

**Leura Uniting Church
Sunday October 4, 2020
Rev Geoff Stevenson**



Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

We gather together on this sacred space, cared for over the millennia by the Dharug people who called this home. We pay respects for their stewardship, care and wisdom.

We also remember and respect the faith and faithfulness of those who have worshipped in this space and served God over the years of white settlement, paving the way for us on this day to gather.

Greeting

The peace of the Lord be with you!

And also with you!

You are invited to share God's peace with one another across cyberspace – use a gesture to reach out and greet each other...

Gathering Prayer

The sun rises without fail bringing a new day to Earth and we rise to embrace this time of worship. Flowers, trees, grasses, and plants flourish and give praise with unfolding leaves, waving blades, and fragrant offerings.

May we join them and praise the Creator with our being. Let us worship God!

Song of Gathering...

Be Still for the Presence of the Lord (Aled Jones)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJMaOxdu6B4>

Prayers

In the stillness look around you and let your breathing and awareness be praise to God...

Prayer of Confession (a video prayer...)

We come with our prayer

There are times when we feel cast down, in deep places, abandoned.

Come to us O God when fear overtakes us.

Come to us with your love and presence.

There are times when we lash out in anger, seeking revenge.

Come to us O God when fear controls us.

Come to us with your forgiveness and mercy.

There are times when we come to our wits end, not knowing where to turn.

Come to us O God when fear confuses us

Come to us with your plans for good.

In this time let us open ourselves and our fears to God in the hope of transformation and a way forward.

We take a moment for reflection...

Words of Assurance:

God does not abandon us in our fear – for ourselves or of others.

God comes to us!

God journeys with us and God can be trusted even when all seems lost.

Thank you to God

Song

1. And you sun and moon and stars,
 O Bless the Lord
 And all you show'rs of rain, O bless the Lord
 And all you breezes and winds, O bless the
 Lord To God be highest glory and
 praise forever more.

2. And you dew and frosts and snow
 O bless the Lord
 And you night time and day, O bless the Lord
 And you darkness and light, O bless the Lord
 And you light'ning and clouds,
 O bless the Lord.
 To God be highest glory and
 praise forever more.

Canticle of Daniel

3. And you mountains and hills
 O bless the Lord
 And you all plants of the earth,
 O bless the Lord
 And you fountains and spring,
 O bless the Lord
 And you rivers and seas. O bless the Lord
 To God be highest glory
 and praise forever more.

Let all the earth bless the Lord
 Let all the earth bless the Lord.

Repeat to fade at end

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Bible Readings**Matthew 21:33-46** Carolyn Craig-Emilsen

³³“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. ³⁴When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. ³⁵But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. ³⁷Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ ³⁹So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. ⁴⁰Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” ⁴¹They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.” ⁴²Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. ⁴⁴The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Philippians 3:4b-14

⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Contemporary Reflection

[The reflection can be found on video at: <https://youtu.be/70m8HOR6JB4>]

Who Owns this Earth and All that is in it?

There is much wisdom amongst the traditional peoples of the world. Chief Seattle was a Suquamish and Duwamish chief. A leading figure among his people, he pursued a path of accommodation to white settlers, of the USA. He responded to the President of the US, who asked him if they could buy land from him and his people. He was amazed and confused that people believed they could own the land – can you own the reflection of the sun off the water; the air; the trees and mountains, animals and rivers? He said:

“Teach your children what we have taught our children: that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the children of the earth. If we spit upon the ground, we spit upon ourselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover, our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land; but you cannot. He is the God of all people. And compassion is equal for all. This earth is precious to God, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on the Creator. So, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it, and with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for our children and love as God loves us all.”

Chief Seattle, like many indigenous leaders spoke from the wisdom of his relationship with the earth and with the Creator of all things. In Kakadu there is a cave, simply ‘Big Bill’s Cave’. It is an overhang of rock with a rock wall along the back on which there is writing and drawings. They represent the teachings of Bill Neidjie, the ‘Gagudju Man.’ Bill was able to attend a mission school and learn something of the whitefella’s language and ways. He was deeply grounded in the traditions, wisdom and life of his people, the traditional custodians of the land. He taught his children, grandchildren and anyone else who would listen, the wisdom of the land and how to live there. He understood the seasons, the creatures and the landforms and he understood his relationship to land and Spirit. Bill Neidjie, like Chief Seattle, understood the paradox of thinking you can own land and do anything you want to it. He understood the dangers in this, dangers we have run headlong into and are hopefully beginning to recognise and will do something about. He also understood that the land does not belong to us – we are custodians, stewards and the owner is the Creator of all things.

