

## Service Sunday 12 February, 2023 Epiphany 6 St Pauls Napier

### Call to Worship *(based on Psalm 119:1–2)*

Kia noho a Ihowa ki a koutou. May God be with you:

#### May God bless you

How sacred are those whose path is honest and just,

**who boldly stride out in the Spirit of God!**

Sacred are they that pay attention to Wisdom,

**seeking God's inner voice with all their heart.**

Steadfast are those who walk the path of God's love

**For they shall not be confounded, they will respect the whole of God's counsel**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, be joyful in the grace of  
God.

**May the Spirit lead us further into the ways of costly love.**

### Hymn

Praise to the living God, all praise be to God's name,  
who was, and is, and is to be, and still the same:  
the one eternal God before what now appears,  
the First, the Last, beyond all thought God's timeless years!

Formless, all lovely forms declare God's loveliness;  
holy, no holiness of earth can God's express.  
Behold the God of all: creation speaks God's praise,  
and everywhere, above, below, God's will obeys.

God's Spirit freely flows, high surging where it will:  
in prophet's word as spoke of old, is speaking still.  
Established is God's law and changeless it shall stand,  
deep written on the human heart, on sea, on land.

God has eternal life implanted in the soul;  
God's love shall be our strength and stay while ages roll.  
Praise to the living God, all praise be to God's name,  
who was, and is, and is to be, and still the same!

Words from the Jewish *Yigdal* c. 13<sup>th</sup> cent. Tune: Leoni

### Psalm 119:1-8 *Read responsively*

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.

**Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,  
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.**

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

**O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!**

Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

**I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.**

**I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.**

### Prayers of Praise and Confession

Gracious and loving God, we gather today as your people, your community of faith in this place and this time, full of joy and delight that we belong to you. May our worship today and everyday be full of gratitude, uplifted with praise, honest in prayer and enthusiastic in response to your call on our hearts. Let us take a moment to be still before you, turning our faces to your light and welcoming you into our presence – let us be still before God.

God beyond all our naming, God of our deepest yearnings, give us devoted hearts that seek to listen, think, and feel anew. Open in us the wisdom of Jesus, with the courage needed to travel his life-giving road, wherever it might take us.

Instill in us a faith that sets us free to live in love and life on that road, not confined by our fears or restricted by our limited vision.

We confess the times when we have found the restrictions useful, when it is easier to busy ourselves with our small world rather than stepping out into the unknown. Forgive us and set us free to live and love in Jesus name.

We confess that we have not always been open to new patterns of belief, when fear of change has stopped us from questioning what no longer honours God, where our rules and laws do not speak the truth of Jesus. Forgive us and set us free to question and learn anew in Jesus name.

We confess the grief we cause ourselves and others when we say and do those things that injure and shame, when we trample on the hopes and dreams of others and ourselves. Forgive us and set us free to encourage and explore in Jesus name.

We confess the panic of uncertain futures, of being tired and feeling like there is nothing left to give, when the darkness seems to be growing and the hope dimming. Forgive us and set us free to trust and be at peace in Jesus name.

Grant us, compassionate God, a faith that truly sets us free, that is new and hopeful, vibrant and alive, discerning and full of life and love, in Jesus name.

And in that hope we hear your words of assurance, that you, our God, made known in Christ Jesus, never move from absolute love and truth. A new day is always offered to us and the encouragement which grace brings. For we are God's beloved people. **Thanks be to God.**

**Prayer of Assurance – we sing** *please remain seated*

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Come unto me and rest;  
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down thy head upon my breast."  
I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad;  
I found in hHim a resting place, and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give  
the living water; thirsty one, stoop down, and drink, and live."  
I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life giving stream;  
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light;  
look unto me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright."  
I looked to Jesus, and I found in him my star, my sun;  
and in that light of life I'll walk, till traveling days are done.

Words Horatius Bonar: Tune Kingsfold WOV 500

## **Readings**

First Reading Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,

I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church

People: **Thanks be to God**

*Second Reading* 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 On Divisions in the Corinthian Church

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, 'I belong to Paul', and another, 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church

People: **Thanks be to God**

## **Sermon**

We pray: Open us, guide us, teach us we pray O God that we may hear your truth in mind and heart- and live in loving relationship with you and each other. In Jesus name. Amen

Last week, we talked about the times when we lose our way because we have imposed human wisdom on the purpose of God – when we have failed to be the God-flavoured salt, the God-coloured light to the world. This week we continue that theme as we talk about our relationship with the law or the wisdom of God and how we keep our understandings of Gods purpose for us fresh and vital and on track.

