

# Order of Service

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark  
24th March 2019 Lent 3c – Rev Dr Robert Stringer

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## **INTROIT TIS 703:** “As the deer pants”

As the deer pants for the water,  
so my soul longs after you.  
You alone are my heart's desire  
and I long to worship you.  
You alone are my strength, my shield,  
to you alone may my spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart's desire  
and I long to worship you.

## **WE GATHER TO WORSHIP GOD**

### **WELCOME**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY & ANCESTORS**

We gather together on the land that cared and nurtured the people of the Kulin nation. The land where the people of the Wurundjeri language gather and celebrated their stories, songs and dances passed on by their ancestors, and the Great Spirit of the Dreaming over countless generations. We acknowledge these ancestors and give thanks for their memory. We also acknowledge and give thanks for the foremothers and forefathers of St Margaret's Uniting Church. All those who have given their gifts to be a shining light of God for the wider community. To this community of saints, living and dead, named and unnamed we pay our respects.

### **LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE**

We light the Christ Candle

**We celebrate God coming to us in human form  
bringing light to the world.**

### **CALL TO WORSHIP:** Psalm 63:1-8

God, you are my God, I seek you,  
**my soul thirsts for you,**  
my flesh faints for you,  
**as drought-stricken land wilts**  
where there is no water.

Yet in the sanctuary I looked upon you  
and saw your power and your glory.  
**My mouth is full of praise,**

**for your steadfast love is better than life.**

I will bless you as long as I live,  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

**Day and night I meditate on you,**

**O God, filled to overflowing with joy and praise.**

I sing for joy and cling to you, my help and my strength.

**O God, you are our God, for you we long.**

**HYMN TIS 52:** “let us sing to the God of salvation”

1

Let us sing to the God of salvation,  
let us sing to the Lord our rock!  
Let us come to his house with thanksgiving,  
let us come before the Lord and sing!

*Praise our Maker,  
praise our Saviour,  
praise the Lord our everlasting King.  
Every throne must bow before him,  
God is Lord of everything!*

2

In his hands are the earth's deep places  
and the strength of the hills is his;  
all the sea is the Lord's, for he made it,  
by his hands the dry land was formed.

3

Let us worship the Lord our Maker,  
let us kneel to the Lord our God;  
for we all are the sheep of his pasture,  
he will guide us by his powerful hand.

4

Let today be the time when you hear him!  
May our hearts not be hard or cold,  
lest we stray from the Lord in rebellion,  
as his people did in time of old.

### **OPENING PRAYER**

Gracious and merciful God, we fill our bodies with rich food and sweet drinks yet we still hunger and thirst for more - for you. And so we praise you for taking the initiative to replenish and renew our lives. You established a new and everlasting covenant of grace in the person of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Through him we seek you and find you, O God. Through him we call on you and know that we are heard. For, through him, the distance between your thoughts and our thoughts, your ways and our ways, is spanned by your divine love. We praise and adore you, O God, as we offer this prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord and our Saviour. Amen

### **A WORD FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN**

Bring along a sick plant and a healthy plant - if you do not have these yourself ask the local nursery for a loan of them and say that you'll advertise their

goods. You may even ask for and get a fig tree! Hold up the sick plant and suggest that it is only good for throwing out. Ask the children/young people if they agree - if not - what would it need to survive? Probably a lot of TLC

Relate to the parable Jesus tells in the gospel today - about the man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. The fig tree had never borne any fruit. Now, a fig tree needs a lot of food to help it to grow and bear fruit, and it would take some of the nourishment that the grapevines needed - so the owner says why should this fruitless fig tree be taking up good space in my vineyard? A good question if the fig tree looked like this - (show the sick plant). But the gardener begs for one more chance for the fig tree and says he will feed it and care for it in the hope that it will bear fruit next year. Jesus tells this story to say that we turn ourselves away from God's love when we do bad or unloving things - (perhaps ask for examples) - and so we can fail to be nourished by God's love. When that happens we do not produce fruit such as love and joy and peace in our lives. But God is always prepared to give us a second chance - giving us time to turn away from whatever it is that is bad so that we can grow in faith and live fruitful lives nourished by the loving kindness of Jesus.