I thought of Bill and Chief Seattle and so many other wise and profound indigenous leaders across the world and history, as I read the story from Matthew’s Gospel this week (Matthew 21:33-46). It follows from earlier stories where Jesus performed a symbolic action against the Temple and the powers who ruled there, seeking fortune and power over justice and compassion. They lined their pockets at the expense of the poor and struggling people in their care. He spoke pointedly at them, claiming they were people of words and belief systems but no action.

In this week’s story he speaks of a landowner who developed a vineyard, planted vines and built a winepress. He then installed tenant farmers to look after the vineyard and work it for him, whilst he was away. In due course he sent some servants to claim his share of the produce, but the tenant farmers took them and beat them, sending them on their way. The owner sent more servants, who were also beaten and sent back. Finally, he decided to send his son, the heir, assuming that they would recognise his authority. They took the son out of the vineyard, beat him, and killed him. Jesus concluded the story by asking: What do you think the owner will do to those farmers?

The tenant farmers made a claim upon the vineyard, a claim of ‘ownership,’ refusing to give the owner what was his. They beat his servants and killed his son. They were stewards of the man’s vineyard, working it for him, but acted as they pleased, as if they owned it. They treated the owner with contempt and disregarding his servants and son. For Matthew, this is a pointed dig at the religious leaders who condemned Jesus, along with Rome and took out of the city and killed him. This, for Matthew, was a rejection of God’s son, sent to bring the message of grace and love for all in the face of injustice and systemic abuse of the poor and ordinary people. The powerful became wealthy on the backs of the poor, using their power and wealth to claim more and leave simple people lost in the struggle to survive.

The question arose for me: 'Who owns?' Who owned the vineyard extrapolates into the deeper question for us – who owns the earth, its creatures, landforms and resources? Within our world, who owns nations or cities or communities, families or organisations? At the heart of Matthew's message is, 'Who owns the church?'

Throughout the Bible and the wisdom stories across many traditions and cultures the God at the heart of all things 'owns the earth.' Psalm 24:1, for example, says that 'The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' If the Creator of all things is the rightful owner, how do we understand our relationship with earth, animals, trees... and each other? Throughout the Bible the notion of being good stewards is reinforced time and again and people are challenged to live with justice, love, inclusivity and grace, reflecting the generosity of God towards everyone and everything.

In Matthew's interpretation of the story, he offers that the tenant farmers who have rejected servants and son, will be removed and people who bear good fruit of God's Reign will be placed there instead. The fruits of God's Reign are grounded in love and grace, kindness and compassion, justice and hope. The Beatitudes of Matthew 5 offer some characteristics and Matthew 25 offers a story where the implications of love are revealed as offering food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked and to visit the sick or imprisoned. These actions, concludes Jesus, are central to a life that has its being in God's love.

Too often, across our world, people hold everything to themselves, accumulating, owning and storing up, whilst others struggle and die from having too little. Even now, as COVID-19 ravages our world, there is competition amongst nations around a vaccine. We continue to compete with one another over resources and wealth and power, as if we have a right to own and control, rather than be good stewards and carers of the earth and everything in it.

The world is a beautiful place filled with the riches of God. God's Spirit renews and recreates and opens our hearts to the beauty and wonder. We are invited to live joyfully and graciously with God and each other, sharing, caring and loving rather than fighting or lording it over others. There is a rich beauty all around if our eyes and hearts are open and there is rich wisdom in the indigenous people of the world who have listened carefully to the Creator Spirit. God is with us in love and invites us to live lovingly and peacefully!

Questions for Conversation...

