

21st Century Disciples: Expect Surprises

Gathering

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

While we are still a bit soggy, our thoughts are with our neighbours in northern NSW.

While we are sometimes uncertain, our prayers are for peace in Ukraine and other places of civil unrest and armed conflict.

This weekend also marks the start of Ramadan. We think of our Muslim brothers and sisters who are beginning their holy fast...

So whether you are someone who like surprises, or someone who would prefer to know what is coming your way; whether you are a meticulous planner or whether you like to just see what happens, you are welcome here and I pray the God of surprises will be revealed to you in ever deeper, ever more expansive ways.

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

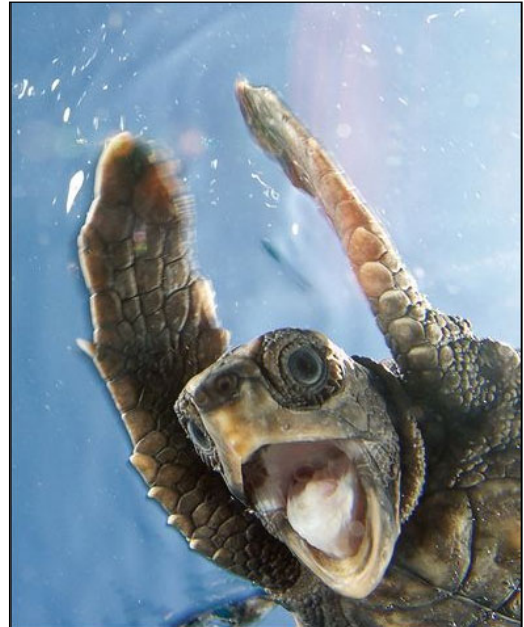
Acknowledgement of Country

As we look upon the hills and valleys and ocean,
we see the love poured out upon this Land
by those who have cared for this place since time beyond measure.

***We honour those who have gone before
and those who are yet to come.***

May we be mindful of the calling God places on all humanity to care for Creation.
May we take the lead from the Wadi Wadi people of the Dharawal nation,
whose stories are entwined with the stewarding of this place.

***May we learn from them
and walk with them.***



Introduction

We continue our preparations for Easter - more than half way there, we are on the downhill!
Or rather, as we follow Jesus, we draw ever nearer to Jerusalem.

Throughout this time we have been 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.

Then we considered how 21st Century disciples take the long view.

we have spent the last two weeks thinking about our experience and sharing of grace - grace that gives second and third and fourth chances, grace that nurtures, grace that welcomes us home, grace that seeks and offers reconciliation.

Today, we encounter the God who surprises us, who breaks in when we least expect it, who breaks open custom and “the way things are always done” and invites us to immerse ourselves anew in God’s way.

Call to Worship

The prophet Isaiah declares, this is what God says:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

And so we pray...

Almighty God,
Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,
we come to worship you,
and to ask for your guiding in our lives.

***We come to be still,
we come to listen,
we come to be together,
and we come to offer ourselves to you. Amen.***

Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 42, resources for Lent 5, 3 April 2022, p.50

Sing - Hear Our Praises (P&W 858)

Palm 126, which we will hear in a moment, speaks of our mouths being filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. This song is a prayer reflecting our hope that our homes, our streets, our lives will be filled with joy.

May our homes be filled with dancing,
may our streets be filled with joy;
may injustice bow to Jesus
as the people turn to pray.

*From the mountain to the valley
hear our praises rise to you;
from the heavens to the nations
hear our singing fill the air.*

May a light shine in the darkness
as we walk before the cross;
may your glory fill the whole earth
as the water o’er the seas.

From the mountain to the valley...

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

From the mountain to the valley...

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Reading: Psalm 126 (Helen Curry)

- ¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
- ² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'
- ³ The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
- ⁴ Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- ⁵ May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
- ⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

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

O God, you are the giver of wonderful things.
You gave us life.
You have filled our lives with family and friends.
You lavish us with your grace.
You have given us this day to add to the many we have shared.
And you have given us Jesus.
Help us grow in our understanding and appreciation of just how much you love us, and
open our hearts that our worship might always be an act of praise and thanksgiving for all
you have done for us.

Gracious God,
you call us to live with compassion,
yet sometimes we show indifference.
You call us to revise our assumptions,
yet sometimes we remain stuck in our ways.
You call us to cultivate hope,
yet sometimes we focus on despair.
You call us to seek reconciliation,
yet sometimes we turn toward conflict.

Renew us, we pray,
and lead us, again and again, on a path of transformation. Amen.

Adapted from Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 5, 3 April 2022, pp68-69

Assurance

Isaiah 43:18-21

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Friends,
see, right here, right now, amongst us, God is doing a new thing!
Open your eyes, open your heart,
Rejoice in the transformation God brings.

Sing - See I Make All Things New (AOV2-7)

Again this week, the readings speak of God doing something new in our midst.

