

## **21st Century Disciples: Know and Practice Grace**

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### **Gathering**

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*Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.*

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **purple cloth** or scarf to signify that we are moving into a time of preparation for Easter.*

*Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

#### **Gathering**

Whether you are full to the brim physically or spiritually, or whether you are hungry, thirsty or longing to be filled; Whether you are confident to face whatever the world has for you, or whether you are struggling to face yet another day; I thank God you are here - and together, I pray, you will know yourself surrounded by love, immersed in grace and filled with the Spirit of Life.

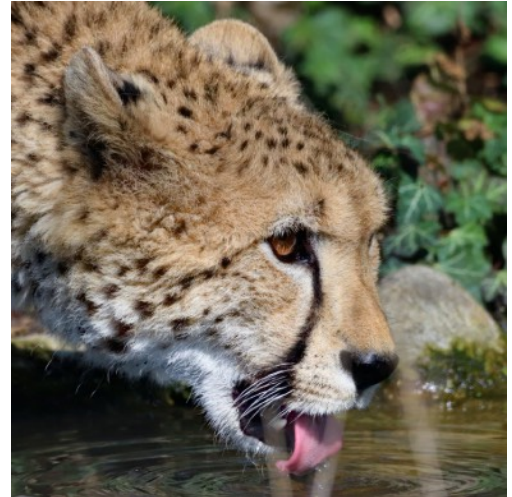


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#### **Light Candle**

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

The writer of the gospel attributed to John assures us:

Jesus spoke to them, saying,  
"I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

*John 8:12*

#### **Acknowledgement of Country**

As we gather in this place, between the mountains and the sea, we give thanks for the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation.

We acknowledge the commitment their ancestors made, across the generations, to nurturing this land.

Together, may we walk into the future,

recognising the sacred footsteps that continue to lead us to the promise of [God's Way].

*Amelia Koh-Butler, Wide and Deep, p.11*

#### **Introduction**

Today we continue our preparations for Easter.

Throughout this time we are reconnecting with what it looks for us to be 21st Century followers of Jesus.

We started by thinking about how we engage with the Scriptures.

Last week we were reminded that 21st Century disciples take the long view.

Today - our focus turns to grace - the grace we have received from God, and the grace we offer to each other and to the people around us.

## Call to Worship

The prophet Isaiah calls to us:

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>6</sup> Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call upon him while he is near;

...

<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.

Let us pray...

Invite us to the banquet of new life  
flowing from your generous heart, O God.

Help us to receive the love

which is spread across the table of life and into which we are gathered this day.

Call to our hearts in invitation.

Take our hands now, we pray,  
and lead us toward your gifts.

Amen.

*(Place a pitcher of water on the worship centre.)*

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.45*

**Sing** - Creator and Poet (Seasons 3-10)

*We sing a song of praise.*

Father and Mother,  
creator and poet,  
speaking your wisdom in forest and glade:  
telling your glory in ocean and river,  
pouring your pleasure on all you have  
made.

Christ of the cosmos, you sang into being,  
galaxies spinning through measureless  
space;  
coming among us, and sharing our  
weakness;  
singing your songs of redemption and  
grace.

Spirit, you danced at the dawn of creation,  
rising, rejoicing on jubilant wings.  
Yours is the rhythm of cycle and season,  
yours is the heartbeat of all living things.

God, you have made us of stardust and  
spirit.  
Etching your image on ev'ry cell.  
We are your love song, your poem and  
rhythm.  
All co-creators, your story to tell.

**Reading:** Psalm 63:1-8

- <sup>1</sup> O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- <sup>2</sup> So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.
- <sup>3</sup> Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.
- <sup>4</sup> So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
- <sup>5</sup> My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
- <sup>6</sup> when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
- <sup>7</sup> for you have been my help,  
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
- <sup>8</sup> My soul clings to you;  
your right hand upholds me.
- <sup>9</sup> But those who seek to destroy my life  
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
- <sup>10</sup> they shall be given over to the power of the sword,  
they shall be prey for jackals.
- <sup>11</sup> But the king shall rejoice in God;  
all who swear by him shall exult,  
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
***Thanks be to God!***

**Prayer**

Persistent God,  
as we gather for worship  
here in this place and in our homes,  
we come grateful for your love.  
Grateful too that you do not expect the finished article:  
that you see in each person only potential;  
that you never give up on us.  
Just as a fig tree may look dormant, dead even,  
you still see worth in each of us  
even when we fail to see it for ourselves.

