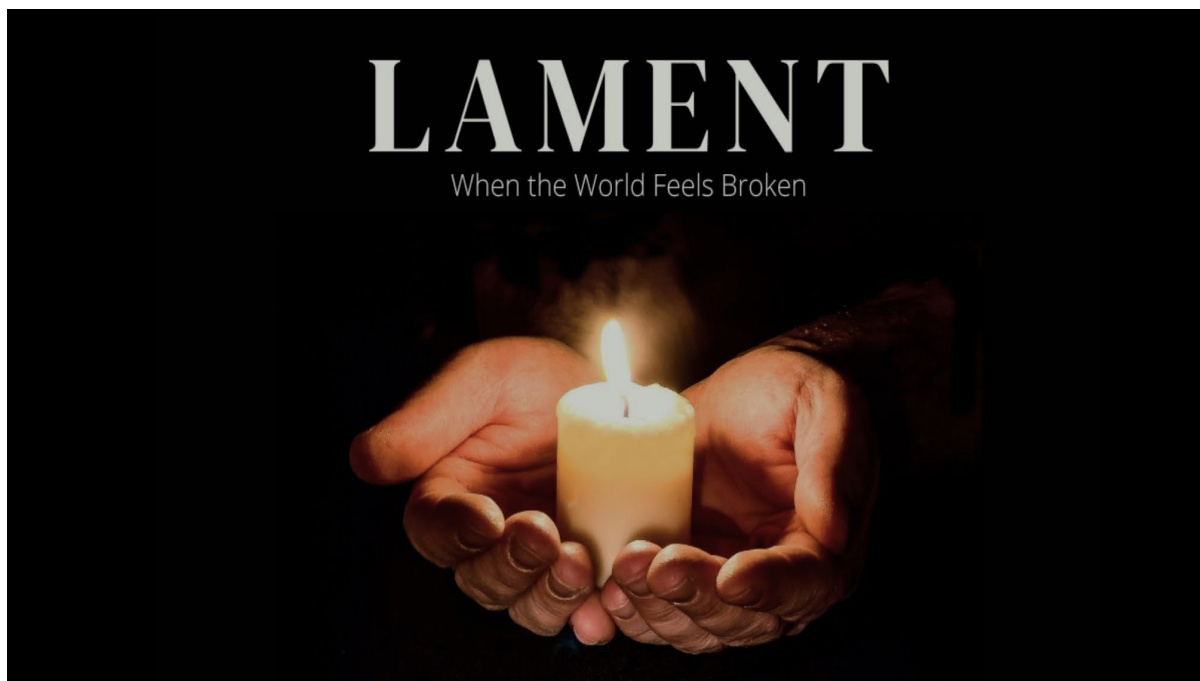

PARRAMATTA CITY UNITING CHURCH

Sunday 27th August 2023



WELCOME

We live in a complex world where disease, violence, abuse, racism, economic hardship and climate disaster both threatens and shatters the lives of many.

In recent years, COVID has particularly impacted on our lives. It is important that we give voice, together, for the loss and sadness we share.

Today we will participate in a Service of Lament. This enables us to cry out to God, to lament what cannot be regained, to hear again God's promise, and to give thanks for God's steadfast love.

Though we grieve with sadness for things which cannot be restored, we look to the future with hope in Christ - in whom all things are made new.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

As we gather in this place today, we affirm First Nations Peoples, honouring their culture and connection to country.

We acknowledge the Burrumattagal people of the Darug nation upon whose land we stand. We confess and seek forgiveness for a history of dispossession and violence against First Peoples. and, in doing so, recommit ourselves to justice and reconciliation.

PREPARATION

A candle is lit in silence to begin the service.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice!” (Psalm 130.1)

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1)

“Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me on the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily on the day when I call.” (Psalm 102:1-2).

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’ (Matthew 11.28)

GATHERING

We meet in the presence of God who knows our needs, hears our cries, feels our pain, and heals our wounds.

Let us pray:

Lord God, the maker and redeemer of all, as we come before you in grief and praise this day, comfort us with your presence, make us attentive to your voice, and sustain us with the hope of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the darkness of unknowing, when your love seems absent, draw near to us, O God, in Christ forsaken, in Christ risen, our Redeemer and our Lord. Amen.

SONG: “When human voices cannot sing” (TIS 682)

(# Three verses only)

When human voices cannot sing
and human hearts are breaking,
we bring our grief to you, O God,
who knows our inner aching.
Set free our spirits from all fear --
the cloud of dark unknowing,

and let the light, the Christ-light show
the pathway of our going.

Make real for us your holding love,
the love which is your meaning,
the power to move the stone of death,
the hope of Easter morning.

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THE LAMENT

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face
from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all
day long?

(Pause)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

For chances missed, for work that is lost,
we cry to you, O God.

For shelters closed, for churches locked,
we cry to you, O God.

For songs not sung, for bread not broken,
we cry to you, O God.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

For family not seen, for children not held,
we cry to you, O God.

For lovers apart, for love not found,
we cry to you, O God.

For learning lost, for schooling delayed,
we cry to you, O God.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

For those weary in want, for those weary in care,
we cry to you, O God.

For unequal life, for unequal death,
we cry to you, O God.

For empty cupboards, for foodbank queues,
we cry to you, O God.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

For lost rest and lost play,
we cry to you, O God.

For lost peace of mind, for restless anxiety,
we cry to you, O God.

For workers on site, and workers at home,
we cry to you, O God.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

For doctors worn down, for nurses fatigued,
we cry to you, O God.

For debts running up, for work running out,
we cry to you, O God.

For those who have died, for all who grieve,
we cry to you, O God.

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?
How long will you hide your face from us?

(Pause)

We cry to you.

We cry to you, O God.

Other losses may be named with the response:

We cry to you, O God.

People are invited to come forward and light a candle on the communion table, silently naming their concern, their grief or loss.

People return to their seats, and after a period of silence, the Leader says:

I wait for the Lord:

My soul waits, and in God's word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for morning, more than those who watch for morning.

Hope in the Lord! For, with the Lord, there is steadfast love, and with God there is great power to redeem.

It is God who will redeem us from all its iniquities.

SONG: "Be still, my soul" (TIS 123)

Be still, my soul: The Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
In every change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future as he has the past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake,
all now mysterious shall be clear at last.
Be still, my soul: the tempest still obey
his voice, who ruled them once on Galilee.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then you shall better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrow, calm your fears.
Be still, my soul: for Jesus can restore

the trust and hope that strengthened you before.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be for ever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgotten, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,
all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

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BIBLE READINGS:

Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

John 14:1-3

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

The Word of Life

Thanks be to God

Other suggested Bible readings:

Genesis 9.8-17 – The covenant and the rainbow

Psalms 23 – The Lord is my shepherd

Psalms 126 - Those who sow in weeping will reap with joy

Joel 2.18, 21-29 The promise of the early and the later rain, ‘...Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh’

Luke 8.22-25 - Jesus stills the storm

Romans 8.31-39 - Nothing can separate us from God

REFLECTION: “Crying out to God”

We enter this world with a cry. Although none of us remember this moment, the first sound we utter after leaving the warm, protected confines of our mother’s womb is a loud protest. We enter the world whimpering and shedding tears. For you see - to cry is human.

And you know, we don’t stop crying after birth. Crying continues. It continues because we live in world that is complex, stressful, unpredictable and broken. Tears are very much part of our humanity. They are everywhere - and they are even there in the Bible.

We call this lament.

To lament is to literally “wail”, “mourn, or “groan”. But it is more than this. Lament in the Biblical sense is a turning to God in times of anguish and pain. Lament is a face-to-face with God, often in the deepest and most personal of ways, about our fears and sorrows.

Over a third of the Psalms are laments. Meanwhile many of the Old Testament prophets, in their vivid, powerful writings, weep over the misfortunes and suffering of their people. The Book of Lamentations, which is attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, is a profound example of this. Then in the New Testament Jesus, himself, laments in the final hours of his life. We can read about this in the Gospels as Jesus faces his last days in Jerusalem.

