

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 10 January 2021. First Sunday of Epiphany

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church.

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 29)

The voice of our God and King is heard in blessing,
as it echoes in its majestic powers over all creation.

**We come to worship our God, and to celebrate the
Mystery and Reality that is God's everlasting glory.**

The voice of God is heard in all creation – and it responds
with joy to the voice of its Creator, Sustainer and Renewer.

**We come to worship our God, and to celebrate God's
power and generosity towards all creation and all peoples.**

We come to worship our God, and to celebrate the
way we are welcomed into God's glorious presence.

**The voice of our Holy God is heard in the sacred
spaces, and God's grace is received as we worship. Amen.**

© 2011 Joan Stott – "The Timeless Psalms" RCL Psalm Year A, used with permission

HYMN Fill thou my life (R&S 406, v4 omitted) recorded by Thora

Fill thou my life, o lord my God,
in every part with praise,
that my whole being may proclaim
thy being and thy ways.

Not for the lip of praise alone
nor ev'n the praising heart
I ask, but for a life made up
of praise in every part:

praise in the common things of life,
its going out and in;
praise in each duty and each deed,
however small and mean.

So shalt thou, glorious Lord, from me
receive the glory due;
and so shall I begin on earth
the song for ever new.

So shall no part of day or night
from sacredness be free;
but all my life, in every step,
be fellowship with thee.

Opening Prayer

"This is my dearly loved Son, with whom I am delighted."

Most wonderful God, foolish and flawed though we are,
we too delight in your beloved Son.

As in his name we gather in the house of many praises, may the heavens be opened for
us,
that we may catch a glimpse of that Light and Love that transforms our common days
with a beauty not of our making. Through Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen**

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Loving God, you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your dear Son.

Thank you for making us your children by water and the Spirit.
Keep us faithful to you throughout our lives.

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We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Lutheran Church of Australia

Offering as we are in the season of Epiphany, I use the same offering prayer as last week:

Loving God, we offer you our gold:
The glow on the faces of children at play
The shining moments that brighten our lives.

We offer you our frankincense:
The quiet reassurance of familiar things
The grace of care and friendship
The blessing of bread and our heart's yearning in prayer.

We offer you our myrrh:
The ashes of our dreams
The bitter taste of our failures
The shadows through which we stumble.

Transform our inadequate gifts,
that they may be an acceptable sacrifice of praise,
and transform our lives to reflect more deeply your justice and joy
In the life of the world. Amen

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29:3-11
Mark 1:4-11

Sermon

There is one thing that connects all of today's lectionary readings and that is the Spirit of God. We had the first five verses of Genesis in which God speaks the world into existence and God's spirit sweeps or hovers 'over the face of the waters'. Some translations say, 'brooding over the surface of the waters' like a bird, or as we shall hear in the hymn later:

She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
Hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
She sighs and she sings, mothering creation...

In Psalm 29, we hear that the 'voice of the Lord is over the waters'. The voice of the Lord is powerful and full of majesty; it flashes forth flames and causes the oaks to whirl. An image not unlike last Sunday's *Perfect Planet* in which David Attenborough explained how there could not be life on earth without the creative power of volcanoes – terrifying and dangerous, yet life giving and fertile. In Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus, the spirit descends like a dove, and speaks – 'you are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.' A voice which only Jesus can hear. A voice and a message directed to Jesus alone – *you* are my Son...

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There is poetry and beauty in how these texts intertwine and repeat themselves – a beginning, the voice of God, which is a spirit like a dove, like a mother hovering over chaos speaking it into creation, a voice of fire and destruction, yet creative; descending like a dove in another beginning and speaking words of love, praising her child. If we view these texts together as a whole, they give a different dimension to the traditional story of Jesus' baptism by John.

The light and water from Genesis remind us of the eternity in which God resides, creating order out of the chaos of unordered matter. In the context of that immensity, the Son, the Beloved, is baptized to be transformed into subservience. The same subservience, through repentance that John calls all people to engage in. We do not read it today, because we would be jumping ahead to Lent, but the next sentence in Mark, after the voice of God, has the Spirit immediately driving Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted and tested, prepared for a life of service.

When we look only at the Gospel reading for the baptism of Christ, we do not see Jesus as fully. He is not fleshed out as is John the Baptist, his forerunner. Jesus remains a mystery while John stands before us in all the wildness of a life that shuns the interiors of buildings, eating what God provides in nature – locusts and honey. We see John in his rough camel hair coat and leather belt; we are not told what Jesus wears. We are told nothing about Jesus except that he came from Nazareth and 'was baptized by John'. John, though perhaps peculiar according to our modern standards, is a fully human creature while Jesus is enigmatic, given to hearing a voice no one else hears. He is identified in this scene in a way no one else has been, or ever will be – as the Son of God, the Beloved. In Jesus' baptism, as told by Mark, nature itself is upended. The heavens are 'torn apart'. All creation in the moment of Jesus' baptism is altered. Out of that rupture comes the Holy Spirit in a form that is described as a dove. That dove does not simply alight *on* Jesus, because the Greek phrase used can be said to mean '*into* him'. Jesus is infused with the Spirit from God. A new reality has come into the world, transforming all things including the seen (the heavens and a dove) and the unseen (a voice). As befits this wondrous transformation, it is on the banks of the river Jordan on the border between the wilderness and the land of milk and honey where John stands, crying out for the people to repent and be baptized. John comes out of the wilderness with a prophetic announcement, that he is not worthy to serve, in even a lowly manner, the one who will bring a new kind of baptism. We do not know why John the Baptist cries out to the people to repent and be baptized or how he knows Jesus will change the world, but like the earlier prophets, John has a vision that requires the people to prepare themselves through repentance and baptism in water.