Way back in the day, when I was looking to reconnect with my faith as an adult in the wonderful metropolis of Amberley, I had to choose from the local church community the one that would become my home. I knew it had to be local and there was no Methodist church (my origins) so it was Anglican, New Life or Presbyterian – and it was the Presbyterian that drew me in over and above the other – and why - because of the reformed and reforming cornerstone that anchored the denomination. I liked that we always asked questions, seeking to discern what Jesus was saying to us, I liked that we were continually trying to examine where we were at as a people of faith, always seeking to interpret God's Word for our time. I especially liked that many voices were heard and respected and that together we grew and matured as Christians. I liked the concept of the minister being the teaching elder, not the fount of all knowledge and really like the concept of eldership, guiding and holding the collective wisdom of the faith community. So - Presbyterian it was!

And my faith has matured and grown in that soil of wide-ranging conversations, shared discernment, troublesome questions and vulnerable answers. But above all, it was about the understanding that the reformed church never sits on its laurels but is always re-forming, always questioning who it needs to be to walk faithfully in the way of Christ, forever challenging and unpacking who we are as Christ followers. You could say that Jesus was a reformer. He came to interpret God's law in a new way – not to change or banish the law of Yahweh but to bring people to fresh understanding of what these commandments mean. He was often accused by his critics of sweeping the Law aside, of not taking the commandments seriously but in fact what he was doing was sweeping away the layers of human wisdom that has almost obliterated these holy commandments, leading the people away from their God.

Jesus spent much of his time in ministry on this earth deconstructing the micro-management that the church had built around God's commandments to Moses, seeking instead to get back to the core of what God's covenant with the people was actually about..

Matthew's Gospel tells us in Chapter 5 how, in the sermon on the Mount, Jesus is assuring the people he had not come to demolish the Law but to fulfil it – and he then preached on interpreting the ancient commandments in a new way: for example: You have heard it said: you shall not murder.....but I say to you, you shall not hate or harbour anger... and he proceeds to unpack the heart of the laws given on Mt Sinai, to challenge the legalistic understanding of the people and to open their hearts to the abundant vision that is God's purpose for this world.

It's not as if the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures weren't on to this as well. The people of the exile well understood that constant vigilance was needed to follow God's law – Moses speaks in Deuteronomy of the chaos if you don't obey the law given by God but note that he sees the law as only being fulfilled in the context of the love of God in your heart – it's when the heart turns away from God that the law gets compromised and bad stuff happens. When the people of the exile interpreted the law through lust or greed or power, then they had effectively turned their back on their Lord.

Paul too has this ongoing problem in Corinth – and is forced to use some very straight talking. Because of their continuing quarrelling and jealousy, he likens their spiritual maturity to that of a child, fit only to be fed on milk, not yet ready for solids. That must have been as good a put down as it comes for that day. To describe grown men and women as no better than infants would not have been well received. Basically Paul suggests that, based on their current behaviour, they are still at school, and in the primers as well. He continues by telling them that as long as they follow human wisdom instead of the wisdom of the Spirit they will make poor judgements and false claims of truth and be a divided people.

But if they come together as one people in common purpose in the name of Christ, it's like a garden where some will plant, some will water, but all the growth comes from God - and it will be abundant. Very good words for us today

A law, as we well know in our culture today, only serves justice when it is interpreted in light of its purpose. A law serves its intention, not the other way round. And we all know that a law meant for justice can be manipulated for injustice. People are always pushing the edges of the law for their own benefit. For instance with the law around taxes (and this is my definition) – the intention is that all contribute to the social good, health, roads, schools, housing, infrastructure, democracy, etc etc. When people with a lot of money find legal ways to avoid doing that are they accepting the intention of the law? I think not.

Moses, Jesus, Paul and we would and should have called out that behaviour saying that the interpretation of the law was flawed and its heart of compassion and justice was being trodden on.

Jesus called out the leaders in the church wherever he saw the love of God constrained by the laws of the church – no healing on Sunday, unclean food, ignoring the downtrodden and the unclean.

Jesus re-formed the commandments into just two – love the Lord your God with everything you have and love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments, he said, hang all the law and the prophets.'

Paul tells us we are to be forever on guard against choices we make that isolate us from the way of the cross, choices that seem to have lost the Jesus factor and sit rigidly in human certainty. I can think of a few and I am sure you can too.

How do we obey the commandment of God today without falling into the trap of manipulating it to suit our ends as the church time and time again has done?

The Psalmist talks about it – how learning to walk the path of right living with God is something we will need to work at and learn and grow in else we will go astray. The metaphor that Paul uses of being as children seeking always to learn and grow and seek, of being willing pupils is a helpful one too I believe.

