

**An Order for Lay Preachers' Sunday
6th August, 2017**



Call to Worship

There are diverse gifts:

but it is the same Spirit who gives them.

There are different ways of serving God:

but it is the same Lord who is served.

God works through people in different ways:

**but it is the same God whose purpose is
achieved through us all.**

Each one of us is given a gift by the Spirit:

**and there is no gift without its corresponding
service.**

There is one ministry of Christ:

and in this ministry we all share.

Together we are the body of Christ:

and individually members of it.

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:4ff
and Basis of Union, para 13.

Opening hymn / song of praise

Australian songs from recent years include:

TiS 179 Praise with joy the world's creator

TiS 188 Where wide sky rolls down

Relatively recent but not Australian include:

TiS 181 Come, O God of all the earth

TiS 182 Bring many names

TiS 183 Sing of the Lord's goodness

TiS 187 Let all creation dance

The "Altogether" series and the book "Here's a New Day" also offer many contemporary Australian songs

Prayers

If themes for the prayers are being drawn from the lectionary readings, then the theme of **grace** would be a suitable one.

The prayer of **adoration** might include:

- God's grace at work in creation
- God's grace at work in the people such as Abraham, Moses, Deborah ...
- God's grace even in Jacob – eventually!
- God's grace in Jesus As per the gospel reading
- God's grace for us as inheritors of Abraham's covenant, even though we are not direct descendants.

The prayer of **confession** might acknowledge:

- How much like Jacob we are at times – stubborn and hard to teach, and/or trying to muscle God into giving us a blessing.

But God's faithfulness to us remains despite it all.

The **assurance of forgiveness** could be from the end of Romans 8, immediately before the NT reading in the lectionary – nothing can ever, ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

First message

(Prepared with children in mind if appropriate)

Jacob

The importance of names

- In Jacob's time, names always had meaning, and often were a reminder of a story: thus the meaning of "Jacob" and "Israel" and "Peniel".
- Ask for some people's names and see if they know their meanings; OR bring some names, including the leader's own name, and give the meaning of those.
- In our time, it's still true; and in some places a child's birth name is only temporary: the parents wait until they see something of the character of the child and give a name to match at a later age.
- Recall the meaning of "Jesus/Joshua" [the Lord saves] and "Immanuel" [God is with us].

The name changes tell the story of how Jacob changed as he responded to the call of God on his life. What about us?

TiS 180 *God of many names*

TiS 653 *This is a day of new beginnings*

ATOK (the red book) 342 *Jacob struggled for a blessing*

Second message

Some ideas

#1 – for preachers who like exploring themes common to the different readings:

a *the call to take responsibility for our decisions and actions*

Jesus to the disciples – YOU feed them

God to Jacob – YOU sort yourself out

Paul to the Romans – YOU, all of you, respect each other

TiS 537 *Let us talents and tongues employ*

TiS 626 *Lord of creation*

or *b* *the grace of God to meet us when we struggle*
(assuming we are really doing all we can and not just
looking to God for an escape or a magic fix)
The psalm writer – “I have always been faithful; I have
never lost my faith; so listen to me plea.”
The disciples – Jesus stepped in when they were
unable to cope
Jacob – finally submitted to God
Paul – God is still faithful, even if we are not.
TiS 653 This is a day of new beginnings
TiS 560 All my hope on God is founded

#2 – The Gospel

- The story
- Whether it's historical or not, and how to tackle the question
- Jesus' compassion
- The disciples' despair, and then trust
- Problem solved

So how do we make sense of this in the 21st century?

- Lay Preachers are still feeding the people with a good, solid meal!!
- Christians and the Church are called to fill a similar role in wider society
- When we share the grace of God, there is always more and more ...

ATE 308 (When pain of the world surrounds us) We are
called to follow Jesus

TiS 256 Servant king

ATAR 673 Community in Christ

#3 – Romans

An exploration of the theology of God's covenant with Abraham and its continuing validity, including: The continuing relevance and life of the Old Testament for the Christian era;

- We are not biological descendants of Abraham, but we are inheritors of his covenant [and inheritance is always pure gift – there is no provision for entitlement];
- The covenant still lives, what it meant for Abraham is true for us: so what does that mean for 21st-century living?

