

St Stephens Uniting Church Worship Guide Pentecost 8, Sunday July 26

Theme: Parables of encouragement (Janet Howie)

Lectionary readings:

Psalm 105:1-11

Old Testament: Genesis 29: 15-30.

New Testament: Matthew 13: 31-33; 44-52

Epistle: Romans 8: 26-39



Opening Prayer:

Gracious God, we come to worship you, in our homes, separated from the church family but together in spirit. Be present with us all. Free our restricted spirits. Open our hearts and minds to praise you for your steadfast love in the midst of trouble. Help us to hear your words for us today. Amen

Hymn TiS 106 Now thank we all our God <https://youtu.be/1MZ2pjum70E>

This surprising hymn of gratitude was written by Martin Rinkart during the Great Plague of 1637.

Prayer of Confession:

God of wholeness, you know us completely. You know that we want to love and serve you, but when faced with great difficulties, we have at times lapsed into fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, unable to find a way forward, to keep on trusting, or to care for others.

Forgive us for our frailties. Renew us with your sustaining spirit to live wisely, one day at a time. In Jesus' name we pray.

The words of assurance: Romans 8:29

We are God's people, graciously forgiven and renewed 'Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Amen.

Lectionary Readings for today

As always these readings are challenging. If you are able, read them all with the theme of 'Encouragement' in mind. The Old Testament reading continues the family saga of Abraham's line, the people of the Covenant, who although unfaithful at times, receive God's blessing that extends to all people of faith. This time there is another love story, that of Jacob and Rachel with some human trickery thrown in between Jacob and his Uncle Laban. The narrative makes compelling reading.

In the New Testament, Matthew's Gospel, through the parables, captures something of the abundant and life-changing nature of the Kingdom of God.

The Epistle to the Romans continues the 'Encouragement' theme. We are held in God's love and nothing, not even the worst thing we can imagine, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Psalm 105 is a response to the readings proclaiming God's steadfast love and calling us to seek his presence and to follow his way.

Today we will look more closely at some short, vivid and joyful parables that help us understand more about the Kingdom of God and what it means to belong to it.

Jesus proclaims that in him, the Kingdom of God has come near (Matt10:7) and that the Kingdom of God is within you, (Luke 17:21).

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, Thy kingdom come.

What does this mean? God's kingdom is not an actual country, but a commitment of followers to God's rule of peace, justice, freedom, salvation and enough for all, made possible by Jesus coming among us, his life, death and resurrection. This is not easy to explain. The parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13 are helpful about what it means to belong.

These short parables use natural, physical images, familiar in daily life

Matthew 13: 31-33

The tiny mustard seed becomes a tree (or shrub) in which the birds may rest. Here is, abundance and safety. 'From little thing big things grow'.

The three measures of flour leavened with yeast yields enough to feed many people. Abundance, again, and sustenance. How the growth happens is mysterious, but we know it does, and we can rely on it to be there.

Matthew 13: 44 – 50

Three more short parables about the Kingdom, show how it is made known to us and how we might respond.

The Kingdom may come to us in the routine work of everyday, in unexpected ways. The ploughman in the parable is just doing his job, but he finds buried treasure that transforms his life. Who knows when God may touch our daily lives, in what appears to be simple ways - perhaps plants thriving in the garden, a song, a card in the letter box, some truths heard on radio or TV, caring conversations with others, or in helping others. It takes time to understand that these things are glimpses of the Kingdom.

We may be seeking the Kingdom, like the man whose main purpose is to find the perfect pearl. Once he does, he sells everything to gain his heart's desire. The pearl may be, a symbol of Christ. Seek and ye shall find. But we live with so many distractions and tasks.

Then there is the dragnet full of all kinds of fish that must be sorted.

This would be a daily task for a fisherman, but becomes a bit jarring and exaggerated when applied to the 'end times'. The main point is that God's kingdom is open to all and we are in the net. None are excluded, but we have to actively accept the invitation to be part of God's kingdom.

Where God is present, there is justice, love and kindness. Life can be lived fully,. Amen

Song: Tis 745 Seek ye first the kingdom of God <https://youtu.be/EsBpM9IcBts>

Prayers for others.

Take a little time to think about, to name, and to pray silently for the people who are in our hearts and minds at this troubled time. In what ways can we help?

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, you will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our sins as we forgive
those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory
are yours for ever and ever. Amen**

Serving wherever we are

Hymn: Tis 687 God gives us a future <https://youtu.be/1kjEmbTS7hk>

Benediction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always. Amen.