Patient Jesus,  
in you we see who God is:  
loving, kind.  
We come grateful for your example.  
Grateful too that in your life

you reached out to people like us:  
not the powerful, not the mighty,  
but people in whom you saw possibilities;  
people who gave us an insight into the Kingdom  
and glimpses of what could be.

Persevering Spirit,  
always present, never distant,  
always nudging,  
we come grateful for your company in our lives.  
Grateful too for the nudging and cajoling,  
always pointing us in the right direction,  
even if we fail to follow.  
You do not give up on us.  
You are ever at hand,  
always within reach.

*Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.33*

### **Prayer - Confession**

*Bring three empty glasses and set them on the worship centre as indicated.*

Hospitable God,  
you invite us again and again to the table  
of abundant feasting in your love,  
but we seem immune to the aromas  
of your lovingly prepared bounty.  
We choose instead to be satiated for the moment –  
but never satisfied for long –  
by empty, easy offerings around us.

*(Place an empty glass on its side on the table near the pitcher of water.)*

We so often settle into the comfort of convenience,  
failing to notice that our lives have run dry.

*(Place another empty glass standing upright near the pitcher.)*

Sometimes we deprive our lives with guilt,  
reducing the dimensions of your mercy to our own.

*(Place a third glass on the table and pour a very small amount of water into it.)*

As we pause to know who we are, O God,  
bring to us the echoes of your gentle words down the ages, we pray.

### **Assurance**

God has set a glorious table laden  
with abundant pardon and forgiveness.  
calling us to receive it and live once again.

*(Place the three glasses in a row and fill them with water from the pitcher.)*

Taste now the peace that lies within grace.

Drink to the full all that God offers to us.

Let us lift up our hearts in thankfulness.

**Thanks be to God.**

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.45*

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## Listening for God's Voice

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### Reading: Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told [Jesus] 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 round 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."'

For the Word of God in Scripture,  
for the Word of God among us,  
for the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God!**

### Reflection

God of table and God of open door, thank you for your invitation. You feed the deep places in our spirits and speak the words that evoke turning for the good. Send your Spirit to guide us in turning toward and trusting in you. Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.42*

What kind of gardener are you?

I have discovered that there are different approaches to gardening.

One approach says, "this stick is dead - throw it out!"

Another approach, I should say, much favoured by my mother, says "No, give it to me and I will tend it and just see if it can be restored to health."

And I have seen, first hand, the frustration that can develop between the two!

The story Jesus tells about the fig tree places his gardener in the "give it another chance" camp.

But what do we make of this passage in our lives today.

In the first part of the passage, we are presented with two tragic events - one where Roman soldiers had murdered people as they worshiped at the temple, and another where a building had collapsed and killed 18 people. Did these people somehow deserve their fate? Jesus is emphatic in his response - no! their sin was no worse than anyone else.

Jesus makes it really clear - that these tragic events were not punishment for sin.

And yet at the same time, Jesus takes the opportunity to remind us that everyone, everyone is being called to turn their lives towards God.

It's that word *repent* again. It's the word that the church has allowed to accumulate a whole bunch of baggage that it doesn't carry.

*Repent* (in Greek, *μετανοήτε*) - turn around, change your thinking, turn your life toward God. And while saying sorry, or seeking forgiveness may be a part of that, the point is in the changing - not any feeling of guilt or remorse that we might have.

So what Jesus is saying is that the circumstances of life, tragic as they sometimes are, are never punishment for sin. At the same time, we all need to be constantly vigilant about the way we live and the way we make use of the precious gift that is our lives.