TiS 560 *All my hope on God is founded*

TiS 219 *Jesus comes with all his grace*

A celebration of Lay Preachers

To preach the Gospel, the grace of God in Jesus Christ, is one of the greatest privileges anyone can have – and a pretty significant responsibility as well! In the Uniting Church we recognise that that privilege is extended not just to ordained ministers – Ministers of the Word and Deacons – and to Pastors in congregation placement, but to lay people, “ordinary” members of a congregation who respond to a Call from God to bring the Gospel of grace to their people.

The Ministry of Lay Preaching is a Specified Ministry in the Uniting Church, that is, it is of such importance that there are Regulations relating to the training and formal recognition of Lay Preachers. And those who have been through the formation will bear witness to the incredible richness of understanding, and deepening of faith, that accompanies the study involved.

We also recognise that there are many who faithfully lead their people in worship and with preaching each week and who do not have any formal recognition. The church recognises the reality that without the faithful service of these people, there would be many congregation on any given Sunday with nobody to lead their worship.

So in this celebration of Lay Preachers, we thank God for the dedication and the gifts of accredited Lay Preachers, but also all people Lay and Ordained who bring the insights of their life experience to their faith and share that with us each week.

We pray the blessing of God on them all.

Prayers for the world

Prayers for our world might draw from the readings for the day, or perhaps more specifically the message, and relate to any of:

The world

- People and places in distress, perhaps where we are called: YOU do it

The church

- Lay Preachers
- People for whom faith is a struggle – because they keep on running away or because life experience drives them away from God

Individual people who may be named [or not, if confidentiality needs to be preserved].

The Lord's Prayer may be included here, or at any other point, according to local custom.

A song in which we commit ourselves to serve God by serving our world:

ATE 308 (*When pain of the world surrounds us*) *We are called to follow Jesus*

TiS 697 *Make love happen*

TiS 473 *Community of Christ*

TiS 256 *Servant king*

TiS 650 *Brother, sister*

ATAR 673 *Community in Christ*

The Sending Out and Blessing

A sung Blessing – TiS 778 or another according to local custom

**Notes to accompany the readings for Lay Preachers' Sunday
6th August, 2017: Lectionary Ordinary Time week 18**

The Lectionary readings for the day are:

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

Acknowledgement is made of these sources:

Abingdon Preaching Annual, 2017

Preaching God's Transforming Justice

Provoking the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew : Commentary – Tom Long

(All these are available from MediaCom)

Romans: Commentary – Paul Achtemeier (Interpretation)

Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary

Matthew

At least part of the story is Jesus' grace at work – and this provides a link to the Old Testament and New Testament readings.

The incident narrated in all four gospels, so it was clearly an important memory for the early church.

In Matthew it is placed very early in the fourth of the five sections of Matthew – Jesus is now focussing on the disciples and their formation. It also follows his rejection at Nazareth, the renewed interest from Herod and the subsequent report of the death of John the Baptist.

On the surface it's a typical miracle story of its time and place:

Problem > Action > Results.

But it's a little more complex than that:

News of John > seek refuge > problem > Jesus acts > result > conclusion.

How shall we interpret the story?

As a historical event? OK, as long as we remember that we still need to recognise the message Matthew was wanting to convey. Why relate the incident at all?

And if we cannot accept this as historical? (And there are many similar "hero" stories through the Bible.)

To get caught up in a dispute over the historical factuality of the account is potentially a waste of time: it might be interesting, but in the end it's a secondary issue. The important thing is: what is Matthew's purpose in telling the story?

And the answer there is plain: it's about who Jesus was, and the nature of the life of the church.

Jesus demonstrated his compassionate nature: he had sought to get away to find some peace and quiet, but was unsuccessful; but he still treated the people with compassion and care, and healed them. Despite his own distress.

The desert is a place potentially of death – it had been often enough. But where Jesus goes, life follows. We might call it “grace”.