Lament is important. It’s integral to our relationship with God. Lament allows us to express our deepest concerns to God. Lament enables us to confront God with our most profound questions. Lament assures us that God is wholly open to listening to our cries no matter how inadequate or unworthy we think we may be. Lament forges wholehearted, honest bonds with God - who is constantly present to us.

Lament begins with a cry of anguish, sorrow and pain. But in directing our concerns to God, lament acknowledges that God is always there. Lament leads us to an ultimate end which is to, in the midst of our grief and turmoil, express a deep trust in God who listens to our anguish and who chooses to never abandon us.

Now, Lament involves four crucial elements.

Firstly, lament turns our focus on God. It does so by addressing God in the most honest and transparent of ways: *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?"*(Psalm 13:1).

Secondly, lament allows, indeed it encourages us, to lay our fears, our concerns, our anguish and indeed, our complaints firmly at the feet of God; *"my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace, my heart is stricken and withered like grass"* (Psalm 102:3-4).

Thirdly, lament enables us to boldly and unashamedly seek God's help. It gives us permission to tell it all, and in doing so, lament allows us to seek answers to our deepest questions and doubts. In doing so, lament dares us to hope, to hope that God listens to us, and that God acts in our best interest: *"For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb."* (Psalm 71:5-6).

Fourthly, lament invites us to trust, to trust in a loving, merciful God who will guide us, who will enable us and who will see us through the brokenness of life: *"But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." "I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me."* (Psalm 13:5-6).

Some of the most assuring words in all of this come from John's Gospel where, in chapter 14, Jesus declares that *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places"*.

These words are the beginning of what is known as Jesus' "Farewell Discourse". They are words Jesus shared with his disciples just prior to his betrayal, arrest and trial. They are words doused with anguish and pain. But they are also words of hope.

The old King James and its more contemporary edition, the New King James Version of the Bible translates these words of Jesus as: *"In my Father's house there are many mansions"*. This is, perhaps, the most popular translation that has stuck with people.

This translation is popular because it congers up ideas of a heavenly reward – of streets paved with gold and a utopian-like life of endless luxury promised to people who are doing it tough in this earthly life. It's an alluring thought, suggesting that we bear with the brokenness of life now because there is an immense bounty awaiting us all when we die.

But this is not really what is meant here. Other translations of the Bible refer, not to *"many mansions"*, but to *"many rooms"*, to *"many resting places"* or to *"permanent residences"*.

For you see, when Jesus spoke these words, it's more likely he was drawing on an Aramaic term (Jesus spoke Aramaic) which actually refers to a *"stopping place"* or a *"resting place"*.

So, when we Jesus utters those words; *"In my Father's house there are 'many dwelling places', 'many rooms' or 'mansions'"* he is really saying God has, and always has, a place for us.

It means God is never "far off". In the midst of all that we encounter, all that we experience and all that we struggle with, God "abides" with us. God is always there for us.

And note - not even the worst of what life can throw at us can impede, dismiss, subvert or sabotage such a promise.!

Friends, the Good News declares that the encounters, the experiences, the struggles, the anguish, the contradictions and all the challenges of life as we know and experience them are not foreign to God.

Rather, in all this, God is there for us. God is there to walk besides us. God is there to carry us when we fall. God is there to "dwell" in us. God is there to "abide" with us - in every aspect of the journey that is life.

So, as you dare to cry out to God in the wake of this COVID pandemic or as you mourn or wail before God in the wake of the hurts, uncertainties, fears or regrets of life, don't hold back. Cry out to God. Front up to God with all your questions. Take aim at God with all your issues and concerns. Unload your doubts, your fears and even your anger right there at feet of God!

This may concern deep feelings of loss. It may involve memories of a lingering, trauma or unresolved hurts. It may relate to a sense of torment and guilt over something that happened in the past. It may entail a degree of fear and trepidation about the future and what all that may hold.

Whatever it is, cry out to God – and as you do - be assured God is always there. God is always there for you. God is always there with a word of hope. God is always there to help you navigate your way through life.

Friends, as we gather today and as we journey forward – take hold of this truth and live it!