In Luke's telling of Jesus' life and ministry, Jesus comments about these tragedies are followed immediately by the parable of the fig tree. The plant is struggling and has not borne any fruit for several years. An unproductive plant is useless so the land owner wants it gone. But the gardener puts in a plea on behalf of the fig tree - give it one more year, let me tend it carefully - in the King James Version, "I shall dig about it and dung it" (13:8). If it bears fruit, fabulous; but if it is still barren next year, then you can cut it down (13:9).

This is grace.

To an unproductive life, to a dry spirit, this is grace - the offer of gentle tending and nourishment, the opportunity to draw on the gift of care and opportunity to try again.

This is grace.

The psalmist speaks of thirsting for God, of being weary in a dry and barren land (63:1) - like the unproductive fig tree.

When we lie in bed at night, sleepless with the worries of the world; God's faithfulness nourishes and restores us (63:6). And we are met with a feast (63:5), completely satisfied.

This is grace.

The psalmist recognises that God's steadfast love (63:2) - several commentators suggest this is better translated as God's faithfulness - is better than life.

The gardener who will dig us and dung us - who will agitate our roots and cover us in chicken poo - better than life. *Just think about that for a moment... receiving the nourishment we need might not always be comfortable - it may instead be a bit smelly and uncomfortable.*

Yet - this is grace.

The followers of Christ, know this grace.

We know what it is like to be given another chance - not just a second, but a third and a fourth and a fifth and so on...

We know what it is to find nourishment and nurture in the presence of God.

We know grace upon grace.

And the followers of Christ, share this grace with the world.

As with many of Jesus' teaching, we find ourselves in two different spaces: we are both receivers of nurture, the digging and dunging, and called to offer nourishment to others, to believe in the potential of another to respond to care.

We are sometimes the ones being tended - agitated, offered nourishment, given another chance to bear fruit.

Sometimes we are the ones offering another chance, doing the agitating and dumping the dirt, so to speak...

Always - we are both.

But before anyone starts flinging the dung - as fun as that sounds - remember, this grace is costly.

In the parable, it only costs the land owner a year.

For Jesus, it cost his life.

For us, in receiving and sharing such grace, it will cost us - personally and as a community. It asks of us to be ever alert to where God is leading us, turning again and again towards the path God reveals to us - leaving behind the baggage we accumulate and the comfortable spaces we have created for ourselves, being open to having our thinking changed, our assumptions challenged, our expectations shattered and replaced by a new vision of where God is taking us.

And in our yearning for our thirst to be quenched, in our seeking for the One who will be found (Isaiah 55:6), we discover that God's faithfulness is always better than life itself (Psalm 63:3).

Let's pray...

Heavenly Gardener, when our souls are parched and our lives are no longer bearing fruit, dig us and dung us, agitate our roots and nourish our bodies, minds and spirit.

When we encounter your world that seems barren and lifeless, hand us the shovel, and give us strength to roll up our sleeves to nurture and nourish and love your world into being all your created it to be. Amen.

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## Responding

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### **Sing** - Called As Partners

(tune: Hyfrydol "Love Divine, all love's excelling" TIS 217(i))

*We sing a hymn of commitment to each other as we live and work and celebrate and struggle together.*

Called as partners in Christ's service,  
called to ministries of grace,  
we respond with deep commitment;  
fresh new lines of faith to trace.  
May we learn the art of sharing,  
side by side and friend with friend,  
Equal partners in our caring;  
to fulfil God's chosen end.

Christ's example, Christ's inspiring,  
Christ's clear call to work and worth,  
let us follow, never faltering,  
reconciling folk on earth.  
Men and women, richer, poorer;  
all God's people, young and old,  
blending human skills together;  
gracious gifts from God enfold.

Thus new patterns for Christ's mission,  
in a small or global sense,  
let us bear each other's burdens,  
breaking down each wall or fence.  
Words of comfort, words of vision,  
words of challenge, said with care,  
bring new power and strength for action;  
make us colleagues, free and fair.

So God grant us for tomorrow,  
ways to order human life  
that surround each person's sorrow  
with a calm that conquers strife.  
Make us partners in our living,  
our compassion to increase,  
messengers of faith, thus giving  
hope and confidence and peace.

