



Order of service  
Date: Sunday May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
Easter 5A

**We acknowledge that we are worshipping on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung people, of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elders past and present.**

**DON'T FORGET YOU CAN LOG INTO THE CHURCH WEBSITE AND SEE MUCH OF THIS BY VIDEO ON THE FRONT PAGE!!!!**

**INTROIT** – Hearts of love, verse 1,4.

1. And who are we that gather in this ordinary place?  
To share a meal and friendship  
and to warm some empty space,  
But people seeking beauty and to offer what we hold  
Such gifts as we've been given:  
Hearts of love and gifts of gold.

4. And what shall be required in our living day by day?  
But hands that work for justice,  
and the eyes for mercy's way.  
In joining in the dance of Earth,  
with steps so light yet bold,  
We touch the hem of Mystery,  
Hearts of love and gifts of gold.

**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

## **CALL TO WORSHIP**

**ONE:** Come to this place, knowing that God is here.

**ALL:** **We come to worship in a spirit of hope.**

**ONE:** Come to this place, a safe place, where God will care for us.

**ALL:** **We come to worship in a spirit of peace.**

**ONE:** Come to this place to be renewed in faith, knowing the risks for us when we proclaim the gospel.

**ALL:** **We come to worship in a spirit of faith.**

**ONE:** Come, let us worship God.

## **Sing – TIS 637**

1

Lord of the living, in your name assembled,  
we join to thank you for the life remembered.  
Father, have mercy, to your children giving  
hope in believing.

2

Help us to treasure all that will remind us  
of our enrichment in the days behind us.  
Your love has set us in the generations,  
God of creation.

3

May we, whenever tempted to dejection,  
strongly recapture thoughts of resurrection.  
You gave us Jesus to defeat our sadness  
with Easter gladness.

4

Lord, you can lift us from the grave of sorrow  
into the presence of your own tomorrow;  
give to your people in this day's affliction  
your benediction.

## **WELCOME**

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all!

**And also with you!**

## **Opening prayer**

Creator, you have shaped a place for us made of love and held in grace.  
It is filled with the whispers of the ancients who followed you and sculpted our faith.  
Breathe into this place again, that we may know your way,  
your truth, and your life. Amen.

## **Prayer of confession**

We cast stones, sometimes.

We hurt others with stones – literal and figurative – that we hurl without thinking.  
When someone says something that bothers us, we cover our ears, and shut them  
out.

We block those with whom we disagree, challenging them, cutting them down,  
disregarding them.

We want others to conform to our standards, not caring if they are good and faith-  
centred standards or not.

We challenge and push aside those who seem different from us.  
We cast stones, loving God, and we are sorry. Please forgive us.  
Amen.

### **Words of affirmation**

**ONE:** Jesus said, “Do not be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.” Friends, know that you can trust in Jesus always, for he offers mercy and forgiveness to us over and over. Know that you are forgiven, and loved by God.

**ALL: Thanks be to God! Amen.**

### **EARLY WORD – Stones – good or bad?**

*(Based on Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-60)*

Have river stones in a pile front and centre, maybe even pour them from the basket onto the floor.

Ask the children if they have ever thrown stones. What situations have they done this?

You have probably heard your parents or other adults tell children not to throw stones.

Here is the reason not to throw stones.

In the recent film *Grown Ups*, four families are sharing a house for several days after a funeral interstate. There are four couples and a whole bunch of children. It is summer, and the children are playing in the lake, and skipping stones. One of the mother’s comes down to watch and is asked if she can skip stones on the water. She replies “I am the queen of stone skipping”. She picks up a stone, aims carefully releases the stone, and hits her son right in the stomach, who buckles in two. This is a good reason not to throw stones.

Talk a little about the story of Stephen. He was a disciple of Jesus chosen to go and tell people about Jesus. He was very confident and spoke clearly about what he believed about Jesus.

You might remember the stories about Jesus being put to death because certain people in charge feared him. In this story of Stephen the same thing happened. People feared his words and were angry with him.

But he stood up for what he believed. Sadly they threw so many stones at him that he died from the injuries. It was a terrible thing.

Whilst we joke a bit about throwing stones, it used to be a way that people used to kill people. Sadly in some parts of the world it still happens.

For us this story might help us think about what we might stand up for.

For many people, especially children, standing up to bullies is really important.

A favourite movie of mine is the lovely Australian film “paper Planes”. In the film the main boy is called Dylan, and he is attempting to enter the State paper plane throwing competition. He lives in country NSW, and attends a small school. The school bully has Dylan in his sights and harasses him about this competition. Dylan will not be cowed and stands up to him. Dylan stands firm. The lovely thing we see

in the film is how Dylan's way of standing firm against this bully included becoming mates with him.