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His washing is more than a ritual bath, more than a repeated ablution required by law. The new bath has become the first sacrament, for John calls the people to faith through repentance.

Many religions and cultures have a sacrament of washing for purity or to bring one closer to God. Muslims must wash before each prayer. Hindus regard the river Ganges as sacred and washing in her is a great honour – they desire to be cremated on the river's banks and return to the water in ash. Religious bathing is important in Judaism and Sikhism. But the baptism of Jesus is by and with the Holy Spirit – 'he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' says John. The spirit of God swept over the water and created light. This new baptism is a call to faith in the God made human in Jesus so recently in the nativity stories.

Through the Holy Spirit, in baptism we are given the faith of Jesus. Baptism opens our hearts and minds to becoming instruments that can bring about peace and unity.

Sometimes that reality - the faith of Jesus within us - is not apparent. If we focus on John's baptism, we may forget that we have been immersed in God's gracious welcome and transformed by the Holy Spirit. We can be caught up in our participation in the work of the church, failing to acknowledge the mystery itself. We may forget that the mystery, which is God's defeat of death and chaos in the resurrection of Jesus, is the reason we come together to care about the world. The work we do may seem to be the goal rather than the life that grows out from gratitude. Through the baptism of Jesus, faith washes over the earth through the baptized. By his baptism in the waters of the earth, the faith of Jesus made all waters sacred; and so returning to the Creation by God's Spirit with which we started - the faith of Jesus is the reason Christians seek to keep the waters of the earth clean, nourishing, plentiful, and free for everyone. Water is life itself in more ways than we can fathom, and all creation is precious and our duty to preserve and honour.

HYMN She sits like a bird Wild Goose Collective (Iona), used by permission

She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
Hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
She sighs and she sings, mothering creation,
Waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.

She wings over earth, resting where she wishes,
Lighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
She nests in the womb, welcoming each wonder,
Nourishing potential hidden to our eyes.

She dances in fire, startling her spectators,
Waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned;
She weans and inspires all whose hearts are open,
Nor can she be captured, silenced or restrained.

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For she is the Spirit, one with God in essence,
Gifted by the Saviour in eternal love;
She is the key opening the scriptures,
Enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God, Your Spirit swept over the waters of creation;
You are sweeping over us now, creating something new.
Open us to a new beginning, where we look through the lens of the goodness
of Your creation, experiencing all possibilities in You.
Turn us away from the negative lens and lead us to the light.
Call us away from the distractions of the world to experience what You are doing now,
in us, and through us, and in our world for which we now pray:

We pray for the Church: that she may be a beacon of hope throughout the world,
reminding us all of our responsibility to care for and protect God's precious gift of creation.

We pray for the world, our common home: that through God's grace we may hear its cry of
the damage done and be moved to protect it for future generations to enjoy. We pray for
those people who are already facing droughts, floods and storms that God may grant them
strength and hope
for the future as they work to adapt to the changing climate. We pray for us all continuing
to suffer the pain and suffering of a pandemic brought about by our abuse of nature.

We pray for the world we live in: that God may open our eyes to recognise the goodness
of all creation and help us to do what we can to restore and care for the wonderful gift that
we have been given. We pray for our local community: that through God's grace we may
be good neighbours to each other and to the whole of creation, restoring and caring for all
that God has made.

We pray for world leaders: that God may grant them wisdom to make just decisions which
respect the earth and all that lives in it, especially those who are poorest and most
vulnerable.

We pray for all we know who are sick, in mind or body. Those who suffer from chronic
conditions, or who are in hospital. We pray for those who care for them and especially we
pray for all NHS staff. And we pray for all those who mourn the loss of loved ones.

Lord you give life. From day one, your Spirit brooding over the deep,
your wind rushing, your breath filling.
As creatures of the earth we give you thanks for the gift of life.
Fill us, enliven us, to be ambassadors of life abundant,
breathing out your song in harmony, singing to you, our Creator,
whose glory shines through all the world. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

HYMN God, who spoke in the beginning (tune Hark, the herald) recorded by Thora
By John Campbell based on today's readings

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1 God, who spoke in the beginning, by your word all life began!
Still, your words in Law and story, shape our purpose, show your plan.
Ancient words we all inherit, words of wisdom, help and merit,
teach us how we ought to be: humble, gracious, endlessly.
By your written words draw near, let your love sustain us here.

2 God, who sent us fiery prophets, fearless, faithful, all for you,
still, their strident call for justice speaks to challenge all we do.
Living, present, urgent voices put before us vital choices:
will we work for God today, will we follow in your way?
Through such prophets, still draw near; let your love sustain us here.

3 God who came to us in person, walking with us here on earth,
still, the way you took in Jesus shows your wisdom and your worth!
Selfless, sharing, kind and caring, learning humbly, yet so daring;
For our rescue flailed alive, spat upon, then crucified.
Living Jesus now draw near, let your love sustain us here.

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Blessing - Epiphany

Star child, wanted and welcomed by the humble,
hated and hounded by power-seekers:
refuge and refugee, we love you!

Apple of God's eye, cherished and chosen by Kingdom-travellers,
rejected and ridiculed by the earth bound:
sacred and scarred, we honour you!

Light of the world, tended and treasured by the pure in heart,
shadowed and shunned by the deceitful:
peerless and pierced, we exalt you!

A World of Blessing ed. Geoff Duncan

And the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen