

**Leigh Memorial Congregation
Parramatta Mission
Uniting Church in Australia
Lent 4
22 March 2020**

(This order of service is prepared for this Sunday, 22.3.2020. to offer a worship space to people, in the safety of their home. Prayers of the people are focussed on corona virus, its effect on people and seeking God's grace to cope with it. The hymns/songs can be said as prayers if not possible for solo singing. Have a blessed worship!)

The gathering of the People of God

Greetings and Welcome:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Friends, this is an unprecedented time. The corona virus is pandemic and creating havoc in the world. As a result, this is the first time in the 135 years of its history Leigh Memorial will not be open for services until further notice. I am sad and I know there are many who share my emotion. However, in response to sharp rise in number of infected people in NSW, and in compliance to Uniting Church of Australia NSW & ACT Synod's strong recommendation the Church Council have decided to suspend all meetings and gatherings including Sunday worship.

As a result we are not sitting in the pews of our beloved church. But as followers of Christ and as responsible citizens of this country we have to do whatever we can to protect one another, especially the vulnerable of our society. This should be the case all the time in life, but in this moment it matters more than ever. I think we can facilitate many ways to worship God, support each other and plough this hard path with a positive outlook. So we gather as a digital diaspora of Leigh community to worship God.

Welcome to worship God in the cyber space which is infused with God's presence.

Call to Worship:

When the world is full of uncertainty and fear,
we turn on the light.

When we cannot find our way to love and peace
we turn on the light.

When our vision dims due to the darkness within
we turn on the light.

Christ opens our eyes with the gift of sight.

The light of the world is Jesus Christ.

Come and worship the one
who brings sight to all.

Hallelujah! Praise God, the light of the world!

Song: *Together in Song 474*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8S5t1LrCSY>)

Here in this place new light is streaming,
now is the darkness vanished away,
see, in this space, our fears and our dreamings,
brought here to you in the light of this day.

Gather us in, the lost and forsaken;
gather us in, the blind and the lame;
call to us now, and we shall awaken,
we shall arise at the sound of our name.

We are the young, our lives are a mystery;
we are the old, who yearn for your face;
we have been sung throughout all of history,
called to be light to the whole human race.

Gather us in, the rich and haughty;
gather us in, the proud and the strong;
give us a heart so meek and so lowly,
give us the courage to enter the song.

Here we will take of the wine and the water,
here we will take the bread of new birth,
here you shall call your sons and daughters,
call us anew to be salt of the earth.

Give us to drink the wine of compassion,
give us to eat the bread that is you;
nourish us well, and teach us to fashion
lives that are holy and hearts that are true.

Not in the dark of buildings confining,
not in some heaven light years away,
but here in this space, the new light is shining,
now is the kingdom, now is the day.
Gather us in, and hold us forever,
gather us in, and make us your own;
gather us in, and all peoples together,
fire of love in our flesh and our bone.

Prayer:

Most Loving God who like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, we gather under your wings this morning.

We come this morning carrying the burdens of uncertainties, anxieties and fear for the Corona Virus that have invaded human life and have taken away life's joy, comfort, peace and stability.

In the scaredness of this hour, open our ears O God, that we may hear once again your never-failing promise that you will never leave us, never forsake us.

Now in solidarity with people from all over the world we pray:

O God, when we are fearful – give us courage;

When we are weak – give us strength

When we are puzzled – show us the way.

Help us find our greatest certainty, comfort and peace in knowing that you are our refuge and help, and that you are always with us.

As we worship you, O Holy God, drench us through and through with your love, and may the light of your hope shine in our eyes, and faith and power possess our hearts to pass through this difficult time through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, you penetrate the darkness of the world with your love and your life and graciously enlighten us to see the world and our neighbours as you see them.

We confess, however, that there are times especially when there is so much panic because of corona virus, we choose to reject the gift of your insight, preferring to 'close our eyes' to the pain and suffering of so many around us.

When selfishness blinds us to the needs of others;

Jesus, Light of the world, forgive us.

When insensitivity blinds us to the hurt we cause others;

Jesus, Light of the world, forgive us.

When our prejudices blind us to the equal dignity and worth of others;

Jesus, Light of the world, forgive us.

When our pride blinds us to our own faults;

Jesus, Light of the world, forgive us.

When the lure of materialism blinds us to the poverty of others;

Jesus, Light of the world, forgive us.

(Time for silent confession)

Jesus, Light of the world,

Have mercy on us.

Help us to walk in your light

that we may reflect your love and mercy

in and through all we say and do.

Amen.

Words of assurance and Declaration of Forgiveness:

Hear the good news!

