if these proselytes (converts to Judaism) ever came to faith in Jesus, the Son of God. But the inclusion of this group of people in the story reminds us that Jesus came to save all peoples and nations.

Right from the opening prologue we have been told that Jesus' ministry and message was for the world, so that the world would find more light and truth, so that all people would have the opportunity to experience abundant and eternal life. And here we have another example of the universality of Jesus' ministry and message.

The Greeks came seeking Jesus, and this activity sets the scene for Jesus to talk about his impending death and to teach again about his followers losing their life so that they may gain eternal and abundant life. The approach of these outsiders also challenges the insiders, the disciples to remember that their future witness will be in and for Israel and beyond.

Jesus tells his disciples that *'the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'*. Earlier in the gospel account Jesus has several made references to the 'hour', he has foreshadowed that there will be an event, a significant event that will occur when the time is right. Throughout his ministry there have been signs pointing to the new thing God will do through Jesus, but up until this point they have only been signs.

But now with popularity and tensions rising, the *'hour has come'*, we are getting closer to the revelation of God's plan to change the world. For the first witnesses it was still not clear what 'the hour' would involve, it would only be later, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension that the disciples and others would discuss and write down all the events of the coming days and what it all meant for them and the world.

Jesus often used familiar and everyday objects to illustrate his teaching, this time he spoke about seeds and how they are used to grow food and shelter that give and sustain life. Seeds are scattered by the farmer, or planted by a gardener, into the soil, there they lie in the dark waiting for the right time. When the conditions are right the seed 'dies' it is changed as it breaks open, allowing the roots and shoots to develop and grow.

The seed is no longer a seed, it has done its work, a plant begins to grow with roots that reach into the soil to gather water and nutrients, and leaves that reach up to capture the energy of the sun and carbon dioxide from the air. The plant continues to grow, eventually bringing beauty, shade and 'fruit' that brings forth and sustains life.

There are (at least) two messages to be drawn from this metaphor, the first is about Jesus himself, soon he will farewell his closest disciples at a Passover meal, he will then be arrested and tried, then crucified. His broken body will be taken down and placed in a dark tomb, a stone rolled across the entrance.

But that is not the end of Jesus' story, three days after his burial in the cold, dark earth he rose and continued his ministry, he met with his disciples behind closed doors and at the beach, and he empowered them with the gift of the Spirit, sending them out to share the story of his life and ministry and the promises he had shared with them. The seed was placed in the ground and there it died in order that others would find new and abundant life.

But there is a second meaning in this message, a message to the first disciples who were there, and to future generations who would hear and study this account. Jesus is teaching that his followers need to let our old selves 'die' so that then we can find new life and bear fruit, fruit that will bear witness to the good news, the healing and hope we have found.

Jesus continued his teaching to the disciples and the crowds saying: *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

Sometimes the writings of the Fourth Gospel are convoluted and hard to unpack, does Jesus really want us to 'hate' ourselves and our current lives? This seems counter to his expressions of love and mercy, and his

challenge for his followers to repent and find new life. A writer for the UMC offers this interpretation for 21st century disciples.

What Jesus wants is for us to hold our lives lightly, to hold ourselves lightly. It is not all about us, despite what various and sundry advertisers want us to believe. It is about something bigger than us. It is about giving ourselves over to a larger truth, a deeper reality, a more profound life than the one we find at the end of our noses and fingertips. He wants us to extend our reach, just like he is about to extend his.

In fact, he says that very thing. "Where I am, there my servant will be also." Where he is when he says that is looking at giving his life away for something bigger than his own flesh and blood. And that is exactly where he wants us to be—living beyond ourselves, living more deeply, living through surrender, living through giving ourselves away, living through service. "Whoever serves," he says. We can find our lives by holding them lightly enough to lose them - not always physically.

This past week my family have read and heard many kind words about my dad and his ministry, many have spoken of his servant heart and how it touched their lives. We have heard and read stories of visiting and listening, about conducting weddings and funerals with respect and care, and bringing a lightness and hope into difficult situations.

Now, Dad was no saint, but he always strived to live out his faith, and to bear witness to the love, mercy, and peace of God that he had found, that had given him a sense of abundant life. He tried to hold his life 'lightly', he worked for justice and peace, he was generous with his resources and his love, in order that others could flourish and experience abundant life.

Jesus is not asking his followers to make grand gestures, he is not asking that we literally put our lives in danger, or that we live in poverty, but he is asking that we 'live lightly'. That we share the good news of abundant life in Christ through word and deed. We do this when we make time to listen to another's stories of pain and joy, when we remember in prayer our neighbours and our world.

We bear witness to Jesus' ministry and message of healing and hope when we serve our community and when we financially support the work of church agencies.

'Some Greeks go to see Jesus', might sound like the title of a children's book, but it is actually a story found only in the Fourth Gospel. The presence of these seekers reminds us that the incarnation of Jesus was a gift for the world, that his ministry of love, his message of mercy and peace, was and is to be shared with all peoples and nations.

The visit of the Greeks also led to a reiteration of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, it means letting go of the ways of the world, denying self, in order that we and those around us, will know and experience abundant and eternal life.

Amen.

SING TIS 589 'Jesus calls us o'er the tumult'

OFFERING

Invitation

We wish to see the fruits of Jesus' ministry. We want to experience God's reign on Earth.
The sharing of gifts is one way we can catch a glimpse of the reign of God.

Prayer

Loving God, open our hearts to a new world. A world where there is no longer least and greatest, rich and poor. A world where there is enough for all, and all treated as beloved children of God. Until that day comes, bless our small contributions of time, talent and treasures and may they work towards the building of your new world.
Amen.

COMMUNITY CONCERNS

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Loving God,
We pray for your church and its ministry around the world...

We pray for your faithful followers, our siblings in Christ...

We pray for this community of believers and for all the joys and sorrows we share with you silently...

God, may the law of love written on our hearts become our song as we journey.

A song with words that comfort when hardships on the road burden us...

a tune that lingers leaving warm thoughts with those whom we meet on the way,

and with a rhythm that lilts,

buoying our spirits and strengthening our resolve to see the journey through.

You promised to write your law within us,
so that no matter where we are, we will always know,
deep in our hearts, you and your ways. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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.

SING TIS 595 'O Jesus I have promised'

SENDING OUT

Go and embody God's song to the world.

With your words, sing hope.

With your actions, dance peace.

With your being, play love.

The grace...

Amen.