Now I know it doesn't always work out like this that kids can make friends with bullies, but I guess this story of Stephen the disciple, and Dylan from Paper Planes invites us to give it a go.

The other thing the Stephen tells us is that Stephen firmly believed that through it all Jesus was with him.

Let's have a prayer.

God there are times we need help to stand up for something, even if we really believe in it. Help us to try even when we are scared. Help us to help others who are trying to stand up for something, when they can't do it themselves.

Remind us we are not alone, even when we are scared.

Amen.

## SHARING OUR STORIES

### READINGS:

There are two readings today, firstly from Acts of the apostles, then from John's gospel. The Acts passage has two parts – the introduction to Stephen and who he is, then the trial and execution.

### **Acts 6:8-15, 7: 54-60**

<sup>8</sup>Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

<sup>9</sup>Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup>But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup>Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup>They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. <sup>13</sup>They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup>for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." <sup>15</sup>And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel...

<sup>54</sup>When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. <sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

**John 14:1-14**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>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? <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.” <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” <sup>8</sup>Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

<sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

**PREACHING** – How then shall I live? - Standing firm!

(Text supplied below.)

Now I know we, as parents, have probably said at sometime, or might still be saying, that throwing stones is not a good thing to do.

But, let me come clean.

It is also a kind of cathartic experience.

Despite the clip I showed the children where the mother skimmed the stone into the boys...bits, skipping stones is awesome. Not just the actual delight in getting two, three, or more skips across the water, but the challenge of finding the “just right” flat stone.

Or even simply how far can you throw a stone of a cliff?

And I must admit a certain glee when I was a kid, my best friend Robert and I used to ride our bikes to Ringwood lake. One day we found some bottles lying around so we set them up on a fence and threw stones at them until they were all broken.

We were very careful of course, but also of course thoughtlessly left the glass where it had shattered all over the ground.

That is part of the thrill of throwing stones, seeing what can happen when you throw them.

It is also the big danger.

Stones really hurt when they hit you.

When they are intentionally thrown at a person in large quantities, hard and fast, it can be lethal.

As was the case with Stephen.

The story serves to show us the courage of this young man in standing firm in his beliefs and discipleship and equating him as a kind of follow on from Jesus and the manner in which he died and the words he spoke at the end.

Bill Loader writes this:

*Stephen faces the same fate as Jesus and for the same reason.*

*So Luke's story of Stephen serves to comfort believers in his day. They were not to blame for Jesus' death, it was the unfaithfulness of the temple leaders. (Loader)*

A minister from the USA, Barry J Robinson has also written on this passage. He writes:

*It seems the passage from John serves a similar purpose as that of the Acts passage. Remembering that John was writing to a community of faith maybe some 30/40 years after Luke wrote his account, it is sobering to note that this still new and floundering community of Jesus followers were facing the same issues.*

*Struggling to maintain their identity after being essentially thrown out of the synagogue, the author was attempting to give courage and hope to people who found themselves in the midst of a very nasty fight with their Jewish neighbours in the synagogue. Their survival as a community of faith and their individual security and safety were very much on the line; because we all know what can happen to people of faith - any kind of faith - when that faith becomes passionate, exercised, don't we? Just ask Stephen.*

*Only one thing matters - being true to the faith that is yours and resisting anything else.*

*You cannot read a book like the gospel of John without keeping such circumstances in mind. John was writing to people who were frightened, vulnerable and defensive. (Barry J Robinson, <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-ea05-keeping.php>)*

This passage from John today, in particular exhibits how the gospels work across numerous audiences. In the passage itself we have the disciples and Jesus, where Jesus is telling them some important things.

The author has written this account in a particular way to allow his own community to listen in on the conversation and relate it to their circumstances.

We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century hear the original narrative, aware of the context in which the gospel was written and try to make sense of it all some 2000 years later.

The disciples were frightened, vulnerable and defensive as Jesus was beginning his farewells, John's community were also vulnerable, frightened and defensive as they heard this story and understood how it connected to their situation of conflict with the same people who didn't get Jesus in the first place.

As for us, this passage often finds us at our most vulnerable and defensive when we hear it most often at funerals. Again Bill Loader notes:

*The disciples were confused by what Jesus had been saying and troubled by the foreboding his words evoked (14:1; see also 14:27). The response of Jesus is wonderfully simple: believe in God! believe in me (14:1)! Belief, here, includes believing that Jesus claims to represent God, but it also means trust. The trust is in the person, but 14:2 offers information - quite a rare phenomenon in John. There's a place for you!*

*One wants to break out into the lyric from West Side Story – there's a place for us, somewhere a place for us. - What a wonderful summary of the Christian gospel! There's a place for you - in the heart of God, and that includes the realm of death.*

That is why this passage is so important at the time of death. It gives us something important that better enables us to let go of our loved ones. There's a place for you - in my father's house are many rooms for all his children.

