



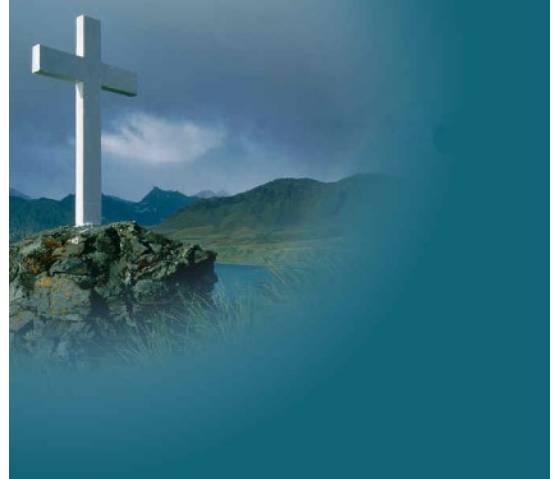
## Towards The Cross

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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 as we journey towards Easter in a time of preparation called Lent.  
Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*



### **Light Candle**

We light this candle...  
*Light the candle*

And we breathe...  
and we turn towards the one who is the Light of the World, Jesus the Christ.  
We seek the light.  
We celebrate the light.  
We allow ourselves to be drawn to the light.  
We wonder at what the light reveals to us.

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

As we gather to worship, we acknowledge the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation.  
We offer our respect to their elders past and present.  
We honour their care of this Country.  
We acknowledge their unceded sovereignty.  
Lent is a time of walking with Jesus towards Jerusalem, a walk motivated by love and seeking justice. In Lent, we commit ourselves to following this way of love and justice.  
We commit to seeking a more just settlement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **Call to Worship - based on Psalm 22:23-31**

I will tell of your name among the gathered community.  
I will praise you among the congregation.  
***We worship you, O God.***

The poor shall eat and be satisfied.  
All peoples will turn to you.  
***We worship you, O God.***

We bring our songs, we bring our lives.  
***Let us worship God.***

## Opening prayer

God of all nations,  
we gather here seeking your light and your life.  
We commit ourselves to the path you have shown.  
Give us courage once more to take the roads that are sometimes difficult,  
give us faith to stay with you even when we are weary and frightened.  
Hold us in your love, we pray. Amen.

## Sing - Come O God Of All The Earth (TIS 181)

*We sing a hymn of praise and invitation - Come O God of all the Earth as we join our song of praise to all of creation...*

Come, O God of all the earth:  
come to us O Righteous One;  
come, and bring our love to birth:  
in the glory of your Son.

*Sing out, earth and skies!*

*Sing of the God who loves you;  
raise your joyful cries;  
dance to the life around you.*

Come, O God of wind and flame:  
fill the earth with righteousness;  
teach us all to sing your name:  
may our lives your love confess.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O God of flashing light:

twinkling star and burning sun;  
God of day and God of night:  
in your light we all are one.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O God of snow and rain:  
shower down upon the earth;  
come, O God of joy and pain:  
God of sorrow, God of mirth.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

Come, O Justice, come, O Peace:  
come and shape our hearts anew;  
come and make oppression cease:  
bring us all to life in you.

*Sing out, earth and skies...*

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## Prayer of Praise and Confession

Come, O God of all the earth, come.

As we join our hearts and voices with the joyous song of all creation,  
come.

It is not hard, here in this beautiful part of your world, for us to see and hear that joy -

in the early morning song of the birds,

in the heat of the summer sun,

in the drum of rain,

in the lightening and thunder of the storm,

in the freshness of the wet grass,

in the smell of the ocean or the freshly mown fields,

in the laughter, even in the sigh, of a friend.

God, forgive us when we get so wrapped up in ourselves that we miss your glorious presence all around us.

Come, O God of all the earth, come.

Come and draw out of us love that knows no bounds.

Come and draw us ever closer to you and to one another.

Come and teach us to live lives that sing your love in the world.

Come - hold us in our joy and comfort us in our sorrow.

Come - and shape us to work for justice and freedom for all peoples.

For we pray in the name of the one who points us to his cross,  
Jesus the Christ. Amen.

### **Words of Grace**

God's Spirit is at work making all things new,  
even us, even here.

***Thanks be to God. Amen.***

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## **Listening for God's Voice**

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**Reading:** Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>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 after you.

...

<sup>15</sup> God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup>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.'

**Reading:** Mark 8:31-38

<sup>31</sup> Then [Jesus] 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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.'

<sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup>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, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words 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.'

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

Let us pray...

Old or young,  
full of energy, or feeling a little tired,  
you meet us and call us to follow.

We open our hearts and minds to you as we ponder  
how you are calling us to shape our living in the world today. Amen.

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old...” (Genesis 17:1)

Ninety-nine!

Do you think that because you are old, God has stopped calling?

Do you think that because you are old, God has let you retire?

Or do you think that because you are not yet 99, then you are safe enough from God surprising you? Think again!

