

**KOGARAH UNITING CHURCH OOS 17/8/25
CARING FOR COMMUNITY FAITH THAT BEARS FRUIT**

GREETING

As we gather in this season of Stepping Beyond: Growing in Faith, Community, and Service, we are invited to consider what it means to cultivate a life of faithfulness. The vineyard is a powerful image throughout scripture, central to daily life—a place of care, patience, and expectation. A vineyard is prepared, tended, and watered with the hope that it will bear fruit. Likewise, faith requires ongoing nurture, shaped by those who came before us and lived lives of trust and perseverance. Today, we hear the call to cultivate justice and right relationships as an expression of faithful living. Tending a vineyard is an act of faithfulness, requiring effort long before any results are seen. What might this metaphor offer us today? How might we step beyond comfort into deeper faithfulness?

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come all you people,
Come lay your burdens down,
Come prepare yourself for worship.

Creator God,
You created the vineyard and the fruit on the vine.
You have given us skills to harvest the grapes,
and turn the juice into wine.
May we follow your example,
putting in the effort to tend and care for the community where you have placed us.
We ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

LIGHT THE CHRIST CANDLE

God is here.....God is with us

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF FIRST PEOPLES

As we meet for worship today, we acknowledge the Bidjegal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of this land since time immemorial. We pay our respects to their elders – past, present and emerging, and we commit to talking towards truth, treaty and reconciliation, acknowledging that sovereignty was never ceded.

SAYING WHO WE ARE

Our vision is to be a loving and caring community, sharing God's love with the world. We are a congregation who welcome people of all cultures and lifestyles. We are creating a safe place for community and sharing the journey of life and faith.

SING Your Hand O God has guided

TIS/456

Your hand, O God, has guided
your flock from age to age;
the wondrous tale is written
full clear, on every page;
Your people owned your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both of this bear witness:
one church, one faith, one Lord.

Your heralds brought great tidings
to greatest, as to least;
they bade them rise, and hasten
to share the great King's feast;
and this was all their teaching,
in every deed and word,
to all alike proclaiming
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

Through many a day of darkness,
through many a scene of strife,
the faithful few fought bravely
to guard the nation's life.
Their gospel of redemption,
sin pardoned, earth restored,
was all in this enfolded:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

Your mercy will not fail us,
nor leave your work undone;
with your right hand to help us
the victory shall be won;
and then by all creation
your name shall be adored,
and this shall be our anthem:
one Church, one faith, one Lord.

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PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Merciful God, your word today challenges us with its message of faith and fruitfulness, courage and commitment. As we hear the stories of the faith of people throughout the ages, we marvel at their perseverance in the face of the many trials they had to endure. We are thus confronted with questions about our faith and our fruitfulness; our courage and our commitment.

The record of faith shows people venturing into the unknown and risking their lives; forgive us when we prefer to cling to what is known, familiar and comfortable.

Jesus showed us that living faithfully was totally dependent on your grace, love and mercy;

forgive us for clinging to the belief that knowledge about grace, love and mercy is all that is needed for a faithful life. .

Jesus demonstrated that a life of faith meant emptying oneself of power and serving others with humility and love;
forgive us when we cling to a reliance on achievement and self-serving power.

We want to be people of faith, totally shaped by the values of your kingdom, O God, as Jesus so obviously was.

Help us to lay aside those things which hold us back from living fruitful and faithful lives.

Set before us and imprint on our hearts and minds the example of Jesus so that we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

The God of Israel is merciful and loving, slow to anger and quick to forgive. Be assured that all those who come in faith will be forgiven.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Holy God, you are the beginning of all things good.

You desire truth, healing and justice.

Let us be partners in your work of reconciliation, peace-making and loving kindness today.

Amen

PEACE

SING May the mind of Christ my Saviour TIS/609

May the mind of Christ my Saviour
live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
all I do and say.

May the word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour
so that all may see I triumph
only through his power.

May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self denying,
this is victory.

May I run the race before me
strong and brave to face the foe,
looking only unto Jesus
as I onward go.

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HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 5: 1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Psalms 80: 1-2, 8-19

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!
⁸You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
⁹You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.
¹⁰The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;
¹¹it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.
¹²Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
¹³The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.
¹⁴Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,
¹⁵the stock that your right hand planted.
¹⁶They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.
¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.
¹⁹Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be

SING A new Commandment TIS/699

A new commandment I give unto you
that you love one another as I have loved you,
that you love one another as I have loved you.
By this will others know that you are my disciples
if you have love one for another;
by this will others know that you are my disciples
if you have love one for another.