*From "A Singing Faith"  
Words copyright 1981 Jane Parker Huber.*

## **Prayer for Others** (Helen Laidlaw)

Our protective and loving God

We come to thank you for the surety that you are always with us.

Help us to remember that our prayers are really the acknowledgement of your love and support. And although they echo our needs and wants, they should not be demands for our wishes to be answered.

However at this time we are so confused and depressed by the horrors of war in Ukraine and so many deaths; of floods and drownings; of volcanic eruptions, tsunami and hunger; of continuing Covid illnesses – and even anxiety about the price of fuel. I pray for the peace negotiations in Ukraine that answers are soon found which will stop the horror.

Help us to remember that Jesus' message is that suffering is part of the human experience and we don't have to face it alone. It is so easy to forget the message "Where 2 or 3 are gathered together there am I in the midst of them", so spending time in prayer and supporting others is so important. Now that lockdown is over, help us to re-energise ourselves to be part of the church and community activities. Please remind us to contact others whom we know are depressed or in seemingly impossible situations.

We pray for the Indigenous people who are treated as less, and help us to find ways to support them in finding representation and justice in our country. Also help us to overcome our racist tendencies when we deal with anyone who has a different face or faith.

We also pray for the many members of our congregation who have serious illnesses. I wish privacy did not curtail us from mentioning them by name, as I am just realising how many I did not know about. Also we pray for those who mourn the loss of family and friends. Teach us all how to be more pastoral, and thank you for our elders and pastoral carers. We ask for your blessings on Kath and Narelle as they care for us all.

Help us to vote wisely in the coming elections applying what Jesus taught us about caring for others and our country. We all have felt the effects of climate change in the recent rains.

Finally we recognise that you understand each of us – our uniqueness and abilities and our struggles – and accept and love us always. Even to sending your own Son to die for us! In Jesus' name, Amen.

## **Offering**

*Today, the stewards will bring the offering bags to you but please don't try and take them and pass them on - please just pop your offering into the bag as the stewards come by. As we make our offering, this is not just about cash - many people give electronically now - this time is also an opportunity to consider what time, skills and commitment we make to the work of God in the world...*

Add to your table of generosity,

all that we bring you today, O God.

Place our gifts among those whose lives are failing to grow because they wait for justice.

Then lead us on toward ever-expanding horizons for growing in the life of Christ.

Amen.

*Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.46*



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## Sending

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### **Sing** - God Who Sets Us On A Journey

(tune: Ode to Joy ("Joyful, Joyful, we Adore you" - TIS 698)

*I love the way this hymn speaks of God being with us wherever we find ourselves, but also won't let us get comfortable when we need to move on.*

God who sets us on a journey  
to discover, dream and grow,  
lead us as you led your people  
in the desert long ago;  
journey inward, journey outward,  
stir the spirit, stretch the mind,  
love for God and self and neighbour  
marks the way that Christ defined.

End our longing for the old days,  
grant the vision that we lack –  
once we've started on this journey  
there can be no turning back;  
let us travel light, discarding  
excess baggage from our past,  
cherish only what's essential,  
choosing treasure that will last.

Exploration brings new insights,  
changes, choices we must face;  
give us wisdom in deciding,  
mindful always of your grace;  
should we stumble, lose our bearings,  
find it hard to know what's right,  
we regain our true direction  
focused on the Jesus light.

When we set up camp and settle  
to avoid love's risk and pain,  
you disturb complacent comfort,  
pull the tent pegs up again;  
keep us travelling in the knowledge  
you are always at our side;  
give us courage for the journey,  
Christ our goal and Christ our guide.

*Joy Dine*

### **Benediction**

As our thirst is quenched by the touch of God's Spirit,  
as our hunger is satisfied in the company of our brothers and sisters in Christ,  
so we go to share grace upon grace with the world we encounter.

So - be bold,  
be positive,  
be encouraging.  
Work for good,  
live for life,  
serve all humanity.

*Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Lent 3, 20 March 2022, p.35*

And the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the companionship of the Spirit of Life  
will be with you always. Amen.

Rev Kath Merrifield  
20 March 2022