

# MOSMAN UNITING CHURCH

**28th February 2021**

**Lent 2**

Words in bold are spoken by the congregation.

## GATHERING AS GOD'S PEOPLE

### **GREETING & WELCOME**

The Lord be with you!

**And also with you**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

We honour the Elders past, present and emerging, of the Cammeraygal People, the traditional custodians of the land on which we stand.

### **WE LIGHT THE CHRIST CANDLE**

Jesus Christ is a light to the World

**Thanks be to God**

**HYMN 116 (TiS)** 'Begin, my tongue, some heavenly theme'

### **CALL TO WORSHIP** *from Psalm 22*

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

**All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;**

**stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!**

For he did not despise or abhor

the affliction of the afflicted;  
**he did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him.**

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
**my vows I will pay before those who fear him.**  
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  
**those who seek him shall praise the Lord.**  
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord;  
**and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.**

For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
**and he rules over the nations.**

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;  
**before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and I shall live for him.**

Posterity will serve him;  
**future generations will be told about the Lord,  
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
saying that he has done it.**  
**Praise the Lord!**

## **PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Before God, with the people of God, we confess to our  
brokenness:

To the ways we wound our lives,  
the lives of others

and the life of the world.  
I regret the harm I have done (to another and to creation),  
and ask for God's restoration.  
Amen.

*(The Iona Community)*

### **ASSURANCE OF GRACE**

Embrace the Assurance  
that God cancels our debt,  
that Christ renews our lives,  
And that the Spirit enables us to grow in love.

**Thanks be to God.**

*(The Iona Community)*

### **THE PEACE**

God reconciles and unites us.  
The peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard  
our hearts and our thoughts in Jesus Christ.  
In worship the greeting of peace is given with a sign.  
As the words are spoken now, we may turn our faces, hearts and  
thoughts to neighbours near and far, hearing and repeating the  
words:

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

**And also with you.**

**HYMN 194** 'O love how deep, how broad, how high!'

# RECEIVING GOD'S WORD

## BIBLE READINGS

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16

Romans 4: 13-25

Mark 8: 27-38

**This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

**HYMN 583** 'Take up your cross, the Saviour said'

## REFLECTION

*Written by David*

Our call to worship this morning began with words from a Psalm, taken from the middle of that Psalm. But the same Psalm begins in a very different mood: not 'You who fear the Lord, praise him!', but 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Those words are very familiar. They were spoken by Jesus, from the Cross, at a moment of extreme suffering. So to those who know the Bible as well as Jesus did, it will be obvious that he was quoting the words of the Psalmist, who continues by repeating the plea in different words: 'Why are you so far from helping me?'

I think most people would think these words were forced from Jesus only at this lowest point. But could it be that was not the first time those words had come to Jesus' mind? I'm exploring, in this reflection, Mark's Gospel, not just the account we find there of Christ's ministry, but its signs that his ministry was only partially understood at this time not only by the disciples and the crowds that followed Jesus, but even – just maybe – by Jesus himself.

This morning's Gospel reading climaxes on a high point, Peter's declaring to Jesus. 'You are the Messiah'. This insight of Peter's is immediately undercut, not only by Jesus ordering the disciples not to tell anyone, but maybe even more radically than that, in Jesus' rebuke of Peter 'Get behind me, Satan!' That should give us pause. It comes, in our reading, in reply to Jesus' question 'Who do people say that I am?'. We think he is testing the disciples' understanding, but could it be that he was testing his own understanding of who he was, and what his ministry would mean? Who do we say Jesus is? Who do you say he is? Are you always sure? Was he?

Some years ago I went several times to China. I was exploring the possibility of working there, with orchestras and concert halls, devoted to classical music originating in Europe, a culture originally foreign to China. It is a minority interest in China, but growing and certainly tolerated by the regime there. The religion I profess as a Christian was more problematical in China, rejected by the ideology of the regime. Tolerated, but within strict limits. I gradually realized I was having my first longish experience of finding myself in a setting where Christian culture isn't paid lip service, as it is in Australia. It certainly heightened my sense of being a Christian, and made me think and feel about it in a different way.

