

Church in a Bag

Dubbo Uniting Church

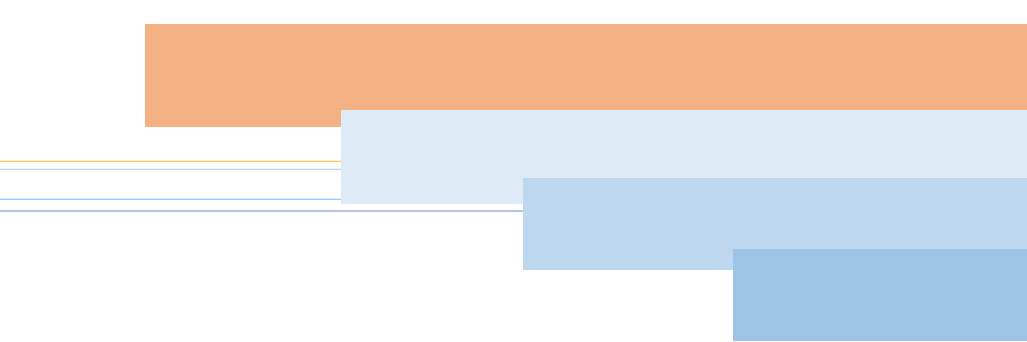
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Don't panic.
I'm with you.
There's no need to fear for I'm your God.
I'll give you strength.
I'll help you.
I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.

Isaiah 41:10

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Sunday 4 July

A Gathering

God of wonder and of unexpected delight
as we celebrate Christ's risen presence among us
we pray that you would open to us
the messages of scripture and prayer we share today.
Talk to us as we journey along life's way
meet us as we fellowship with one another
and so move in us
that we may claim all your
promises as our own.
Open our eyes and
quicken our hearts.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen



Preparation

St Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "And God said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee'". What a hard thing that is for us to accept.

We are like the old man riding down the road on a donkey while he carried a 100kg sack of wheat on his shoulder. Someone asked him why he didn't take the weight off his shoulders and strap it to the donkey. "Oh, no!" he protested. "I couldn't ask the donkey to carry all that weight."

Many of us are carrying burdens today that we do not have to carry. It is our lack of faith, trust, and confidence that God really is alive and able to relieve us of our burdens that keeps us in bondage. How frustrated Christ must be with our lack of faith.

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Reflection

"For when I am weak, I am strong"

Consider this poem by Carol Wimmer, who became concerned about the self-righteous, judgmental spirit she was seeing in some people corroding the very essence of the Christian faith. It's called *"When I say I am a Christian"* and it reads like this:

*When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I'm not shouting, 'I've been saved!'
I'm whispering, 'I get lost!' That's why I chose this way.
When I say 'I am a Christian,' I don't speak with human pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble – needing God to be my guide.
When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I'm weak and pray for strength to carry on.
When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting that I've failed and cannot ever pay the debt.
When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I don't think I know it all.
I submit to my confusion asking humbly to be taught.
When I say 'I am a Christian,' I'm not claiming to be perfect.
My flaws are far too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.
When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I still feel the sting of pain.
I have my share of heartache which is why I seek His name.
When I say, 'I am a Christian,' I do not wish to judge.
I have no authority – I only know I'm loved.*



Reading: Mark 6:1-13

Reflection

“Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour.”

When I was teaching, I recall setting my Year Six class to perform an end of year play. We rigged up a makeshift curtain by hanging an old bedspread at the end of the hall. We chose a play and ensured everyone had a part to play. They were actors, stage assistants, prop handlers. Everyone had a part to play that would give each child a connection with the show. We practiced and practiced, even adding a sort of dance routine. As I remember it, we all worked hard to put on the best show at the school.

The students were encouraged to personally invite all their parents and family and friends to come to our performance. The excitement was noticeable in the young eager actors. Then we put on our play.

Now I know we put a lot of work into that play. Students had given up playtime, some lunchtimes and even a couple of ‘after school’ times to get their lines and actions down pat. So, you can imagine my surprise when I looked out on the audience saw the parents, family and friends chatting and pointing towards the stage, talking about how cute the students were, and how some seemed to have some talent and maybe some were in the wrong role. Their focus wasn’t on the play. They weren’t focused on what the students had spent so much time learning. Their attention wasn’t on what was being said, but more to how it was being done.

At the end, it seemed that they retained nothing of the plot or the story of our play. They just told their children how cute they were. Cute! That word must have stung! I’m sure that each child wanted their family and friends to take their work seriously, just like it would be if adults were putting on a play. All the students heard was that others saw them as cute little kids, as if there was no play at all.