In the season of Easter it really is good news of resurrection life.

But this place is not the domain only of those who have died. There is a place for each of us, for every one living. The heart of God knows no bounds, sets up no barriers.

This is what Jesus is really getting at here I believe. God desires our presence within the heart of God here and now, in our daily living. Not a thing to be kept for special occasions, or when on retreat or when we worship together. God desires the whole of our living to be in this place.

So essentially it becomes a quality of living rather than some destination. It becomes an attending to the movement of God through the large and small of each day.

*Again Bill Loader notes:*

*Thomas's confusion about how to get there (14:5) evokes the famous response: 'I am the way' (14:6) John is in no doubt: Jesus is the way. It is not claiming that Jesus points to the way, but that he, himself, is the way (and the truth and the life). This only makes sense if we see the focus on the relationship. The verses, which follow, make that clear (14:7 and 9-11). Jesus is not claiming any of this independently of God, but rather saying that they should 'believe in God' as they have seen God in Jesus.*

*Philip's confusion (14:8) helps move us further into what that means. Jesus' response uses words of intimacy and trust (14:9-11). The challenge is to recognise God in Jesus, in his words and deeds. This is a fundamental Christian claim.*

*For some it justifies an exclusive claim that denies that God is to be found anywhere else.*

*For others it justifies the claim to find God wherever God is recognisable by such words and deeds, even where Christian claims are not made or not known.*

And this is where we get really interesting. And potentially controversial and divisive. Stand firm is the sub-theme for today.

We see it very clearly in the story about Stephen in Acts.

He stood firm, like Jesus did, in the face of those who saw things differently, and paid the ultimate price.

But what of this passage from John about Jesus the way, truth and life?

How do we stand firm in regard to this?

Is it simply making an exclusive claim that denies that God can be found anywhere else, and believing in Jesus is the only way to that God?

Or is it something else?

I remember reading on this by a biblical scholar some years ago, warning us of our claims about this one way, one truth, one life Jesus. He says this one-way Jesus was born in circumstances that were less than auspicious and accompanied by dodgy shepherds and foreign astrologers proclaiming his birth.

This one way Jesus consorted with criminals, prostitutes, tax cheats, the mentally unstable, the chronically ill and disabled, people of no religion or some other religion, not to mention members of an occupying oppressive regime.

This one way Jesus healed what is impossible to heal, brought dead people back to life, gave food to the unemployed, made fools of the rich and well to do, ridiculed the religious leaders, and what's more proclaimed God's favour for the poor and oppressed.

We need to take care what claims we make about Jesus and what claims we make in his name because Jesus himself may not support such claims.

Because if it is not like that then it is like this.

*"I am the way because your way is not! Jesus is the only way to God! It is our way or the highway, friend!"*

*This is said not said to comfort one another, but to make people who don't believe in Jesus or don't believe in Jesus the way they do or don't read the Bible the way they do or don't talk about their faith the way they do, feel on the outside. Using such a text, in other words, like a weapon, in defiance of any other way other than the authorized Christian way, which, of course, means the way that I or my group authorizes and not yours. "There is one way to heaven and that is our way!"*

Well, it won't surprise you to hear me say that I don't think or believe, it is that way. Again I am borrowing Barry Robinson's words:

*I believe in the way Jesus insists on - always moving on, moving out to people who are on the outside, who haven't found the way in yet, always leaving the ninety and nine in the fold and going out to endure all the indignities of the search just so that he can find the one that is lost. "I am the way, the truth and the life." "Like that, not like your precious opinions about me. Not like your beliefs about me. Just me. I am the way!"*

*"You want to know the way, the only way?", Mr. One Way says.*

*"A sower went out to sow and scattered good seed everywhere - every-where!*

*A man found weeds growing in his wheat-field and said, "Leave'm be! Dandelions make good wine!*

*A man had a son who stayed at home and kept all the rules and one who was a loser and got busted. Guess what?! He loved them both!*

*I'm the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep and who has sheep that aren't even part of this fold and yet who belong to me too!*

*That's the **way** I am.*

*That's the **truth** I am.*

*That's the **life** I am.*

*Now do you get it?"*

*Yes, there is something comforting about this week's gospel and it is that the way into wherever all of us need to be, the only way in, is a lot broader and wider, a lot more welcoming and expansive than any of us have ever*



*imagined. Room enough for everyone! (op cit Barry Robinson)*

But there is more.

More in this passage than about one way Jesus and lots of rooms.