On one occasion my Chinese hosts and I flew from Beijing to Shanghai for a meeting with my Chinese orchestral conductor friend, who was the main reason I was in China. He brought with him to our brief meeting at the airport the concertmaster, or leader, of his Shanghai orchestra. She was a young woman with good English, having studied in the West. While the others talked, I noticed she was wearing a small pectoral cross. 'Are you a Christian?', I quietly asked her. 'Yes I am', she replied. It was an exchange with quite different resonances, for me at least, than

any similar exchange in Australia. And that discreetly worn crucifix really meant something. The Chinese musician who wore it wasn't like the young woman who went into a jeweler's shop in the USA and asked for a cross on a necklace. 'Oh!', she asked when she was shown some samples, 'don't you have one with the little man hanging on it?'

Who do people say Jesus is? – indeed.

The original readers of Mark's Gospel would have grasped, immediately, at least two things about Peter's exchange with Jesus. They would have been proud that Peter was the first disciple to grasp who Jesus truly was. Peter was the founder of the Christian church in the pagan city of Rome where Mark is thought to have written. More than that: they would have known that Peter's confession that Jesus was Messiah was not just a revelation from God (as another Gospel adds). They would have recognized the courage of Peter's confession, in a place where Christians were persecuted. They too were faced with a situation that required their bravery. They could be fed to the lions, or even be crucified, as, tradition has it, in Peter's case. In Mark's Gospel, this is the very point where Jesus begins to teach his disciples, as we will sing in the next hymn, that following him means to 'take up your cross'.

But let's look more closely at the context in which arises Jesus' question 'Who do people say that I am?' I deliberately added the preceding verses to this week's lectionary reading, to provide the context. Jesus' ministry has begun, but so far it has been in his home region, in Galilee. At Caesarea Philippi the evangelist sets Jesus at a crossroads. He could either continue to where he had already been, or set his path into upland Judea, and ultimately to Jerusalem. What has his ministry told us thus far about who Jesus is? He takes a poll of the vox pop, which comes back 'John the

Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets'. Then he asks the disciples, implicitly, whether they agree with that, or do they think something different? This prompts Peter to blurt out 'You are the Messiah'.

In the text we have, Jesus says 'Keep it a secret'. This is very typical of Mark's Gospel, and I'll say some more about the so-called Messianic secret in a moment. But consider this: did Jesus want people to say he was the Messiah? Maybe not. A few verses further on, when he tells the disciples he must suffer, and be killed, Peter's reaction makes Jesus say to him 'Get behind me, Satan!'. The implication is that Jesus is sure of his mission, and his disciples don't accept it. They can't face it. But notice that Jesus says, in the third person, that the Son of Man must suffer. He doesn't say 'the Messiah'. Some students of the Bible think that in Jesus' sayings which were Mark's source here, the rebuke calling Peter 'Satan' was actually Jesus' response to Peter calling him Messiah.

If so, why did Jesus react so strongly? Perhaps because he was still struggling in his own mind about who he was and what his mission was. If Jewish people like Peter started greeting Jesus as Messiah, that meant they were seeing him as the once and future king of Israel. And probably a warrior king who would triumph over all enemies. That goes right up to the crowd's Palm Sunday greeting 'Hosanna to the son of David'. The most balanced reading of the whole of the passage from Mark's Gospel we heard this morning is that Jesus was delaying the public proclamation of his identity as Messiah, until he could reinterpret his life and ministry in the light of its fulfillment, that is, in the light of the Cross and the Resurrection. That is why there had to be a Messianic secret.

But just possibly, there may have been another rather different reason for the secret. Mark may have had in front of him stories and sayings of Jesus that puzzled him, because they seemed to show a Jesus who only gradually became fully aware who he was. And Mark got out of the puzzle by showing flashes of revelation that show Jesus as son of God, first at his baptism by John, in a voice from heaven only Jesus may have heard. Then Peter's flash of insight, so quickly lapsing into all-too-human misunderstanding. That's the story we heard today. Still to come was the Transfiguration. We heard about that last week. And each time, Jesus ordered the disciples to keep the secret about who he was, while his words and deeds were showing what his presence among us means.