Pupil or teacher, we are to be questioning and learning, alert to the ways we might curtail Jesus teaching into our own comfortable purpose. We remember that we do not know it all, there is never a time when we can simply abide by the rules but we are to be continually discussing, learning, growing from each other, with those who know much and those who would say they know nothing but in fact have a profound faith. Look around – think of the people here who have been teachers for you, those whose journey with God had impacted on your journey, whose faithfulness gives you hope and whose gifts have been, and will be, light and salt for you.

The learning and growing, the re-formation never stops –we are forever seeking to discern how we are to live as the people of God in true and faithful community interpreting scripture in the power of the Spirit, opening our heart to the truth that is that is Jesus Christ in this world today.

We finish with some of the words from Ps 119 – used in the call to worship

*Sacred are they that pay attention to Wisdom, seeking God's inner voice with all their heart. Steadfast are those who walk the path of God's love for they shall not be confounded, they will respect the whole of God's counsel.* And for this we say thanks be to God. Amen

**Hymn** words © Shirley Murray , music Colin Gibson *Alleluia Aotearoa* 113

Our life has its seasons, and God has the reasons  
why spring follows winter, and new leaves grow,  
for there's a connection with our resurrection  
that flowers will bud after frost and snow

*so there's never a time to stop believing  
there's never a time for hope to die,  
there's never a time to stop loving,  
these three things go on.*

There's a time to be planting, a time to be plucking,  
a time to be laughing, a time to weep,  
a time to be building, a time to be breaking,  
a time to be waking, a time to sleep,

*but there's never a time to stop believing ....*

There's a time to be hurting, a time to be healing,  
a time to be saving, a time to spend,  
a time to be grieving, a time to be dancing,  
a time for beginning, a time to end,

*but there's never a time to stop believing ...*

### **Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

Holy God, as we turn our faces to the world, as we bring before you the concerns of our hearts, the struggles and injustices which exist in this world, we first say thanks to you for your unfailing love, your infinite patience, your faithfulness and mercy, for a faith that sets us free to live and love. We give thanks for our friends, our neighbours, those we sit beside now and those who we will encounter in the week to come. Hear now our prayers, intercessions for the life of our world, that the world may also know what it is to live in hope and love.

We pray for the people and areas of Aotearoa that are under continuous threat of disastrous weather patterns. Where homes are ruined, families left with nothing to call their own, where futures are uncertain and prospects bleak. May the generosity of care be directed to the needs of the vulnerable, may the strength and wisdom of the helpers, the decision makers, the resourcers and the carers be unfailing and compassionate we pray. May the community of country show their care and love in helpful ways.

We pray for those in education – for those who have not long started school and are still finding their way, for those who struggle to send their children to school properly resourced, for those who teach, those who learn, those who ask questions and those seek answers. We pray especially at this time for all those who are

going to university throughout the country – for safe travel, a warm welcome and wise guidance in new ways of learning and growing.

We pray for the world. For the changing of attitude and laws that will give us some hope for our planet, for the changing of the attitude and laws that allow inequality and encourage prejudice, for the coming of peace, the profusion of care and the disempowerment of hate and anger. Loving God, we pray fullness of life for the entire world and we pray we take up our part in that prayer.

A time of silence as we bring our personal concerns and hopes before you.

Hear our prayers gracious God, in Jesus name.

...we sing: WOV 676

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
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, now and forever.  
Amen, amen. Amen, amen. Amen, amen. Amen, amen.**

### **Offering and Offertory Prayer**

Loving God, we bring before you our gifts of offering and ask that you bless them to your purpose in this community and beyond. Bless us too that we might be your hands and feet in this community and beyond, sharing our skills, our compassion, our desire for life and love for all people. In Jesus name. Amen.

### **Hymn WOV 626 Words Oliver Wendell Holmes Tune Ombersley**

Lord of all being, throned afar,  
thy glory flames from sun and star;  
center and light of every sphere,  
yet to each loving heart how near.

Sun of our life, thy quickening ray  
sheds on our path the glow of day;  
star of our hope, thy softened light  
cheers the long watches of the night.

Our midnight is thy smile withdrawn,  
our noontide is thy gracious dawn,  
our rainbow arch thy mercy's sign;  
all, save the clouds of sin, are thine.

Lord of all life, below, above,  
whose light is truth, whose warmth is love,  
before thy ever-blazing throne  
we ask no lustre of our own.

Grant us thy truth to make us free,  
and kindling hearts that burn for thee,  
till all thy living altars claim  
one holy light, one heavenly flame.

### **Blessing and Benediction**

As the people of God, free to love and live in Jesus name, let us go in peace to love and serve our Lord. And may the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. [Sung] Amen