That is pretty much what happened to Jesus in today's reading when He brought his show to his hometown audience.

Adopted from a story by Kenneth W Collins

Closing Prayer

Lord of the Church

Teacher of disciples.

You loved your friends to the end

and gave them the example of leadership through service.

May we who follow you today

and accept the radical challenge you still offer

to your companions on the way throughout all time.

Stop us short if our values go astray

and enable us to discover in obedience a perfect freedom.

Above all, help us to make your church

a pattern for a new world rather than a pale reflection of this one.

With thanks to Dan Eaton for preparing today's reflection



Love of God

Sunday 11 July

A Gathering

At this time, be still for a moment
as you draw near to worship God
taking just a few seconds
to remind yourself why we attend to God.
Listen for His voice
even through the background noise
of the world around you may be a distraction...
Lord God, in this short time
open my ears and my eyes to see your vision for this place
and my part within it.
Teach me, hear my prayers
and enable me for service wherever you might take me
to your praise and glory.
Amen



Preparation

If you play the game of chess, you are familiar with the pieces on the board – from the lowly pawn to the all-important king. If one of your pawns gets "captured" it's not that big a deal. But if your king gets captured the game is over. Pawns have little power and are usually used to set up other pieces or sacrificed to help clear the way for the other, more important pieces – like the rook, knight, bishop, or queen. Kings, however, while their movement is somewhat limited when compared to the other pieces are the one piece you want to protect at all cost.

That's also the way it is in life – isn't it? People will strive to be protected like a chess king and nobody wants to be a pawn. The truth however is that even kings can end up being pawns (like Herod Antipas did in today's Gospel account) and we have to be careful that we live our lives following and serving the real King – God – instead of being someone else's pawn.

Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Reflection

"For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world"

It would be possible that each of us has a childhood memory of joining a gang of young peers wanting to play a team game of some sort. A captain would be nominated for each side, likely the bigger or older, the faster or the better catcher, thrower or batter. Two captains are nominated and the choosing of sides would begin.

Were you one of those who found this a fearful event wondering when or if you'd be chosen? What about not getting chosen and only going onto a team just to make the numbers? What does it mean to be chosen last? Whatever our experience, to be chosen at any rank is a big relief. You were in!

"God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." That's the good news in today's reading. What a relief to know that! You did not, you could not, do that choosing. That is God's doing. We can choose to live as the chosen. That is a way of saying we can exercise our election. We can get into the game. We can score. We can choose to be chosen.



Believe it! You're on the team. Choose now to be a chosen one. Wear your uniform, the righteousness God gives you through Christ Jesus, gratefully. Get out early for extra practice on the field - a workout with Word and prayer. Realise the blessing of God's food at the training table. You need never be discouraged, never need to feel you'll be traded if you make errors. Yours is an eternal contract. Choose to live as the chosen one you are!

Reading: Mark 6:14-29

Reflection

*"The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths...
he did not want to refuse her"*

This is an odd incursion into the Gospel of Mark, this full account of the beheading of John the Baptist. This oddly placed death story provides an interesting concept: a dramatic demonstration of faith, for which unfortunately such resolution of faith does not always save you. John has been arrested by King Herod. And why? Because John kept reminding Herod that even the king is not above the law. He said, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife".

Now, it would be understandable if this were where the story ended. The king didn't like a desert preacher calling him a sinner so he had him beheaded. Simple enough. But life is not always simple. There is usually more to a story than meets the eye. And in this case, we read that Herod actually liked to listen to John, thought he was a holy man, and protected him. Perhaps, in Herod's mind, putting him under lock and key was a way of removing him from harm's way. He might be offended, but it was not enough to warrant death.

The king feared the prophet and dared not harm him. But life has a funny way of pressuring us to do things we would not normally do. This is a story about a man who caved due to social pressures. It offers us these questions: How do life's pressures affect your judgment, and what can we learn from this deplorable moment in the life of this king, this moment when the king caved?"

What we can learn about pressured situations is that:

1. Puzzling problems require conscientious decisions.
2. Promises made in haste create great waste.
3. Pressures in life can affect good judgment.



As GK Chesterton so concisely wrote: "It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting but tried and found difficult". Life has many roads to travel. However, we choose the road on which the shadow of the cross falls. It always leads to freedom and to victory when the final lap of the race is run. Some 2000 years later, we speak of the reigns of the Herods and Caesars with pity and disdain, but the names of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ live on as those for whom life was lived with devotion and courage.

Text adapted from Commentary by Brett Blair and Leonard Sweet

Closing Prayer

Christ greeted us with good news:
may the world hear it through me, and find hope.