So, more reflection on the question 'Who do people say I am?'. It is no heresy to ask if Jesus fully knew the answer himself. Yet... This man could pray, in the Garden of Gethsemane 'If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, Father, but yours be done'. Jesus was fully human, and his destiny was hard to accept, for Peter, and even for Jesus himself. Before his ministry, in the wilderness, he grappled with his Father's will for him, to accept it, and, (I'm asking) perhaps to understand it?

That is something we should contemplate now, in the season we call Lent. Ask yourself 'Who do I say Jesus is?', and 'How will I answer the call to take up the Cross?', the one with the man on it. What does it mean to be a truly confessing Christian, and therefore a member of a minority, not only in China, but everywhere? To acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, Christ, Savior – these are interchangeable words. Our Savior, who shared our humanity to the extent of crying out, in the words of the Psalmist 'My God, why have you abandoned me?' We believe that Jesus, even in that extreme moment, had faith and hope in the answer given on Easter Day. May our Lenten prayer, we who sometimes find it hard and doubtful, be that God give us, unworthy though

we are, the faith and hope to stay with his Son on the journey, which is the way to new life.

Martin Luther lived in troubled times, and Satanic evils were vividly real for him. But he found – with the help of St. Paul in readings such as we heard from Romans today – the way to a Messiah who set him free from uncertainty and sense of failure. The rest of Luther’s life was a song of triumph, and thanksgiving, like the one of which he wrote both words and music, which we will sing – yes, WE will – at last!

## **OFFERING**

O God, may these, our offerings, expand your work in the world and add gifts to many people’s lives.

**Bless all that we have given today. Amen.**

## **PRAYERS OF GOD’S PEOPLE**

*By Martin Goodwin*

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, for all people according to their needs.

Almighty God, you created us for a purpose. We are to restore wholeness to creation by acting in your name. Help us to accept this calling with a firm belief that you will accomplish your purpose through us. Lead us to include all nations in our thoughts and prayers for restoration through you. Bless your creation through our loving words and actions and unite us, your children, in your grace.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of Jacob and Rebekah, God of Joseph and Mary, God of our ancestors and our descendants, you hold all people in your hand.

Your mercy surrounds us in our grief, fills our hunger, and stills our fears. We ask your presence in lands torn by war, where natural disasters threaten to take away hope, where corrupt rulers place their own desires above their citizens' needs. Creator of us all, bind up our wounds and restore wholeness to creation. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Faithful, loving Lord, in your mercy you provided a way for us to come to you, to fulfill the requirements of the Law passed on through generations. While we are still unworthy, you come to us offering us salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ. As you raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, restore our wholeness through his sacrifice. Forgive us when we break our relationships and surround us with your loving grace. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Glorious God, it is within your power to renew lives torn apart by sin, by illness, by tragedy and by grief. Strengthen all who struggle from day to day to hope in you. Because we know you have borne the cross to restore wholeness to all creation, we trust you to embrace all who are in need and to bring us to joy in you. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Into your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 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 for ever. Amen.**

## **BEING SENT ON GOD'S MISSION**

**HYMN 103** 'A mighty fortress is our God'

### **BLESSING AND THREEFOLD AMEN**

May the strength of God pilot us  
May the power of God preserve us  
May the wisdom of God instruct us  
May the hand of God protect us  
May the way of God direct us  
And may the shield of God defend us  
Now and evermore

*(St Patrick's Breastplate, adapted by The Corrymeela Community)*

**AMEN AMEN AMEN**

**ORGAN POSTLUDE**

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Many thanks to David for leading our worship today.

Following the service you are invited to join us for morning tea at St. Honores Cafe and Bakery at 542 Military Road, Mosman (under the Bridgepoint Walkway). Our change of location for the time being is due to current Covid 19 restrictions.

If you have concerns or needs which you think would be helped by talking to a minister of religion, we suggest you contact the Reverend Michael Thomas, minister of Crows Nest Uniting Church. Look on our website for details.

**Revised Common Lectionary.** Our readings for next Sunday will be chosen from the following list. Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22.

**ICC Prayer:** We pray for the leaders and people of Mosman Uniting Church.

**Service leader:** David

**Reader:** Brian

**Singer:** Donna Cain

**Organ:** Mr Pastor de Lasala OAM 0408 079 414

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