

The Vine at Home
Second Sunday of Lent – Year B
28th February 2021

Call to worship

Here we are Lord, gathered in your name to worship you.
Here we are Lord, gathered on this Lord's Day to encounter you.
Here we are Lord, bringing all our needs, desires and pain – we bring ourselves just as we are. Come amongst us, by your Spirit, O Lord our God. Amen.¹

Hymn: 409 STF – Let us build a house where love can dwell

Opening Prayers

We pray to our loving and living God,
Who has reconciled all things to himself in Christ.

Gracious God,
we pray for peace, justice and reconciliation throughout the world.
We pray for the honouring of human rights and those who strive for this end.

Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for the renewal of your Church in worship, faith and learning, service and evangelism.

We pray for our local and national leaders of the church.

We give thanks for the gift of your word,
the grace of the sacraments
and the fellowship of your people.

Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

As we journey together to Calvary,
We remember the pain born at the cross,
May we look forward to the empty tomb and the good news of Christ.

Lord, hear us,
Lord, graciously hear us.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 - The Sign of the Covenant

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Matthew Forsyth

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17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty;^[a] walk before me, and be blameless. **2** And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” **3** Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, **4** “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. **5** No longer shall your name be Abram,^[b] but your name shall be Abraham;^[c] for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. **6** I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. **7** I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring^[d] after you.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”³

Mark 8:31-38 - Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. **32** He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,^[a] will save it. **36** For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? **37** Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? **38** Those who are ashamed of me and of my words^[b] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”⁴

Romans 4:13-25 God’s Promise Realized through Faith

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. **14** If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. **15** For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, **17** as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. **18** Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” **19** He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already^[a] as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. **20** No distrust

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made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, **21** being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. **22** Therefore his faith^[b] “was reckoned to him as righteousness.” **23** Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, **24** but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, **25** who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.⁵

Reflections on the readings

The readings today take us through a few key points in the relationship between God and us. When I think of the narrative that flows through the Bible I think of God and humans on a journey together, humans understanding more about God as time goes on. We start with the covenant between God and Abraham way back in Genesis. God makes a promise to Abraham about his descendant, “you will be the father of many nations”, God’s chosen people, Israel. Then much of the Old Testament follows the continued relationship between God and the people of Israel, the complexities and difficulties of that relationship will be familiar stories to many of us.

Our readings then take us forward to Mark’s Gospel and Jesus predicting his death to the disciples. That meek and mild Jesus we sometimes like to think about is far from this story. Jesus tells Peter “get behind me Satan” and he reiterates the difficult task a life of faith demands; he asks us to deny ourselves, lose our lives, take up the cross and follow him. These are big statements and hard for any generation to hear, but they feel as applicable now as they did then.

Paul helps to decode these messages in Romans 4, he speaks about justification by faith and the concept of Grace. He argues that Abraham’s covenant with God was due to Abraham’s faith and therefore Abraham is the father of not only the circumcised but also all those who share a faith in God. “It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be the heir to the world but through the righteousness that comes through faith.”

As we piece these three messages together we see a God who wants to connect with us throughout our human history. A covenant with Israel which is then reaffirmed and broadened through the life and death of God in human form, Jesus. All God asks of us is faith and yet many of us, and I include myself in this, often struggle to have that. For me faith and doubt have always been closely connected so I don’t always find these readings about faith easy to hear. Sometimes my faith feels flimsy and hard to hold; but if we learn anything from the bits between these readings we see that God is unrelenting in his desire to connect with us. The humans in many of those well-known stories of the Old Testament: David, Jonah, Jacob to name a few; fail to live up to what God asks of them but God continues to seek them out, and they continue to work with God.

This is a comfort to me as it suggests that what is asked of me is to keep trying to understand and connect. Faith is not about surety, otherwise it wouldn’t be called faith, it is

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about wrestling with ideas and continually aiming for greater understanding and a deeper connection and relationship with God, one-another and the world.

I am asked to wade through my doubt and see it as part of my story of faith and the journey we are asked to live here on earth trying to take steps in the right direction. Times of failure, doubt and confusion are a guarantee in any Christian journey through life. Often from these times we can come out with fresh enthusiasm and zeal as we have really taken our beliefs to task and challenged what is at their core. The big questions are not to be shied away from but be dealt with head on, from the people I have met those with the strongest and most developed faith are those who grapple and wrestle.