*See I make all things new,
new as night turns to morning.
The spirit is calling:
"I'm with you; I make all things new."*

The rivers are bursting with life,
the stars in the night sky sing praise.
Come to me in joy,
come to me in song.
All of creation rejoice!
See I make all things new...

Trust in the promise of life;
colour the earth with my love.
Come to me in joy;
come to me in song.
Open your hearts, rejoice!
See I make all things new...

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Listening for God's Voice

Reading: John 12:1-8 (Helen Curry)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

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, surprise us now with the touch of your Spirit.

Move among us.

Inspire us.

Shake our traditions and reshape our being so that we are ever more closely reflecting your love to the world we serve. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Imagine the scene with me...

We are all gathered at Lazarus' place and Lazarus is reclining at the table with Jesus.

This is the same guy who had died, had been wrapped in the usual burial cloths and been buried. And then 4 days later, Jesus had showed up and brought him back to life.

Apart from the wonder that filled their close friends and family, it had really ruffled the feathers of the religious leaders so much so that Jesus had withdrawn to a place on the edge of the wilderness.

But it was almost time for the Passover, so Jesus had come to Bethany and was staying with his friends - Lazarus, Martha and Mary - and they were hosting a feast.

The room is full of people talking and eating together.

Martha is serving - of course!

When in the midst of all the activity, Mary comes in and approaches Jesus.

She breaks open a bottle of perfume and pours it over Jesus' feet.

The smell fills the room as perfume does, the smell so sweet, we all know it is expensive stuff!

But if that weren't enough to cause disruption, Mary then starts wiping Jesus' feet with her hair - her hair! Did she not have a towel?

Of course she did, but that wasn't the point.

This is an act of worship, and act of care and compassion.

Just imagine yourself as an onlooker, a guest at the table perhaps, one of the people helping to serve... How does this make you feel? We know the disciples are enraged - we'll come to them - but like any surprise, there are always some who are intrigued and some who are less than impressed. What is your first response, generally, to a surprise like this one?

This event in Jesus' life, or one like it, is recorded for us in all four of the gospels - but all in different ways. And the danger is that the stories get mashed together - so every now and then it is useful to give some attention to separating them out.

In Luke's gospel, they are dining at a Pharisee's house, possibly in a town called Nain, the woman is nameless and described as a "sinner" (Luke 7:36-50). She carried fragrant oil but she wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair and then anoints his feet with the oil. This is the woman who for centuries was misaligned with Mary of Magdala.

In the accounts of Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:3-9), Jesus is dining with Simon the leper and a woman (no reference to being a "sinner") simply pours oil on Jesus' head. While the woman remains nameless, the gospel writers assure us that her story will be told wherever the gospel is preached "in memory of her".

John, however, places this event at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha and while the other gospel writers leave the women nameless, the writer of John's gospel names the woman as Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, a friend of Jesus.

For Luke, the scandal lies in the status of the woman and that if Jesus knew who she was, he wouldn't be letting her touch him. But Jesus uses the moment to teach about hospitality.

For Matthew, Mark and John, the scandal is the cost of the oil and how the money could have been better spent - the male disciples are horrified - well, they are probably also a little bit shocked at Mary using her hair to wipe Jesus' feet... Remember, this is a time when women are supposed to keep their heads covered (cf 1 Corinthians 11) so shaking her hair about around the dinner table was probably "not the done thing"!

But for Mary, as I mentioned already, this was an act of worship, an outpouring of gratitude - her brother is back amongst them, he is alive!

She also recognises who Jesus is - anointing him as the holy one.

Another part of John's account that differs from the others, is that it is explicit that this is about preparing Jesus for his own death (John 12:7). And it comes immediately before the religious leaders plot to kill Lazarus in order to undo Jesus' work (12:9ff). In the spread of the perfume throughout the room, there is an affirmation that resurrection life cannot be pinned down, it smells of beauty and abundance, echoing the abundance of Jesus' first sign, the water that becomes wine, lots of wine (John 2) and the abundant catch of fish which in John's gospel occurs after the resurrection (John 21). Echoing, too, one of the themes of the way the writer of John's gospel wants to tell Jesus' story - "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:16)

As we noted earlier, in all the gospel accounts, the disciples and people at the table are not impressed. In Matthew, Mark and John, it is all about the cost of the perfume and how the money could have been more wisely spent. But to their objections, Jesus replies:

'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.' (12:7-8)

First he affirms the reference, the prophetic pointing, to his impending death.

And then he adds this comment which unfortunately has often been taken out of context and used to suit

⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

This doesn't mean that because the poor are always part of our community, we can happily spend what we like on expensive perfumes and not worry about their needs.

It is a comment about the nature of the life that God gives us - which means the work, the offering of new life, the caring, never stops. We always need to be about being alert to the the people around us who are more vulnerable and ensuring that we are embracing and enabling them to participate in God's abundant life.

Here, the scent of God, God's beauty and aroma, is at work in the middle of the mess, in the middle of the growing tension, still able to birth beauty and abundance and life in the midst of it all.