**HYMN TIS 491:** "Father welcomes all his children"

*Father welcomes all his children  
to his family through his Son;  
Father giving his salvation,  
life for ever has been won.*

1  
Little children, come to me,  
for my kingdom is of these;  
life and love I have to give,  
mercy for your sin.

2  
In the water, in the word  
in his promise, be assured:  
those who are baptized and believe  
shall be born again.

3  
Let us daily die to sin,  
let us daily rise with him,  
walk in the love of Christ our Lord,  
live in the peace of God.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

**Before God and the people of God we confess to our brokenness, to the ways that we wound our life, the life of others and the life of the world.**

**ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS**

Hear Christ word of love to us,  
God forgives you,

Christ renews you  
and the Spirit enables you to live in love.  
**Thanks be to God!**

## **WE LISTEN FOR A WORD FROM GOD**

The Book of the prophet, Isaiah. Chapter 55. Verses 1 to 9

Ho, everyone who thirsts,  
    come to the waters;  
and you that have no money,  
    come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
    without money and without price.  
<sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
    and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
    and delight yourselves in rich food.  
<sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
    listen, so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
    my steadfast, sure love for David.  
<sup>4</sup> See, I made him a witness to the peoples,  
    a leader and commander for the peoples.  
<sup>5</sup> See, you shall call nations that you do not know,  
    and nations that do not know you shall run to you,  
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,  
    for he has glorified you.  
<sup>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
    call upon him while he is near;  
<sup>7</sup> let the wicked forsake their way,  
    and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,  
    and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
    nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
<sup>9</sup> For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
    so are my ways higher than your ways  
    and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. Chapter 10. Verses 1 to 13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup> Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written,

“The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ <sup>[b]</sup> to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. <sup>10</sup> And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. <sup>11</sup> These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. <sup>12</sup> So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. <sup>13</sup> No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

#### THE GOSPEL according to St.Luke. Chapter 13. Verses 1 to 9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ <sup>8</sup> He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Thank you, God, for your word to us today!

**Thank you, God, for Christ Jesus, a living Word!**

#### **REFLECTION**

It has been a deeply sad week and we are all feeling the weight of grief and horror as we are confronted by the degree of hatred simmering in our twilight internet zones. Probably all of us have asked the question at one time or other: What have I done to deserve this? Rabbi Harold Kushner asked this question in his book: When bad things happen to good people.

In today’s gospel I believe that Jesus was being asked the same questions. Occasionally there is an obvious answer. If you drive home blind drunk then

there is every possibility that you will probably be involved in a car accident and could kill someone.

Some actions have consequences and there is no use complaining.

However if you were innocently sitting in your car at an intersection when the drunk person ran into you, it is not so easy to make a connection and end up asking Why me, what have I done to deserve this? Wrong place at the wrong time.

I remember asking this question as a teenager when a beautiful young Baptist girl named Fiona McIntosh was involved in a car accident and died.

If we start to ask why did God let this happen or worse still blame God then we are like the people in today's reading where Jesus had to say you have got your theology wrong. That is not hard to do because there are those passages in the Bible that say if you obey God's commandments then you will prosper and if you disobey God's then you will suffer some consequences. In fact some religious organisations have maintained control over their believers through this system. If you tithe then God will prosper you if you don't then calamity will strike. We call this type of theology prosperity theology.

Jesus rejects this as today's reading from Luke 13:1-9 indicates. Some people had approached Jesus about the fate of a group of Galilean worshippers who were murdered by Pilate. Remember last week when I talked about the climate of fear and rebellion that was there in Jerusalem at the time of Herod and Pilate. Jesus did not blame the worshippers, although he also did not at that time blame Pilate??

The same question was also asked of some 18 people who were killed when a badly built tower of Siloam fell on them. An example of wrong place wrong time, or maybe it was lax building codes or no mortar between the bricks.

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Who was to blame, the victims, the Government?

We are always seeking to make the world a safer place hence our occupational health and safety laws and risk management processes. We understand better what is needed to make the world a safer place.

The disciples also at another time asked Jesus the same question with respect to the man who had been blind from birth. "Whose sin caused his blindness? his own or his parents. On that occasion Jesus also said nobody sinned, and asked the question "Do you think that that proves they were

worse sinners than anybody else? I tell you no!”

Not only does Jesus condemn bad theology he refutes the suggestion that God causes human misery, he turns the question back on the asker: “but I tell you that unless you repent you will cop a similar fate.” Now logically speaking that does not make sense. What I think Jesus was saying is that you can spend a lot of time trying to work out other people’s sin and don’t take a good look at yourself, your own society.

This past week we have seen the Prime Minister of New Zealand wrestling with the same problem. First she names it for what it is “New Zealand’s darkest hour.” Then she refuses to give the suspect any oxygen by not naming him but affirms that New Zealand society is one built on inclusion of everyone. She stands with the victims in solidarity wearing a black hijab and puts the resources of the New Zealand Government at the disposal of the families who are grieving and have to bury their dead.