1. How do you respond to the claim by indigenous people (and Biblical witness) that we are stewards of the Earth and all that is in it - not owners?
2. What might this mean in reality for us?
3. What does it mean for us to be stewards or custodians of the church, rather than 'owners'? What responsibility do we have - and does this pertain predominantly to buildings or people and mission?
4. What might this mean for us?

Offering ourselves to God...

Announcements

Prayers of the people

Ross Neville

Lord we pause for a while to remember our needs and issues and to bring them to you requesting your intervention. WE do so because of your promise given to us through Jesus that you will hear our prayer and give us the appropriate answer. 'The heavenly Father will give good things to those who ask him' Matt 7:11

After each section you are invited to have a time of quiet for the spirits prompting of your thoughts and the together we will say.

Lord hear our prayer

Let us pray for our world.

Nations throughout the world are suffering with the pandemic. We pray for those who are ill, grieving or suffering hardship because of Covid.

WE pray for the doctors, nurses, carers who are beginning to lose energy and compassion.

Strengthen them, let your love be felt through their caring.

We also pray for the leaders of the countries who are finding the normal means of maintaining their economies, their cities and communities are not able to work.

We pray that you will help these leaders have compassion, wisdom and concern for the welfare of their people.

Silence

Lord hear our prayer

Many countries in the world are at war with each other or there are groups that are trying to oppress or subjugate sections of their society. Lord you historically have bound or defeated the oppressors, so we ask you to this morning to allow and give freedom to these suffering people. Help the peacemakers in the world to be seen and to be effective in their work.

Nations are heading for elections and many nations are rebelling against their existing governments with demonstrations. WE ask you to encourage these people who are objecting to oppression in its many forms.

Silence

Lord hear our prayer

Lord young people, many groups and many scientists are becoming aware of how our world is being destroyed. We can see the signs of the changes in our world climate. The fires, the cyclones, the floods, the ice melting, the destruction of our forests, the warming of our oceans.

Lord help all humanity see the urgency of the need to change our behaviour as peoples to prevent world destruction. Give wisdom and patience to our scientists and leaders to be able to guide the necessary changes.

Silence

Lord hear our prayer

Lord you have given some people the gift of healing and we pray for them now All doctors, nurses, carers who are working constantly to alleviate suffering. Especially we ask for the people at our local facilities Nepean & Katoomba, the shut ins, and the many nursing homes in our area.

Bless their efforts and their work.

We in particular remember those of our contacts and families that are especially in need of your touch and grace at this time because of any medical condition they are struggling with. We thank you that we have Doctors who can repair or manipulate the body systems, but you Lord do the healing.

Silence

Lord hear our prayer

Lord we pray for your church worldwide and here in Australia. We thank you that some of you servants and witnesses such as Rev. Dr. Robinson and the chaplains who helped during the fires are gaining public recognition.

We pray for our church leaders here at the Presbytery and Leura who are making decisions about our future, our activity and the appropriate mission activity that is needed in this times.

Give these leaders wisdom love patience and compassion appropriate for the issues they are dealing with.

Silence

Lord hear our prayer

Let us say to together 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***

Closing Hymn

Here I Am Lord

1. I, the Lord of sea and sky
I have heard my people cry
All who dwell in dark and sin,
My hand will save
I who made the stars at night
I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear My light to them
Whom shall I send

Refrain:

*Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord
I have heard You calling in the night
I will go, Lord, if You lead me
I will hold your people in my heart*

I have borne My people's pain
I have wept for love of them
They turn away
I will break their hearts of stone
give them hearts for love alone
I will speak My word to them
Whom shall I send *Refrain...*

3. I, the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied
I will give My life to them
Whom shall I send *Refrain...*

2. I, the Lord of snow and rain

Here I Am, Lord - Dan Schutte
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Blessing

Blessing Song

For You Deep Stillness (Julie Perrin and Robin Mann)

For you, deep stillness of the silent inland;
For you, deep blue of the desert skies;
For you, flame red of the rocks and stones;
For you, sweet water of hidden springs.

From the edges seek the heartlands
And when your burnet by the journey
May the cool winds of the Hovering Spirit
Soothe and replenish you
In the name of Christ,
In the name of Christ,

In the name of Christ.
*CCLI Song # 2563901
Julie Perrin | Robin Mann
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