Of course, we can't be sure about how old Abram is - the stories in Genesis speak of people living for well over a hundred years - so either counting wasn't their strong point - or perhaps it didn't matter that much.

As the story unfolds, however, we can be sure that Abram and his wife Sarai were passed their prime child-bearing years. Which is why, if you read on in Genesis 17 you will find that Abram laughs at God's suggestion that Sarai will bear him a son, and so did Sarai when she heard about it [from from visiting strangers] (18:12).

Nevertheless, in this encounter we have a second covenant statement.

God, draws near to Abram and promises that he will be the father of many nations - not just one nation, not just Israel, then, but many nations - and it is repeated three times, “many nations” (17:4,5,6). Perhaps what is implied here is that Abram will be the ancestor of all nations - that God's dream, God's intention for the world, God's promise is for all nations. And so God is not just Abram's God, but the God of all nations (17:7).

Alongside this, we encounter Jesus turning the conversation with his disciples towards what is to come.

Most commentators agree that this part of the gospel attributed to Mark is the turning point of the drama. Until now, Jesus has been teaching and healing and healing the 5000 and debating with the religious authorities. But in the passage just before this one, Jesus turns the conversation by asking the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29) and Peter makes the bold proclamation, “You are the Messiah” (8:29) - you are God's anointed one! It is a bold statement of faith.

But then right away, the mood changes as Jesus tries to explain what that will mean - suffering, rejection, conflict, even death (8:31) - not that *God* needs or intends these things to happen, but there is an inevitability about the path Jesus has taken. <sup>1</sup>

And there is something important for us to understand in this - when we take the path Jesus shows, suffering and conflict can be very real consequences and experiences.

Peter - you gotta love Peter's enthusiasm and “foot-in-mouth” disease - Peter is having none of it and “rebukes” Jesus - tells him off, how dare you say that!

But Jesus, in return, “rebukes” Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (8:33)

Remember, Satan in the gospels is not an evil spirit or red devil with horns. IN the Jewish tradition at this time, Satan is an accuser or an adversary or a tester.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bythewell.com.au/episodes/b210-lent-2>

And “get behind me” is more like “get in line” or come after me, or even “follow me”. It is the same language Jesus uses when calling the disciples in Mark 1 and again at the end of the gospel when they are instructed to go to Galilee. So while it is certainly harsh, Jesus doesn’t call Peter evil, rather he names Peter’s accusation for what it is - at odds with the path Jesus knows he is taking, and he invites Peter to get back into line.

But then Jesus goes further, and speaks of what it means to follow him.

‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>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, will save it.

*Mark 8:34-35*

First of all, Jesus is indicating the kind of death he will die.

And when we think about who this gospel was written for, the early Christian community knew all too well that to follow Jesus was to risk their lives, literally. Martyrdom was a very real threat to the early Christian community. So there is certainly an element of being ready to die for the sake of the gospel.

We are fortunate that we live in a place where being killed for a faith is far less likely.

But we still struggle with this text.

It has been used in unhelpful and harmful ways, particularly for women, in suggesting that they should put up with abusive relationships. I have no doubt that that is not what Jesus meant by it.

He was not talking about self-flagellation or leaving people in situations of abuse with no agency. He was not talking about subjugation.

I think he speaks to people with power here, people with privilege, and for us, he invites us to acknowledge our power and privilege, and to be prepared to let it go in order that another might flourish.

Further, self-denial comes from a place of knowing who we are and whose we are. It comes from a place of knowing that we are deeply loved and held in the embrace of our Creator.

Peter struggled with the idea of suffering, and understandably, with the idea of death, particularly death on a Roman cross. At the same time, he was still thinking the Messiah would defeat Rome, and restore Israel to its former glory - either using military might or some kind of magical power.

Yet here is the Christ, the Messiah, offering himself, being prepared to empty himself of power and to suffer whatever that would bring.

Yes - it is challenging, deeply challenging.

First we need to know we are loved - extravagantly, completely. We are held and nurtured and nourished here as we share bread and wine at this table (Communion).

And then, are we prepared to empty ourselves of the power and privilege we enjoy so that those who are oppressed or captive to power or abuse, or ill or hungry, so that they might be released, so they might flourish?

Because it is in the emptying, in the enabling another to flourish, that life, abundant life, life in its joy and fullness - is given space to emerge and grow.

It is in the emptying and enabling another to flourish, that we all flourish together.

That’s the challenge.

That’s the paradox.

That’s the good news!

Let us pray...  
God of love,  
the reality of suffering and the cross of Jesus are hard for us.  
We, like Peter, prefer a softer, gentler approach.  
But you call us to follow your way,  
and you teach us to learn to empty ourselves for the sake of others.  
Don't let us off the hook - but help us to grapple with what that means for us  
as individuals, and as the church as we seek to share your gospel with the people around  
us. Amen.