Since then there have been a lot of questions about why did the relevant authorities not pick up the hate speech and signs of the perpetrator on the internet. Part of that was our society’s fixation that the next terrorist attack would probably come from Muslim extremists. No wonder Jesus in a similar situation said that : “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others in Jerusalem? No I tell you that unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Jesus is saying that we need to take a good look at ourselves for the seeds of this kind of destruction and turn your life, your society life around. Jesus focuses on the real meaning of “metanoia” or repentance. If we take that seriously then it helps us to understand one of the most difficult passages when Jesus in the context of talking about little children said “If what you do causes another to stumble then you ought to put a millstone around your neck and jump off the end of the pier and drown yourself.” Now I am sure that Jesus was not suggesting that we commit suicide but he was asking the question “What are you going to do to make sure that what has caused the problem is going to change so as to make sure that it does not ever happen again.”

Then in today’s Gospel reading Jesus goes on to tell a parable about God’s mercy and judgement. The vineyard is Israel, the fig tree (leaders/people) who are expected to bear good fruit. Then he asks the same question: “What are you going to do about it to bring about a different outcome?”

Today we would call this evidence based medicine or quality of life outcomes. What effort are we going to make to bring about a better situation?

Jesus redefines repentance. Too often we focus on turning away from “sin” whereas Jesus asks what are you turning towards?

Turn towards a God of love

Turn towards loving our neighbour.

Make decisions to produce love, peace, justice, a new world order that is inclusive of all people. To actively bring in what we would call the reign of God/kingdom of God.

We are asked to become co-creators of a new world order with God.

So Bad things do happen to good people. God does not want that to happen to you or anyone else, so what are you going to do about it?

Tragedies and suffering are part of life. God does not cause them, but God asks us to make something out of them. Just as Jesus can turn suffering and death into resurrection so we are called to follow Jesus and not avoid suffering but to face it full on and look to what needs to change so as to make sure that it does not happen again.

3

Tragedies happen but God's goodness is not thwarted. Maybe like the fig tree the situation needs some tender loving care.

That is what we as a church are called to be, a loving presence in a fragile world, to respond as the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Adern did, to call it for what it is, and to bring all our resources to care for those who are the victims of such tragedies. This is our calling as followers of Jesus.

Let us conclude by singing the hymn TIS 677: "Christ's is the world in which we move"

**HYMN TIS 677: "Christ's is the world in which we move"**

1

Christ's is the world in which we move;  
Christ's are the folk we're summoned to love;  
Christ's is the voice which calls us to care,  
and Christ is the one who meets us here.

*To the lost Christ shows his face,  
to the unloved he gives his embrace,  
to those who cry in pain or disgrace,  
Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place.*

2

Feel for the people we most avoid  
strange or bereaved or never employed.  
Feel for the women and feel for the men  
who fear that their living is all in vain.

3

Feel for the parents who've lost their child,  
feel for the women whom men have defiled,  
feel for the baby for whom there's no breast,  
and feel for the weary who find no rest.

4

Feel for the lives by life confused,  
riddled with doubt, in loving abused;  
feel for the lonely heart, conscious of sin,  
which longs to be pure but fears to begin.

**SHARING OUR COMMUNITY LIFE**

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

### **OFFERING and OFFERTORY PRAYER:**

We worship you, O God, through these gifts and our lives. May they be used to nourish lives with grace and mercy. May the fruit of your Spirit be evident in all we do and say as followers of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen

### **HYMN TIS 681: “Lord let me see, see more and more”**

1

Lord let me see, see more and more,  
see the beauty of a person, not the colour of the skin,  
see the faces of the homeless with no-one to take them in,  
see discouragement because she'll never win:  
see the face of our Lord in the pain:  
Lord let me see.

2

Lord let me hear, hear more and more,  
hear the sounds of great rejoicing, hear a person barely sigh;  
hear the ring of truth, and hollowness of those who live a lie;  
hear the wail of starving people who will die;  
hear the voice of our Lord in the cry:  
Lord let me hear.

3

Lord let me care, care more and more,  
care for those who feel the loneliness, for those who have no say,  
care for friends who have no job and find it hard to face the day,  
care for those with whom we sing and work and pray:  
and in care Jesus Christ will be found:  
Lord let me care.

4

Lord let me learn, learn more and more,  
learn that what I know is just a speck of what there is to know;  
learn from listening to my neighbour when I'd rather speak and go;  
learn that as we live in faith and trust we grow;  
learn to see, hear and care, with our Lord:  
Lord let me learn.

5

Lord let me love, love more and more,  
love the loveless and the fragile, help them be what they can be,  
love the way that I would like them to be looking after me;  
for to know you is to love them and be free,  
and in love Jesus Christ will be found:  
Lord let me love.

### **REPORT BACK BY THE CHILDREN**

### **WORD OF MISSION AND BLESSING**

Go into this week  
brimming over with the grace of God,  
nourished by the love of Jesus Christ,  
implanted with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

### **ASCRIPTION TIS 782 “Go now in peace”**

Go now in peace, go now in peace,  
may the love of God surround you  
everywhere, everywhere you may go.

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