This simple, yet profound poem adapted from "Footprints in the Sand" by Mary Stevenson, says a lot to me. Let me share it with you:

*One night I dreamed a dream.
As I was walking along the beach .
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to me and one to Jesus.*

*After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.*

*I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,
there was only one set of footprints.*

*This really troubled me, so I asked Jesus about it.
"You said once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.*

*But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was
only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed you the most, you would leave me."*

*Jesus replied: "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you
Never, ever, during your trials and suffering.
When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."*

Amen.

SONG: "O, let the Son of God enfold you" (TIS 655)

O let the Son of God enfold you
with his Spirit and His love,
let him fill your heart
And satisfy your soul.
O let him have the things that hold you,
and his Spirit like a dove
will descend upon your life and make you whole.

*Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill our lives.
Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill our lives.*

O come and sing this song with gladness
Is your hearts are filled with joy,
Lift your hands in sweet surrender to his Name.
O give him all your tears and sadness,
give Him all your years of pain,
and you'll enter into life in Jesus' name.

*Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill our lives.
Jesus, O Jesus, come and fill our lives.*

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ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OFFERING

OFFERTORY PRAYER

All good gifts come from you, generous, gracious God and from these riches we bring this offering. Help us to use it for the furtherance of your purpose in this world, and for the benefit of those in need. Amen.

THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

Let us pray:

We thank you God for the turning of the seasons and for the pattern of the days:

God protect the earth.

We thank you God for the voice of conscience, for the faithfulness of friends, for every way you have worked good from bad in these months:

God bring justice.

We thank you God for the art of medicine, for the wisdom of science and the work of care:

God heal the sick.

We thank you God for the life of your Church, for those who are new to faith, for all that builds your kingdom:

God renew us.

We thank you God for those who have died, for those who are mourned by many, for those whose life is forgotten:

God comfort all who grieve.

We thank you God for unknown blessings, for preventing us from greater harm for carrying us in life this day:

God teach us what to pray.

We say together the prayer that Jesus gave us:

**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 time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power
and the glory are yours, now and for ever.
Amen**

SONG: “Great is your faithfulness” (TIS 154)

Great is your faithfulness, O God my Father
there is no shadow of turning we see;
you never fail and you love is unchanging:
as you have been, you forever will be

*Great is your faithfulness
Great is your faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All we have needed your hand has provided
Great is your faithfulness, Lord, to me*

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in unspoken witness
to your great faithfulness, mercy and love.

*Great is your faithfulness
Great is your faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All we have needed your hand has provided
Great is your faithfulness, Lord, to me*

Pardon for sin and a peace that’s enduring,
your living presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow -
these are the blessings your love will provide.

*Great is your faithfulness
Great is your faithfulness*

*Morning by morning new mercies I see
All we have needed your hand has provided
Great is your faithfulness, Lord, to me*

*(Thomas Obadiah Chisholm 1866-1960 – based on Lamentations 3:22-23 All rights reserved.
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CLOSING RESPONSES

God is our stronghold;
God will help at the break of day:
God will help at the break of day.

God is our refuge and strength,
ready to help whenever we are in trouble:
God will help at the break of day.

We will not fear, even if the earth shakes,
and the mountains topple into the sea:
God will help at the break of day.

Come now and look at the works of the Lord,
the awesome things God has done on earth:
God will help at the break of day.

Be still and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations;
I will be exalted in the earth:
God will help at the break of day.

God is with us, God is our stronghold;
God will help at the break of day.

BLESSING

The blessing of God, the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you
and remain with you always.
Amen.

*(This liturgy has been adapted from [The Methodist Church in Britain – Service of Lament-
a-service-of-lament-0321.pdf \(methodist.org.uk\)](http://www.methodist.org.uk))*

Other suggested Hymns/Songs:

All my hope on God is founded (TIS 560)

Comfort, comfort all my people (TIS 647)

Guide me, O thou Great Redeemer (TIS 569)

Have faith in God my heart (TIS 619)

I heard the voice of Jesus say, Come unto me and rest (TIS 585)

In heavenly love abiding (TIS 588)

O God of Bethel, by whose hand (TIS 564)

The King of love my shepherd is (TIS 145)

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want (TIS 10)

Where cross the crowded ways of life (TIS 608)

When human voices cannot sing (TIS 682)