In the Greek language, wilderness is a place of emptiness and depopulation – like Jerusalem after the destruction of 70 AD (which Matthew's audience assuredly remembered well). The Hebrew is *midbar*: *mid* is away from, absence of; *bar* is spoken word: *midbar* is the absence of spoken word – there's nobody there.

The disciples – that's us

Accept responsibility – when the disciples reported the lack of food, Jesus said, “YOU feed them.” That's always the call, isn't it: we are the ones on the spot, we are called and commanded to do God's work. There's no looking for some kind of miraculous intervention from God unless we're prepared to get in there and do it ourselves.

But when it was found that they didn't have the resources, then Jesus stepped in. “Bring what you have”, he said; and that is always enough.

Scarcity

People often behave as if there's a scarcity of whatever it is they want, even if there's plenty. [The fear of such “scarcity” is foundational to keeping our consumer-driven economy going.] For us in Australia there is plenty and to spare for us to be generous and more than “charitable” – there is no doubt about that. Jesus offers a vision of an abundant life, the kingdom of sharing God's resources right here and now. As we bring what we have, God will multiply it for others: sharing grace and compassion always results in much more.

It's not really a community of faith (or a community of any sort) if some have ample and others not enough.

Old Testament - God's grace in covenant

Jacob is “just” another in the long line of people through whom God has been at work in human history: Abraham, Isaac, and later Moses, David, Elijah, Jonah (!). Here we read of the final transformation of Jacob.

Jacob's history

Remember Jacob had a lifelong history as a con-man and outright deceiver. There's a symmetry to how the stories of his victims are presented:

- Esau (ch 25-27)
 - God, at Bethel (28)
 - Laban (29-31)
 - God, here (32)
- Esau (33-36)

The question was: will he ever learn? Will he be changed at Jabbok? After all, he had made promises at Bethel, and they had come to nothing.

The power of names

Jacob – one who grabs by the heel

Israel – one who struggles with God

Peniel – the face of God

Jacob demands to know God's name – this would give him access to God's inner person and character, and so some power over God.

God has a price too – demanding that Jacob tell God *his* name first; and the moment Jacob did was the instant he lost the fight.

The name changes to Israel and Peniel signify the change in Jacob that (at last) allows God to work in him.

PS

Where was the grace for the women, children and slaves sent ahead of Jacob? Surely we cannot deny that he used them as, in our terms, human shields. They had no say, they were pawns in the game. One can only hope that that kind of abuse of power, committed before his overnight struggle, was never repeated.

New Testament - grace and covenant continue in Jesus

Paul's anguish is over Jews who don't believe in Jesus – but God remains faithful: God made a covenant with Israel and it remains valid, always.

It's easy to forget – and we should not – that Paul remained a Jew all his life: that's partly why, in a new town, the first place he went to was the synagogue.

The context of this letter was tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman church. In 46 CE the Emperor Claudius has expelled all Jews from Rome – including Christian Jews. (We see mention of that in Paul's writings.) So the church that remained was Gentile. In time the Jews were allowed back – and had to work out how to belong in this church where some of them had been founding members but their covenant story was no longer relevant.

Paul says – with different shades of meaning for each group, perhaps – God is still at work in the Jewish nation – traditional, Christian or other. There is no place for an Us-and-Them attitude.

The existence of a “True Israel” is not a history of race (as Jews tended to think) but of choice – God's choice to extend grace to Israel and then through them [in the person of Jesus] to all humanity. That promise continues to be valid, said Paul. But it's not “biological” Israel, rather the *inheritors* of Abraham's covenant through Jesus. (And the one thing we know from inheritance is that we never earn it – it is purely a gift.)

Where to for us as Christians and preachers, then?

- ^ Jesus' compassion and care despite his own struggles.
- ^ YOU feed them – a message for the disciples and us alike.
- ^ Jesus – where and in whom life is found.
- ^ Transformed by God and then employed for God.
- ^ God continues to be faithful – to covenant and in grace.
- ^ The indescribable abundance of life with Jesus – plenty and more for all to share; to be imitated in our human, physical life as well.