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## Responding

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### **Sing** - The Summons (All Together 413)

*The call to follow Jesus towards the cross is hard.*

*This song asks that question - how will you respond?*

Will you come and follow me if I but call  
your name?

Will you go where you don't know and  
never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown, will you  
let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown in you and  
you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but  
call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind and  
never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare should  
your life attract or scare?

Will you let me answer prayer in you  
and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call  
your name?

Will you set the prisoners free and  
never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean, and do  
such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean in you and  
you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but  
call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside and never  
be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found to  
reshape the world around  
through my sight and touch and sound  
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true when  
you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be  
the same.

In your company I'll go where your love  
and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you  
and you in me.

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### **Prayer for Others**

Gracious God, as we bring before you our concerns for our world, our nation, our  
community and ourselves, we rejoice in your presence with us in all that we do, and  
wherever we go.

Lord, we come before you with longing and hope for a different world, a place where  
injustice is turned on its head, where the poor, hungry and displaced are lifted up, the sick  
are comforted, violence is overcome by peace and the lonely and lost are embraced with  
compassion and hope.

Lord, so many people are struggling with the challenges of life – extreme weather events that continue to impact lives and livelihoods, needless violence, physical and mental illness, loss of loved ones, fractured relationships, and social injustice. Lord, show us how we can best serve you with compassion and kindness, empowering broken souls to live with dignity and worth and to help shine your light into their darkness. We thank you for everyone who are making a difference but we ask for your help that we might also contribute to life giving change when we see or hear the opportunity to do so. We continue to lift up our indigenous brothers and sisters in their ongoing struggle – one that goes to the heart of their identity and their place in our nation. Give us the courage to stand with them in their longing for rightful recognition in their own land.

We pray for friends and family members affected by sorrow, illness, or hardship  
We hold before you now in silence those people and situations you've laid upon our hearts  
{silence...}

Loving God, thank you for calling us to follow you. Thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus.

May we be open to hear that calling on our lives, today, tomorrow and beyond.  
And as we do, may we be daring enough to look in unlikely places for signs of your presence so that we can faithfully partner with you in the transformative work you call us to.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Sing - Lord Jesus Christ (TIS 526)**

*We come to this table reminded that every one is welcome here.*

*The song we sing in an invitation to come and to allow God's life to live in us.*

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you have come to us,  
you are one with us,  
Mary's son;  
cleansing our souls from all their sin,  
pouring your love and goodness in,  
Jesus, our love for you we sing,  
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
now and every day,  
teach us how to pray,  
Son of God;  
You have commanded us to do  
this in remembrance, Lord, of you:  
into our lives your power breaks through,  
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you have come to us,  
born as one of us,  
Mary's son;  
led out to die on Calvary,  
risen from death to set us free,  
living Lord Jesus, help us see  
you are Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
I would come to you,  
live my life for you,  
Son of God.  
All your commands I know are true,  
your many gifts will make me new,  
into my life your power breaks through,  
living Lord.

### **Holy Communion**

*If you would like to share in Communion and are unable to join with us, please let Rev Kath or Rhonda Back know. We would love to bring Communion to you in your home or we can gather in the Church at a time that suits you.*

## Offering

*This part of our service is not about the money.*

*It is about considering how we will respond to what we have seen and heard and experienced this morning, or perhaps throughout the week - how is God prompting you, nudging you, inspiring you - and what will you do about it?*

*Each one of us is precious.*

*Each one of us has something to offer in terms of resources - time, energy, skills, money. How will you respond?*

*As part of this, we offer our financial gifts - either here or by electronic transfer.*

*But if this is your first time with us or if you are visiting, please don't feel obliged to give.*

*You are our guests, and we want you simply to enjoy the blessings of worshipping God together.*

Generous God, may our offerings - both here and through our lives - follow you in generosity and be used to work for love, justice, and peace in the world. Amen.

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## Sending

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**Sing** - God Who Sets Us On A Journey (tune: Ode to Joy)

*The song that sends us reminds us that God leads us, loves us, and at the same time is not likely to let us become stale or stagnant - pulling the tent pegs up to encourage us to keep moving, to keep following the path Jesus shows us.*

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*

## Sending

As we go from this space into our homes and workplaces, into the streets and pathways, we make this commitment as we live this life together:

The cross, **we will take it.**

The bread, **we will break it.**



The pain, **we will bear it.**  
The joy, **we will share it.**  
The gospel, **we will live it.**  
The love, **we will give it.**  
The light, **we will cherish it.**  
The darkness, **God shall perish it.**

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### **Blessing**

And be blessed in the name of God, the promise-keeper.  
Be blessed in the name of the Christ, the fulfilment of the promise.  
Be blessed in the name of the Holy Spirit, who is always with us, calling us to return to God's holy embrace.

*Liturgy adapted from Rev Dr Bec Lindsay, writing for Mediacom L3, Lent 2, 2024.*

Rev Kath Merrifield  
25 February 2024