We praise and thank you, Lord of heaven and earth.
You are the hope and joy of mankind in every age.
We pray that your coming may transform your people
and renew our youth and vigour in the service of mankind.
Holy is your name, Father God:
grant me a true understanding
of your saving mercy and grace
so that, freed from fear and from the power of my foes
I may serve you faithfully all the days of my life.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen

With thanks to Dan Eaton for preparing today's reflection

Sunday 18 July

A Gathering

Brothers and sisters, family and friends, Jesus makes us one.

Young and old, liberal, conservative and somewhere in between, Indigenous, settler, immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker, Jesus makes us one.

Soldier and pacifist, secular and religious, admirer of Jesus and followers of Jesus, sinner and saint, Jesus makes us one.

Let us worship God who calls us into unity.



Preparation

Let's think about how peace comes about. What are the sacrifices and understandings to bring about good, very good, peace? How do we attend to our neighbour and ourselves whilst serving God?

As Christians, we believe that all people are created in the image of God, are of intrinsic value and are worthy of respect and love. We believe that conflict is a normal part of life and is, in fact, necessary for personal and social development. When it is addressed constructively, conflict can provide opportunities for growth, new understanding and

transformation...it becomes destructive when, through attitudes, words and actions, it leads to exclusion, wounded self-esteem, broken relationships, loss of a sense of well-being, alienation, distrust, undue stress, misunderstanding, abuse and violation. We are called to restore broken relationships wherever they occur, and to practice ministries of healing and reconciliation and we believe that our response to conflict is a theological statement.

We ask that God forgives us, for when we have let our conflict define us and remind us that healthy conflict is a part of God's Creation. Let us hold in tension our need for repentance and God's healing forgiveness. Let us find God's peace, hard won in Christ and priceless for eternity.

Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Reflection

Identity is complex. One of the tricky things to navigate in our own divided world is the knowledge that in our faith community there may not only be some who are secure in their identity and others very insecure, but some who seek identity in belonging to an 'old' group like village or trade or nation.

There may be others deciding to join a newer group based on gender or cause, often one with fluid boundaries. You can take a minute and consider how belonging to Dubbo Uniting Church might relate to any of these and your place in it all.



You might think that Paul (it matters not whether you think he wrote the letter, or whether it was written in his name) is addressing a simpler situation, and some of the metaphors we use – like the lost sheep – do indeed present simple options of lost or found, outsider or insider. Actually, it is a necessary skill of the writer, the one who is witnessing the faith, to show that human life is always about the

choices we make, and the choices God has made for us. Even if we are living in a complex world that requires great wisdom.

Now back in Paul's age, just as in ours, there are certain simple things which do give us an identity which allow us to meet challenges, so it all rings true even if our time here on Earth is very different from Paul's time. These are simple, yet they have extraordinary depth which the rest of the Bible fills out. Here they are, as Paul states them:

1. You were outsiders, now you are insiders – part of the age-long community of God's people, Old Testament and New Testament (vv.12-13, 19-20).
2. There is only one humanity, defined not by this or that kind of identity, but by the person of Christ (vv.14-16).
3. Whatever your past or present, chosen or unchosen identity, you are one in Christ (vv.15-18).

Our faith and sense of purpose in Christ is something dynamic, not static, it is a model for growth (vv.21-22). Note especially the word used for what we are growing into – a temple. This is one of the richest words in Scripture used for: the human body (1 Corinthians 6:9; the Christian church (1 Corinthians 3:16); the earthly place of worship and the control centre of the universe (Psalm 11:4, 48:9, 78:69, 132:8); the human and for the exalted body of our Lord Jesus (John 2:19).

We have a good and gracious God, who asks us to find our balance with one another, and so we give thanks for blessings of home and family, of education and nurture, of art and science - in all our different experiences. We celebrate all who make peace, for all who build bridges,

for all who have learned to forgive the past.

We applaud all good people, lovely things, loving things, our identity in Christ, and those who have explained this and loved it into our lives - yes we are truly grateful.



We remember our place in Christ's church. For opportunities to witness, to serve and to be served. We say thank You God, for the wonderful

story of our salvation, for the prophets and apostles who named it, for the scriptures which carried it into our own history. We are blessed by God's marvellous purposes. Today we recognise that we are unified with Christ and we are built with Him into a holy temple, unseen yet strong and lasting. Christ is our peace: Christ is peace within our own lives, Christ is peace between us all, and Christ's peace is a gift for every situation. There is more that unifies us than divides us. We are one in Christ.