Jesus accuses Peter of being more interested in “human concerns” rather than with the “concerns of God.” I don’t know about you but for me this rings very true! Peter likely had admirable desires and aims, as a leader within the group, he probably didn’t like Jesus upsetting them with all this talk of his death. He wanted to avoid the uncomfortable truth or perhaps just didn’t believe it would really happen. I think often we are guilty of trying to avoid what is uncomfortable in our faith and in our world. We like to keep ourselves and our nearest and dearest safe and happy. We do this by avoiding the uncomfortable truths about the world we live in and what that means for how we worship and how we live.

We may continue to buy things that we know have a negative impact on our planet and on our global sisters and brothers. We may fail to have difficult conversations about faith, climate change and social justice issues with those around us. The example in Jesus here challenges the comfort and denial we want to live in, he deals with the terrifying issue of his own death head on. He wants them to understand the significance of his death, prepare for and grapple with it. I think Jesus also wants us to understand the full extent of what having a faith means, he challenges the very concept that our life is our own. In our current society this is extremely counter cultural as so much is about working for our own ‘salvation’ through what we own, the profile of job we have, the holidays we go on, the house we live in... I could go on.

What Jesus asks of us is huge, it is a complete readjusting and challenging of the current world view in society. I feel it takes a lifetime to work on this. In Romans 4, Paul tells us our faith is enough, we are justified by faith and there is grace for each of us. Therefore, our desire to be more Christ-like is an outworking of the ever-loving God who constantly wants to connect with us. We will continually fail to live up to the example of Jesus, in our decisions about how we live and in our relationship with God. The pull of greed, selfishness and comfort are so strong. However, through the life of Jesus and that new covenant between God and humans we are only asked to keep trying, absolute success is not a possibility. This is where a church community comes in really useful. Look around the church, see your brothers and sisters in Christ. There will be days when the weight of the world’s problems, our own suffering and doubts will overwhelm each of us. However through this community around you, you are called to support one another in this ever changing, growing faith we all have.

We are called to love one another, sometimes this means being a listening ear, sometimes it means challenging one another and sometimes it means just being together, talking and laughing. This is the purpose of the church to help each of us make slightly more Christ-like steps each day. When we struggle and don’t feel we can ever measure up we are here to

remind one another of our ever-present, ever-loving God who forgives and sees each of us as precious and valuable beyond measure, no matter what our worldly status is.⁶

What are you being called to?

“O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.”

Psalm 71:17 NRSV

[Pause].

Who has inspired your Christian journey?

What do you think God’s vision might be for the Church, to grow people of faith?

How might you help everyone to develop a resilient faith?

[Pause, or give people an opportunity to discuss or reflect on the questions, in groups or alone].

Let us pray:

At times, my faith in you is strong and at times, it is weak. Help me to learn from the times of plenty so that in the times of little my faith in you can remain resilient.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

[As part of the prayers of intercession, you may wish to use the hymn 780 STF – Stay with me – playing and/or singing it between each section of the prayers. If this is not possible, simply hold a moment of pause where indicated].

Let us pray.

God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake,
Transform our barrenness into your fruitfulness,
Turn our despair into hope and faith,
Bring water to our parched throats, and food to our empty stomachs.

[780 STF and/or silence].

God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake
In times of war and strife in our world, raise your covenant of peace and love;
In places stalked by hunger and famine, rain down your covenant of abundance.

For people broken and despairing, whisper your covenant of encouragement.

[780 STF and/or silence].

God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake
Where human pride and earthly glory abound, bring your goodness and mercies.

⁶ Reflection written by Anna Bland

If our vision is blurred and cloyed, may your blessings endure.
Where disease and illness have taken root let your healing suffice.
When our faith is fickle, focus our minds on your steadfastness.

[780 STF and/or silence].

We pray that the poor shall eat and be satisfied,
that the rich will be generous in sharing your gifts,
We pray that the mighty rulers of the world
shall be humble vessels of your loving justice.

We pray that the weak and the vulnerable
will find their strength and place in your kingdom.

Loving and just God we pray that your holy covenants
will be fulfilled beyond these walls of worship.

In the name of the suffering and rejected Christ, Your Son, our Saviour.

Amen.⁷

Hymn: 350 STF – I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship

Blessing

Go out in peace, and see the world made anew.
Go out to meet with a community, a family, a society crying out for some love, looking to
encounter the living God.
Go out to discover God's Spirit is at work throughout our world, and be transformed by your
encounter with that same Spirit.
Go, by the grace of God.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.⁸

⁷ Prayers of intercession written by Vincent Jambawo

⁸ Additional prayers by Tim Baker