In the midst of the tensions, the growing angst with the religious leaders, God breaks in, reminding us of beauty, reminding us of who Jesus is, inviting us to participate in acts of extravagant care and hospitality as an act of worship.

In Isaiah 43, we are reminded that God is making all things new - but are we even aware of it, can we perceive it? Perhaps we do when someone walks into the room and starts wafting perfume around but what about the smaller, quieter, less smelly moments of gentle, tender, but no less abundant, moments of love and care?

In Psalm 126, we heard the psalmist say:

¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

The psalmist is picking up on the ancient perception of dreams as the in-breaking into our lives of the world beyond. For the ancients, the life was hard, and this is about the life of the world beyond, God's world, breaking into our human experience - and inviting us to participate in it.

So how is God breaking into your world today?

Can you see it?

Can you perceive it?

And how will you respond?

I pray that we will respond with extravagant grace, abundant hospitality, and open hearts and minds.

Let us pray...

God of the poor, prompt us to offer that which is most precious to us in your service.

May our acts of love be like perfume in our communities, filling lives with the scent of your grace.

Open our eyes and our hearts to recognise and respond to your in-breaking love in the world today. And give us courage to join in with all that we have and all that we are. Amen.

Responding

Sing - Beauty For Brokenness (TIS 690)

We sing of the transformation God seeks to bring in the world. And we align ourselves with being a part of bringing about such transformation.

Beauty for brokenness,
hope for despair,
Lord in the suffering,
this is our prayer,
bread for the children,
justice, joy, peace,
sunrise to sunset your kingdom increase.

Shelter for fragile lives,
cures for their ills,
work for the craftsmen,
trade for their skills;
land for the dispossessed,
rights for the weak,
voices to plead the cause of those who
can't speak.

*God of the poor,
friend of the weak,
give us compassion, we pray;
melt our cold hearts,
let tears fall like rain.
Come change our love from a spark to a
flame.*

Refuge from cruel wars,

havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary,
freedoms to share,
peace to the killing-fields,
scorched earth to green;
Christ for the bitterness,
his cross for the pain.

Rest for the ravaged earth,
oceans and streams,
plundered and poisoned,
our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness,
carelessness, greed;
make us content with the things that we
need.

God of the poor...

Lighten our darkness,
breathe on this flame,
until your justice burns
brightly again;
until the nations
learn of your ways,
seek your salvation and bring you their
praise.

God of the poor...

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Prayer for Others (Rhonda Back)

Let us pray :

God of surprising grace, in these troubled times of war and aggression, floods and famine, pandemics and health care crises, embolden us in ministries that convey care and connection, whether such ministry engages us in actions of long standing tradition or risk-taking newness. For in gracious ministry with those around us – like Mary, like Martha – we minister to you and offer the following prayer from *Spill the Beans*.

Loving God,
you spoke love into this world,
you called each of us by name
to know you and be with you
this day and forever.

We give thanks today for the truth and the wisdom shown to us through the life of your Son, our saviour, Jesus.

We bring our words of prayer
for our troubled world,
aching under the afflictions
of disease, poverty, and war,
help us and all those with the power to do so, to speak justice
help us, in your name
to bring peace and understanding to all peoples.

We bring our words of prayer for our country and communities,
in this time of change and optimism amongst the uncertainty,
help us and all those in positions of power,
elected and unelected,
to shine light into the darkness,
hope into the hopelessness,
and let us, who know your love,
to bring it in word and deed,
to everyone we meet.

We bring our words of prayer for your church,
as we seek to serve the communities around us,
help us to understand your love,
to use it and cherish it
as we dedicate ourselves once more to your message and mission.

We bring our words of prayer for ourselves and all those we love,
each with our own
strengths and weaknesses,
doubts and hopes,
help us to hear your word,
and use our words for the good of your kingdom,
the joy of your people
and the glory of your name.
Amen.

Adapted from Spill The Beans, Issue 42, Resources for Lent 5, 3 April 2022, p.50

Offering

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...

We offer our gifts with gratitude.

Through them,

may hope come to those who know despair,

may love come to those who feel alone,

may healing come to those who endure pain.

May these gifts be a sign of our commitment to serve you in the world. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 5, 3 April 2022, p,70

Sending

Sing - O Jesus, I Have Promised (TIS 595 - tune: The Source 391)

We commit to staying on the path Jesus shows us.

O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
Lord, be forever near me,
my master and my friend:
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.

O let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
Lord, speak to reassure me,
to chasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
true guardian of my soul.

Still let me feel you near me:
the world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
and tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw me nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

Lord, let me see your footmarks
and in them plant my own;
that I may follow boldly
and in your strength alone;
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end;
and then in heaven receive me,
my Saviour and my friend.

Words: John Ernest Bode

Benediction

My sisters and brothers:

go into the world that God loves.

Bless it with your compassion.

Renew it with hope.

In every step you take may you know

the peace of Christ,

the promise of the Spirit,

and the presence of God. Amen

Adapted from Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Lent 5, 3 April 2022, p,70

Rev Kath Merrifield

3 April 2022