God's love has no beginning or end. God's faithfulness is eternal and all majesty of the heavens and the myriad wonders of earth bear witness to God's purposes. We cannot exhaust God's love. We cannot even get our heads around it, but God's Word declares what you are like, and in Jesus Christ, we see enough to satisfy us forever.



Our time on earth is short, and God's purpose is long. So let us ask God to guide us in the week, to help us in the things that challenge us, and keep us faithful to the balance that brings peace. Human life is always about the choices we make, and the choices God has made for us. So we ask that God grant us wisdom, and true humility, as we journey with Christ before us and behind us, above us and within us, to hear the call to heal and be whole, to give and receive and to tell the whole world of God's great love for God's creation.

A song to sing or to read: The Deeper River

Verse 1

There's a river running deep within the silence of our souls
where the quenching healing waters carve their art.
At its source a spring of living water surging and sustained.
It's the voice of Jesus waiting for the listening of our hearts.

Chorus

When the living waters flow in us
when the living waters flow again
they will carry us, they will wash us down.
They will quench our thirst again.

Verse 2

Sometimes the river of our life winds wandering away
sometimes the rapids tumble restlessly.
Comes the time to stop and find the deeper river running strong.
To drink refreshing waters and hear the spirit's song.

Chorus

Verse 3

Hear the call to thirsty people, there's no need to thirst again.
To the weary come beside still waters lie.
Full of goodness full of mercy our cup will overflow.
When the call of that deep river is a voice we've come to know.

Chorus

*Music and Lyrics Digby Hannah 1994
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Closing Prayer

Merciful God.

Through Christ walls that divide are broken.

Forgive us for times when we have failed to live
as a faithful community.

May we in unity support our life together
and may we know the depths of your love and grace.

We remember that wherever love reigns, God reigns.

Let it be said that walking into our church
is like “walking into the heart of God”

and though we may disagree at times, let us heal and mend.

We go into the world together

united in Christ’s love for each of us

empowered by the Holy Spirit wherever we are.

Walk now in peace and love in the name of Christ.

Amen.

With thanks to Rev Mel Graham for preparing today’s reflection

Sunday 25 July

A Gathering

We worship this day our giving God:

God in the crowds, God in the bread

God in the children, God in the bounty.

We worship this day our powerful God:

God in the storms, God in the sea, God in the boat

God in our fear.

We worship this day our living God:

God of forgiveness, God of justice, God of miracles

God of our life.

Come, let us worship God.

Preparation

This passage once again pits human need and the natural response towards it against God's bigger picture. Jesus knows what He is going to do (verse 6). The disciples haven't a clue how such a meagre amount of food can fill so many stomachs.

Their questions relating to the practicality of the occasion are quite understandable and are ones we have probably asked ourselves when unexpected guests arrive for dinner. John sets this passage at the time of Passover, linking the meal on the hillside with the story of God's saving of the people from Egypt. What may seem like an insignificant detail in fact is at the heart of what the entire chapter claims about Jesus. We learn that everyone was satisfied, again emphasising that not only was immediate necessity met but surpassed. The 12 baskets referred to in verse 13 are another indication of God's unstinting bounty and can be interpreted as referring to God's provision to the 12 tribes of Israel.



The addition of the story of Jesus walking on water may seem odd in a series of passages which focus largely on the satisfying of physical need. The facts in the story are sparse but what we learn is that fear is banished in the presence of Jesus. John perhaps uses this incident to demonstrate further the dependence on Jesus of the disciples. It is indicative of Christ's mastery over the created world, and so the disciples continue to trust Him.

Reading: John 6:1-21

Reflection

If I were to ask you the question "How do you experience God", what would you say? Not how do you think about God, nor how do you feel but rather, how do you experience God?

Some might say they had experienced God in nature. A bush walk, surfing a wave, surviving a shark attack, a sunset, a cloud, a breeze. And "Yes, God was there." Some might say they had experienced God in children or grandchildren. The trusting, innocent smile, the childlike laughter, the simple profound truth, or the spontaneity of youth. "Yes, God was there." A few people might say they had experienced God in music. They had attended a concert, or purchased a new CD, and heard Tchaikovsky or U2 as they had never heard them before. "Yes, God was there."



But now I want you to remember a time when God interrupted your life or intervened. Have you been open to God asking you, guiding you strongly and in the end, you

are either being protected, or you are helping someone who desperately needs help?

Have you ever had what you felt in your heart of hearts was an experience of God?

They happen far more often than we might want to admit. Imagine you are a Jew in Palestine a little more than 2,000 years ago. You hear about a man named Jesus who is teaching and healing in a region around the Sea of Galilee and you decide you want to hear him. Is he really a man sent from God? You don't know. You only know him by reputation. You want to find out for yourself.