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NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES

Luke 12: 49-56

⁴⁹"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Hebrews 11: 29 – 12:2

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. ¹²Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

REFLECTION

Hebrews 4:12 says "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword."

Here comes the cutting edge of that sword today... Last week the readings promised reward to those who are faithful to God's call. This week the readings warn of division, distress and rejection. Divine revelation always brings division between those who respond and those who refuse to hear.

The biblical prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and others usually managed to create division, and to experience rejection because they were concerned with people and with God's interaction with society. They felt called to enter into that action and live out a faith shaped by God's role and rule within the world. Many of the prophets were hesitant in responding and did so only out of an absolute conviction that they were indeed acting as God's messengers - as God's agents in the world. They seemed to be particularly open to hear God's word and to interpret it for their contemporaries - usually interpretations that people were reluctant to hear.

In today's reading, Isaiah was railing against the people for failing to care for the land that God had provided for them. If the people had cared for the land they would have been living blessed and fruitful lives but all God could hear were the cries of the oppressed and downtrodden.

God looked for justice and saw only bloodshed.

God looked for righteousness but only heard cries of distress.

Isaiah spells out the intense longing of God for the well-being of people. He also enlightens his listeners to the pain of God when the arrogant and unjust behaviour of people is undoing the results of God's love and care for them. Words the people would no doubt have heard with dismay and alarm.

Nothing has changed, prophetic faith calls us to interpret God's word for today - even if it is a word that people are reluctant to hear and even though it may isolate us from people who refuse to hear the message.

I must say, I was rather reluctant when I saw the readings set down for this week - the Old Testament, especially the Gospel and finally the Epistle. The Gospel - one of the most difficult set of verses there is - Jesus talking about fire and division. Thank goodness the Epistle had words of hope and assurance.

The Hebrews reading opens with the words about the large crowd of witnesses that surround us- and goes on to compare our journey through life to a race. One commentator said that the imagery in these verses comes from the sports stadium, and the heroes and heroines of the faith are, as it were, in the stands cheering us on. Being the sporting nation we are, it shouldn't be too difficult to imagine a large sports stadium, and picture the figures of the psalmist and Isaiah and Jesus there in the stands cheering us on in our journey through life. Not only cheering us on, but with particular messages for us today.

I vividly remember the very first worship service I led in my 'home' church where everyone knew me. I was not yet ordained - still a student at Theological College. The minister and majority of the congregation were at the annual camp so they probably thought it was

safe to let me loose on those few who were left! There was quite a long pathway along the side of the church leading to the vestry and as I walked along it I had the intense experience of being 'surrounded by the cloud of witnesses' – those who had gone to the camp. Knowing I would be nervous, they were praying for me just prior to the service beginning. (I checked this out later and the timing was certainly right!) This experience was so real and it did strengthen my confidence and faith when I needed it.

But in the Gospel, what of these difficult words of Jesus, how can they be of any help to us? I think they can help bring home to us the divisive effect that God's word can have. It is very easy to forget that if one has been brought up within a Christian family and has never found Christianity to be a cause of division in the household. But if one belongs to another culture where the dominant religious faith is not Christianity, then, yes, division certainly can occur.

We had the experience of someone in our city parish for whom becoming a Christian was certainly a source of division. A young Japanese woman, Hideko, came from a Buddhist background but a friend took her to a Japanese bible study group and she met one of our church members there - Mayumi – another young Japanese woman and they became friends. Hideko began coming along to worship with Mayumi and her husband. One day Hideko had a car accident which held within it the possibility of being much more serious than it actually was. Hideko felt that God's hand was upon her at that time and she believed that the message for her was that her life was precious to God. She had on occasions, previous to this, contemplated ending her life as she had suffered many miscarriages since the birth of her daughter ten years before and felt ashamed over not being able to produce a son - very important in a traditional Japanese marriage, as hers was. Her husband was a Buddhist and was happy enough for Hideko to come along to church - to visit - without having or making any particular commitment to the Christian religion. After the experience with the car accident, Hideko felt that she did want to make that commitment to follow Christ - and - to be baptised. She was, however, too afraid to tell her husband, and Mayumi, Hideko and I met a number of times and talked and prayed about the situation. To cut a long story short, Hideko did pluck up enough courage to tell her husband, and after a while, when he saw that she was serious about this, he didn't give his permission but said that he would not stand in her way. She was baptised on Easter Day - her husband played golf as usual.

A happy postscript to add - Hideko gave birth to a son the following December - a wonderful experience for her and her husband, and the whole congregation. Sadly, Hideko's husband would not permit their son to be baptised and they returned to Japan shortly after that.

