

Collins Street Baptist Church

Summer Worship: Prayers & Readings

Sunday January 10

Introduction

In any service of worship, or gathering for prayer, or virtual-online-written-liturgy, the context matters.

Our context today feels heavy, as it often does. One year ago we were grappling with the impact of unprecedented bushfires ravaging vast areas of Victoria and beyond. We prayed for mercy.

Today we watch in sadness and horror at the impact of illness, authoritarian politics, conspiracy theories, violence, poor leadership and the misuse of power in many places. This week we have seen images that shock us: hospitals overwhelmed, parliaments overrun, leaders who cover weakness with theatrical displays of power devoid of responsibility.

We long for something different. Something more. Something holy and true and just.

Peace that does not paper over cracks but seeps down into them – healing, mending, restoring.

Prayer

Where are you God? The world has run amok.

The angels have finished their chorus, and their anthem proclaiming “peace on earth” has gone unheard. Babies are still being born – but are we asking them to take on the problems of this earth?

In some places your name is used to justify heinous things. In other places your name is scarcely whispered. We do not know which of these is worse.

We pray for something new – not just in and for ourselves, but for the world.

We pray for repentance – not just in and for ourselves but for the world and its leaders.

We pray for vision – not just for ourselves but for the world in which we live.

A vision of wholeness and justice; a vision of peace and truth; a vision of a world in which people are able to thrive and flourish.

Show us the path to this future God, and we will follow – carrying our crosses and our children, and leaving behind all that encumbers us.

Show us the path to this future God, and we will follow.

Amen.

Scripture Reading – Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

During Advent, just a few weeks ago really, we heard a plea from the prophet Isaiah: "won't you tear open the heavens and come down." Isaiah, like so many before and after, longed for God's presence to be a more tangible, powerful, apparent reality than it seemed to be.

Traditionally, the reading for today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, is about the baptism of Jesus. According to Mark's gospel, at this moment the heavens really did tear open, with God's spirit descending like a dove on Jesus. The voice from heavens declares "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". I have often been deeply moved by this, and by the reminder that God's great pleasure in Jesus was apparent long before he had "achieved" anything notable in his earthly existence. But this moment of the "heaven's opening", it seems to me, doesn't really answer Isaiah's prayer. Nor mine. Because the world, as we have seen this week, is still deeply troubled. If illness doesn't overwhelm us, then it seems the violent followers of a crazed man addicted to power might. If political leaders don't fail us in the short term, then perhaps their long term failures to address impending environmental catastrophes might.

The story of Jesus's baptism is accompanied by the story of his cousin, John the Baptist, calling people to repent and seek forgiveness. John seems crude and rough, certainly in comparison to Jesus, and we have often struggled to know what to do with his harsh words and harsh living. Jesus's clean post-baptism self is far easier to incorporate into our church services than John's camel hair and locusts and hellfire and brimstone preaching. But in a world in which evil is apparent, and decisions made by a few (a few who are not necessarily informed by wisdom and grace) impact so many, the call to change our ways and make ourselves and our world new is a crucial one.

Repentance – the call to turn around and embark on a new, and more holy path – is a call for our times. May we hear it.

Blessing

May God gift you with a vision of hope for this world.

May God gift you with the faith to see it and the courage to be part of it.

May God gift you with love for the unlovely, hope for the hopeless and perseverance through it all.

May the God of life so fill your life with the fruit of the Spirit, that your own living and loving inspires others to walk the way of grace.

For God is good, with steadfast love that endures forever.

Amen.