“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light”. Know that we can “live as children of the light” (Ephesians 5: 8)

Because in Jesus, the Light of the world,

we are enlightened;

we are healed;

we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer: *(In the spirit of the Lord's Prayer feel free to pray in your own language)*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is 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 times of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours for ever and ever. Amen.

The Service of the Word

Bible Reading:

John 9:1-41

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7 saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8 The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10 But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." 16 Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. 17 So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20 His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22

His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." 25 He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" 28 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30 The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Spiritual Blindness

35 Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ!

Song: "Of the Multitude of Words" (Tune: 'Vienna', 77 77)

Of the multitude of words
held within the Bible's wall,
some bring life and some spread death,
some can liberate us all.

Should our use of sacred words
put all other views to flight?
Does our inner certainty
justify abuse of might?

Are our ways of using strength
open for the world to see?
Do they hide behind the texts
masking our transparency?

Loving God, the source of truth,
help us clearly to discern
what brings death and what brings life,
life for which our spirits yearn.

Then O God of spirit life,
we shall live with openness,
giving all the right to be
their true selves with graciousness. (*William L Wallace*)

Prayer of Illumination

Come upon us now, O Holy Spirit,
and give us holy thoughts which are translated into prayer,
holy prayers which are translated into love,
and holy love which is translated into life;
for the sake of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

(Uniting in Worship II)

Reflection

Our journey through John's Gospel this lent has brought us to John 9. It is the narrative of the man born blind. It is a narrative that explores a major Johannine theme. Not, 'seeing is believing,' but, 'believing is seeing.' People ask Jesus why was this man born blind? The assumption is that either he or his parents must have sinned. That was the thinking then. It still is. Of course, the man born blind and his parents have sinned. We all have. But that is not the cause of his blindness. Jesus responds that the man was born blind so the works of God might be made known through him. This is not that he was born blind in order to be given sight as some kind of magic trick. All of us are born so that the works of God might be made known through us. The man is healed. Then the narrative takes a turn. Who healed him? Clearly someone with non-human ability. The narrative points to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.

Now it becomes interesting. The healing of the man causes confusion and uproar. The man who has grown up blind and known to be so since birth now sees, neighbours are discombobulated. Can it be him, or is it someone else? The religious leaders become involved. That the healing happened on a Sunday adds to the drama and tension. This is awkward. Who is Lord of the Sabbath? Who is the healer? The parents are called in and interrogated. 'Is this your son?' 'Yes.' 'How does he see?' 'Don't know!' The man then seems to display spiritual insight even though he does not know who, nor presumably has he seen the healer because his last interaction with him was as a man born blind. The religious leaders cast him out. Then the man born blind meets the man who healed him. The healer reveals who he is, and the man born blind now has spiritual sight. The high point of the whole drama is when the man says, "I believe." The man has two healings, one physical and the other spiritual.

This is not about a man born blind receiving physical sight. Many have and still do live with physical blindness. It does affect their life, obviously. The tragedy here is that the people who have sight do not 'see' Jesus. The people who are religious are blind to who is Jesus. They do not believe. Their unbelief is spiritual blindness. Yet they are masquerading as the sighted ones! Their spiritual blindness is profound.

Here is an inverse. At the start of the narrative is a man born blind, people who can see and religious people supposedly with spiritual sight. Yet at the end of the narrative is the inverse. The man born blind has gained both physical sight and importantly, also spiritual sight. He believes. The neighbours and the religious start this narrative as the sighted ones and on this basis considered also to be spiritually sighted. Yet they are spiritually blind, even while physically sighted. It is not that their religious practices make them blind. It is that they don't 'see.' It is all the more stunning that they are so close to where spiritual sight might be obtained yet remain blind to it. Believing is seeing.

To believe is to see God at work in the world, at work in the lives of people.

What ought to disturb us here is that the religious people were attending the version of the church Jesus attended, seeking to do the right thing. This ought to disturb everyone who attends church, COVID-19 church suspension notwithstanding!

This is also about sin. Sin is mentioned early in the narrative and again at the end.

The Greek word for truth is a compound word that literally means 'not concealed.' Truth is revealing what is hidden or concealed. The crowd and the religious are not committed to uncovering what is hidden. They do not seek the truth. Even when presented to them, they refuse to believe. This is their sin.

The text also speaks of judgement. In John's gospel, judgement is the crisis of a decision point. Like a choice between two options. In John the standard of the Christian faith is set forth, and people judge themselves by the decision they make. By not believing, people are making a judgement which is upon themselves. By not believing, yet claiming to 'see', the people are judging themselves as spiritually blind.

The Lenten journey to Easter invites us to open ourselves to Jesus Christ again. To seek the truth of who Jesus is, and what it means to 'see' him. It means to acknowledge our sin. Not to lightly dismiss it, nor to be overwhelmed by it, but to confess it. Our response could be to cast Jesus out, or to confess, "Lord, I believe," and fall on our knees in worship of him.