People are sitting there with their mouths open in awe at his wisdom and his acts of healing. It is a wonderful event. It's all you had hoped it would be and more. However, your stomach is beginning to growl. You had come expecting that the event would last an hour or so; you hadn't even thought to pack a lunch. Not a brilliant move. Then you begin to notice that you are not alone. There are at least 5,000 hungry men there and then all the women and children as well, and you are not the only one who failed to pack a lunch. Perhaps you think to yourself, "What a frustrating ending to an otherwise wonderful day".

Then you notice the Teacher talking to one of his associates. You step a little closer so you can hear. The Teacher asks, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?". Good question you say to yourself. At least the Teacher is aware of your situation. Little good that will do, however. About all he can do under these circumstances is to pronounce the benediction and tell everybody to go home.

One of the Teacher's associates, a man named Andrew, speaks up. You see him nudging a small boy to the front of the crowd where the



Teacher could see him. “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish,” he says, “but how far will they go among so many?” Andrew is probably trying to make the boy feel important. Besides, it’s good that he came prepared. You wish you had done the same. “I could consume that amount of food all by myself.” But deep in your heart you’re now praying, “Let’s wrap things up. I’m starving”.

The Teacher’s not ready to go home yet. “Have the people sit down,” he says. “Oh, no,” you think to yourself, “He’s going to keep us longer. Your blood sugar is starting to drop. I’m going to faint if he doesn’t let us go before long.” But everyone starts sitting down.

Then the Teacher does something unbelievable. No - unbelievable doesn’t even begin to describe what you are witnessing. The Teacher



takes the five small barley loaves that the boy had with him, says a prayer over them, and then starts passing the bread among the crowd. Is he crazy? Five thousand men, and no telling how many women and children? Five tiny barley loaves? Who’s he kidding? Then he does the same with the small fish.

Something miraculous is happening. Something that cannot be explained. The more bread that is eaten, the more bread there seems to be. The same thing is happening with the fish. “That’s impossible,” you think as you reach out hungrily for your share. “It’s impossible. Fish and bread don’t multiply. What’s happening here?” Then the thought grabs your mind: “I’m not crazy! God is here. This is holy ground. I am standing in the presence of God.” It is a day that will stay with you as long as you live. You and at least 5,000 other people sit there in stunned silence.

Then somebody whispers, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” Someone else murmurs, “This is our long-awaited king.”

But then you look around and the Teacher is gone. Just when you were going to volunteer to help lead the insurrection to place this man as your King, he’s gone. You pause for a moment and think to yourself a little more soberly, “God was here. I have experienced the presence of God.”

This is the impact Jesus had on people. They found themselves in the presence of the one who created the universe. Jesus was more than a wise teacher. He was more than a great physician.

Here was a man to whom even the forces of nature were subservient. Not only could he give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf without the benefit of MRI and Xray - but he could also still the storm, walk on water, cause ordinary bread to multiply, and even raise the dead. What can we say in our Lord’s presence, except this: “Here is God.”

What is possible in your life?

God is here.

Much is possible.

Open yourself to experiencing God anew.

A song to sing or to read: Christ Be Our Light

Verse 1

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people
light for the world to see.

Chorus

**Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.**

Verse 2

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice. **Chorus**

Verse 3

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others
shared until all are fed. **Chorus**

Verse 4

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others
walls made of living stone. **Chorus**

Verse 5

Many the gifts, many the people
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another
making your kingdom come. **Chorus**



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Closing Prayer

God, you are with us when we are alone and when we feel isolated and disconnected from others. May we reach out to others, just as we allow ourselves to be reached in moments of joy and crisis. Bless us with connection and imagination that we might be a vibrant witness to the miracle of your love.

God, you are with us when we struggle with material goods, when we want more things, or do not want the things that we have. You know our failures, our proclivities, and the ways that our communities exploit our desires for their own profit. Teach us the true meaning of enough; help us to remember those who are without bread to eat and enable us to give generously to those in need of a miracle.

God, you are with us in the storms and struggles of life, and we pray for all those who are grieving and lost, for those who struggle with pain and addiction, for those who suffer from illness and disease. Grant us your knowing comfort and help us to embody the knowledge that you walk across the waters to bring us safely to shore.

Open our eyes lord help us to see your miracles at work, open our ears that you may call on us to do your work, helping others, and open our hearts that we may recognise that all things are made possible by you. Praise God from whom all blessing flow.

God of miracle, bless each of us. Inspire in us a belief in your ability to feed our souls and calm the storms of life. In Christ's name we pray,
Amen

With thanks to Rev Mel for preparing today's reflection