We forget, in this country, or don't even think about how traumatic becoming a Christian is for some people, of how it can cause division in a family as it has since the experience of the first Christians. Jesus himself was a casualty of the hostility and division which necessarily attends the prophetic proclamation of God's word.

But, because Jesus walked that road himself, we know that he is there cheering us on, when we are thrust into situations which are divisive because we stand up for gospel principles.

And, finally, isn't it good to read these words from Hebrews and to know that they are addressed to us as surely as they have been to Christians throughout the centuries...

Hear them again...

"As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses round us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race marked out for us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end."

Readings today which I must confess I thought were going to be far more difficult to understand than what they turned out to be...they certainly do not contain pious platitudes about faith, but they say that when our faith gets us into difficult situations we can be assured and re-assured that we will be given the strength to cope - that God does not desert us, that Jesus shows us the way, and that the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us: "lifts up our drooping hands" and "strengthens our weak knees". (Hebrews 12:12)

"May I run the race before me, strong and brave to face the foe, looking only unto Jesus, as I onward go."

SING You were in this place ATS/433

At the dawn of the ages
you pulled land from the sea.
With your word you invented
all we know, all we see:
creek and desert and forest,
red and grey kangaroo.
You were in this place –
but we never knew.

Paintings seen on the rock face,
footprints left in the sand,
campfire next to the river,
songs that rise from the land:
signs that seem so elusive,
shadows just out of view.
You were in this place –
but we never knew.

Do we take after Jacob,
blind to what lies at hand,
needing dreams to inform us
God is here in his land?
See him suffering and dying,
bread and wine tell the news.
You were in this place –
but we never knew.

Jesus, open our senses,
help us see you today
in the person beside us,
as we work, as we play.
While we love you and serve you,
may it never be true:
you were in this place –
but we never knew.

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OFFERING

Faithful God, we pause at this point of our faith journey to give you thanks for the love and care you bestow upon us. Love and care revealed so fully in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. We offer these gifts and our lives to be blessed by you as we continue our journey with perseverance and for the sake of the joy you have set before us in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Merciful God,
as a church, we have so often failed to look after
the vulnerable, the young and the elderly.
We have allowed abuse to flourish
and turned away when the alarm was sounded.
We have limited the care given to those harmed,
and valued lawyers over reconciliation and reparations.
Help us to see the error of our ways.
Help us to listen to the cries of those who are hurting.
Help us to care for those who have been abused.
Help us to value the needs of the vulnerable over the needs of the institution.
God of Mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Loving God,
may your life-giving arms be wrapped around those who have been abused,
those who have lost faith due to the lack of integrity in church spaces,
those whose family members have taken their own lives,
those whose mental health has suffered.
Help us to understand the ways we can love and support all those who are suffering.
Help us to take responsibility.
Help us to make real amends and seek reconciliation with integrity and respect.
In Jesus' name, we pray.

Merciful God,
you see the divisions all around us.
You hear the hurts and feel the pains.
Be with us in these hard times.

Gracious God,
you see the racism, misogyny, ageism, ableism and other hate.
You see the wounds and scars it creates.

Be with us in these hard times.

Loving God,
you see the wealth gap and growing inequalities.
You hear the cries of anguish.

Be with us in these hard times.

God of justice,
help us to be a witness
to light, truth, love, and reconciliation.
Help us to speak up for those who are oppressed.
Help us to act for truth and kindness,
and to care whenever there is injustice in this world.
Help us to know the actions we can take.

Be with us through it all.

In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

SING Inspired by love and anger TIS/674

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
informed of God's own bias we ask him once again:
"How long must some folk suffer?
How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self interest turn prayer and pity blind?"

From those forever victims of heartless human greed,
their cruel plight composes a litany of need:
"Where are the fruits of justice?
Where are the signs of peace?
When is the day when prisoners and dreams find their release?"

From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy,
the fear of lost advantage provokes the bitter cry,
"Don't query our position!
Don't criticise our wealth!
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth!"

To God, who through the prophets proclaimed a different age,
we offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:
"When will the wronged be righted?
When will the kingdom come?
When will the world be generous to all instead of some?"

God asks, "Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

Amused in someone's kitchen, asleep in someone's boat,
Attuned to what the ancients exposed, proclaimed and wrote,
A Saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools
has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools

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BLESSING

May God's love shine on you.
May God's grace flow through your heart.
And may the peace that passes understanding
be with you now and always.
Amen.

SENDING OUT SONG

Jesus Christ is Waiting

TIS/665, verse 1, 5

Jesus Christ is waiting,
waiting in the streets;
no-one is his neighbour, all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am lonely too.
Make me, friend or stranger,
fit to wait on you.

Jesus Christ is calling,
calling in the streets;
"Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet."
Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

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