

**An Order for Lay Preachers' Sunday
6th August, 2023**



Call to Worship

God of many names, gathered into one

Strong mother God, warm Father God

God of Jacob and Israel

God of Tamar and Ruth

God of Simon and Peter

God of Saul and Paul

We come as we are – you say that's how you want us

We bring the old self, with its old names and habits

We hear your offer of grace, of love that perseveres with us

Open us to our new selves and our new names in you.

These notes and worship suggestions are offered by the Lay Preachers' Committee for congregations and preachers wishing to celebrate Lay Preachers' Sunday on the 6th of August, 2023.

The assumption is of a fairly standard order of worship, so provided here are:

- commentary notes on the lectionary Bible passages for the day,
- some suggestions for themes for prayers,
- and a note about the occasion of Lay Preachers' Sunday.

We recognise of course that there is far more material here than can be used in a single worship service – people using this resource select from it those elements that best suit the person concerned.

Our hope is that anybody preaching or leading worship on Lay Preachers' Sunday will be able to find something of interest and/or use. You may agree or disagree with some of these: they are offered as starter ideas, perhaps a challenge. They are just some of many perspectives.

The most important thing on this day is the celebration of Lay Preachers' Sunday itself, and the recognition of Lay Preachers that goes with it.

The Call to Worship above picks up some of the main characters involved, directly or as a type of character, in today's readings. It fits well onto an A5 page for anyone using a printed order.

Prayers

If you like to have themes for the prayers 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.
- How we are like the disciples at times: given to panic or despair when faced with a significant challenge.

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.

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

A celebration of Lay Preachers

This can be read as an introduction to the pastoral prayers

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.

Here are some thoughts for the message(s) to the people

Jacob

The story of Jacob is perhaps easier than the other readings to make accessible to children; but of course it works for adults as well!

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?

If you enjoy exploring common themes across 2 or even 3 readings:

1 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, show the same grace as Jesus does

2 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 a magic fix or to evade responsibility)

- *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* – God's perseverance outlasted Jacob's evasions
- *Paul* – God is still faithful, even if we are not.

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
- YOU feed them – a message for the disciples and us alike.
- Jesus – where and in whom life is found.
- 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. When we share the grace of God, there is always more and more ...

Notes to accompany the readings for Lay Preachers' Sunday 6th August, 2023
Lectionary: Year A, 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:

 Preaching God's Transforming Justice
 Provoking the Gospel of Matthew – Swanson
 Matthew: Commentary – Tom Long

(All these are available from MediaCom)

 Romans: Commentary – Paul Achtemeier (Interpretation series)

 Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary

 HarperCollins Study Bible

 Jewish Annotated New Testament

 Against the stream: progressive Christianity between pulpit and pew – Rex A. E. Hunt

Matthew

At least part of the story is Jesus' grace at work – and this provides a link to the other readings. This incident is 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 section (of five), sandwiched between the news of the death of John the Baptist and the action of Jesus walking on the water.

1 *How shall we interpret the story?*

As a historical event? That's OK, as long as we remember that we still need to recognise the message Matthew was wanting to convey. Why did he 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 to spend time on what is an interesting but secondary issue. The important thing is: what is Matthew's purpose in telling the story? Far better to read the story as just that, a story, or perhaps a parable – and seek Matthew's meaning in it.

2 *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.

3 *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.

4 *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.

A note about **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.

Other perspectives:

not counting women and children

Rex Hunt remarks: we call this "the feeding of the 5000", but that is incorrect: the biblical text itself says the people numbered 5000 men, "not counting women and children".

How often that happens!! Jesus had many disciples, including women – we are told (in two different lists) the names of twelve of the men: the women are omitted. In the Gospel of John we don't even have the name of Jesus' mother!! So often the women are not counted but are left out, considered "besides"!

Men may laugh it off, but women are disgusted or angry.

But then – who are the others who are discounted? In Bible accounts: the sick, the elderly, the divorced, lepers, tax collectors, Gentiles?

And who are their equivalents in 21st-century Australia? The elderly (still), the mentally unwell, the ones living with disability, the divorced (yes, still, in some Christian circles), the LGBTQI community, people of faiths other than Christian.

What do we do in our congregation budgets for these myriad uncounted / discounted, who are beloved children of God every bit as much as we who call ourselves Christian?

of course there was enough food – the women took it.

Rosemary Radford Ruether comments: of course there was enough, but the disciples only looked to the men, of course saw none of it; and when suddenly the food appeared, it seemed indeed like a miracle.

Jews and Gentiles

Shortly after this incident we read of the feeding of 4000 – this time in Gentile territory. A look at the contrasts and similarities of the two accounts could be informative.

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, Tamar, and later Moses, Ruth, Elijah, Jonah (!). Here we read of the final transformation of Jacob.

1 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, at Jabbok (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. Indeed, even now he's misrepresenting God's promise for his own advantage (v 9-12).

2 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.

But 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 change from Jacob to Israel, and the name of Peniel, signify the change in Jacob that (at last) allows God to work in him. And while he's injured, he is paradoxically a more mature person.

3 The women ...

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.

But then – how do we respond to the idea that God only won the wrestling match by cheating??

New Testament - grace and covenant continue in Jesus

Chapters 3-8 have been about non-Jews who follow Jesus; now in chapter 9 it's about Jews who do not follow Jesus – and Paul's anguish over them. But God remains faithful: God made a covenant with Israel and it remains valid, always.

1 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. And just as he argued against compelling Gentiles to become Jews first, so he never tried to argue Jews out of their Jewish heritage.

2 The context of this letter was tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman church. In 46 CE the Emperor Claudius had 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 exclusivism.

3 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.)

Augustine (of the 5th century) read Romans as God giving the grace that leads a sinner to repent – but then managed to misunderstand the basic point of the whole business: God's grace is extended to **all of us**, regardless.

PS

There are 3 different possible translations for Romans 9:5 – with quite different emphases: from (the Jews) comes ...

^ the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed, for ever

^ the Messiah, who is God over all, blessed for ever

^ the Messiah. May he who is God over all be blessed for ever.