It might also be fostering daily practices that nurture belief. Daily prayers and daily study of the scriptures, with an attitude of humility, and searching for the truth. This humble searching for truth provides the context in which the Holy Spirit comes to us afresh and enables us to believe Jesus as Christ. This decision and confession of believing is a choice we make afresh.

Keith Hamilton, 19 March 2020

Let us pray:

Blessed are you, merciful God,
whose Son came not to condemn but to save;
come quickly to help us in temptation,
and save us from the time of trial.
By your grace you welcomed us home
when we were lost,
and gave us the Spirit of comfort and mercy.

Blessed is God's holy name.

(From UCA Daily prayer guide, Friday)

Hymn: *Together in Song* 129

(<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Amazing+grace%2C+how+sweet+the+sound%2C>)

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see

As grace first taught my heart to fear
so grace my fears relieved
how precious did that grace appear,
the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

Prayers of the People:

Loving God, the whole world is reeling under the threat of the deadly coronavirus which is causing unprecedented disruption to our normal life – public gatherings of large size including churches have been shut down; people are panic buying; medical professionals are racing to treat those infected and to developing a vaccine. This can be a time of great fear, despair and uncertainty. So today we especially pray for those who are infected with corona virus and affected by it.

Loving God, we pray for those who are suffering from corona virus or facing quarantine. May they feel your power of healing through the care of doctors and nurses. Take away the fear, anxiety, and feelings of isolation from people receiving treatment or under quarantine. Give them a sense of purpose in pursuing health and protecting others from exposure to the disease. Protect their families and friends and bring peace to all who love them.

O God, we pray for those who are at higher risk of developing the disease and more likely than others to become severely ill from this virus — the elderly and people with chronic health conditions. Protect them from harm and be their comfort in this time of uncertainty.

Loving God, we pray for those who are lonely, shut in and isolated that your company, your love may come to their life through our friendship and practical care.

O God, we pray for medical professionals, caregivers, researchers, and leaders responsible for decisions about fighting the new coronavirus. We pray for people making decisions that affect the lives and futures of our families, communities, countries, and the wider world. Inspire and invigorate people developing better tests to diagnose the virus, vaccines to prevent it, and protocols and communication to eliminate the disease's spread. May truth and empathy be the touchstones of people setting policies for our protection.

Loving God, we pray for those whose livelihood have been hampered by the effect of Corona virus – small business people, daily labourers, casual workers, victims of bushfire, drought stricken farmers, travel business related people just to mention a few. May their employers, the government and all of us may support these people at the time of this crisis.

As we endure this new normal in our lives, we pray earnestly for the heroic medical doctors, nurses, and health care professionals who are putting their lives on the line for helping the sufferers. May you give them strength and physical immunity during this time, so they can help push back against this ravaging virus.

O God, you are the light in our darkness. Shine on us today and hear our prayers for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Sending forth of the People of God

Hymn: *Together in Song 681*

Lord let me see, see more and more,
see the beauty of a person, not the colour of the skin,
see the faces of the homeless with no-one to take them in,
see discouragement because she'll never win:
see the face of our Lord in the pain:
Lord let me see.

Lord let me hear, hear more and more,
hear the sounds of great rejoicing, hear a person barely sigh;
hear the ring of truth, and hollowness of those who live a lie;
hear the wail of starving people who will die;
hear the voice of our Lord in the cry:
Lord let me hear.

Lord let me care, care more and more,
care for those who feel the loneliness, for those who have no say,
care for friends who have no job and find it hard to face the day,
care for those with whom we sing and work and pray:
and in care Jesus Christ will be found:
Lord let me care.

Lord let me learn, learn more and more,
learn that what I know is just a speck of what there is to know;
learn from listening to my neighbour when I'd rather speak and go;
learn that as we live in faith and trust we grow;
learn to see, hear and care, with our Lord
Lord let me learn.

Lord let me love, love more and more,
love the loveless and the fragile, help them be what they can be,
love the way that I would like them to be looking after me;
for to know you is to love them and be free,
and in love Jesus Christ will be found:
Lord let me love.

Commissioning and Benediction:

Go forth into the world with the light of Christ
that you may recognise his image imprinted on every human being especially
those who are needy, vulnerable and isolated;
and that you may find many ways of serving Christ by serving them.
And as you go,
may the goodness and mercy of God enfold you,
the glory and light of Jesus Christ shine upon you,
the insight and power of the Holy Spirit inform you
this day and every day.

Blessing Song: *Together in Song 778* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-u-WxpmOpN4>)

Shalom to you now,
shalom, my friends.
May God's full mercies
bless you my friends.
In all your living and through your loving,
Christ be your shalom,
Christ be your shalom.