There is this little kicker at the end.

*13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

Yet again this is where context is vital. The preparing of the disciples for their forthcoming mission, is also the setting for the promise about answered prayer in 14:13-14. It is not a blank cheque for every whim, but a promise about help for the mission.

It is not about praying to feather your own nest be it a physical nest or spiritual one. It is about praying for what is needed as Jesus' followers embark on the mission that Jesus started and handed over to us.

This of course can then open up an interesting conversation as to the nature of this mission and what the requirements are that we may appropriately pray about.

And that is the most vital issue for us out of this passage this morning.

What is the nature of the mission that we must engage in, and what are the requirements that we may appropriately pray about?

This from this passage is dead centre for us today, as we have resolved to move forward in our mission discernment for the years ahead of us. Again Bill Loader offers this:

In this passage

*...John has been portraying Jesus' last words to his disciples, but doing so with an eye to his hearers and future generations, including us!*

*Their distress and confusion about Jesus' fate becomes a paradigm for confusion and distress in our own experience. While John employs the individual disciples to enhance the drama, its message is simple and telling.*

***Trust that God is the way Jesus told us and demonstrated to us in his own self.***

*That means two things, especially as we now think about the entirety of the bible and include more of the story of Jesus from the other gospels: we can trust in the God of compassion in which there's a place for us (even if we know nothing else!) and we can know that the meaning of life is to share that compassion in the world - there's a place for all!*

*We can join with that compassion wherever we recognise its 'Jesus shape', acknowledging it as life and truth and the only way. (Loader)*

Let me conclude this exploration this morning in a more poetic way with some words from colleague pastor Steve:

*A zen koan – a paradoxical question.*

*People have used it to imagine Jesus answering a question he wasn't asked.*

*He was not being asked which religion will get you saved.*

*Not comparing one ism with another,*

*after all, he was Jewish, talking to Jews.*

*It's not that there is one religion, one "way" and no other way;*

*there is no "way" at all. No set of rules. No formula. No ism.  
Not even Christianity.  
There's only relationship. Presence. Love.  
He's not selling a religion, he's offering himself.  
Jesus is not trying to convert you.  
He's inviting you to love him.  
"John," the story's author, sees Jesus as the embodied love of God,  
the Word made flesh.  
God's koan.*

*Love is what Jesus means by "me."  
The only way to God is through God's love.  
Love is the way, the truth, and the life.*

*Forget religion.  
Christ hides in all of life and whispers,  
"Love me."  
Amen.  
(Pastor Steve)*

**Sing** – How then shall I live? (verses 1,4)

1.  
Took a walk outside of my walking. Stepped inside another's shoes.  
Walked the dusty borders between us. Paths I'd never chosen to choose.

*How then shall I live? How then shall I live?  
How then shall I live, O God? How then shall I live?*

4.  
Took a step outside of my walking. Found within a beat that we share.  
Walked with you the length of a lifetime, and made of life a living prayer.

*How then shall I live? How then shall I live?  
How then shall I live, O God? How then shall I live? (repeat)*

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE – read by Nick Toovey**

All these words we bring in the name of the Risen Christ who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today 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**

**Sing – In my Father's house ( we learnt this last year)**

(verse 1)

Rainbow of colours, a complex of creeds  
Age-old perspectives meet fresh ways to see  
Everyone welcome, fling open the doors  
You'll learn of my path and I'll learn from yours

(chorus)

In my father's house there are many rooms  
But no walls to divide  
In my father's house there are many rooms  
The gates are open wide

(verse 2)

The strong and the scared come from left and right  
We're not so different seen in this light  
There at the table, a banquet is served  
For every person a place is reserved

(chorus)

In my father's house there are many rooms  
But no walls to divide  
In my father's house there are many rooms  
The gates are open wide

(verse 3)

Some greet a stranger, some serve the poor  
Some shake the system right to its core  
Some have found true faith, others still search  
'Cause it takes all kinds to make up a church

(chorus)

In my father's house there are many rooms  
But no walls to divide  
In my father's house there are many rooms  
The gates are open wide

(verse 4)

A voice for the voiceless, justice for all  
And for the listless, a clarion call  
A church of inclusion we're bringing to birth  
Just like in heaven, it can be on earth

(chorus)

In my father's house there are many rooms  
But no walls to divide  
In my father's house there are many rooms  
The gates are open wide

## **BLESSING –**

### **Blessing with Many Rooms by Jan Richardson**

As you step inside this blessing, we wish to tell you  
it is large enough for you to lie down in.

Or

(though it may not look it, small as it is upon this page)

you can curl up in this blessing  
with a cup of tea and a good book

beside the window—

here, just beside you—

that faces east.

Likewise it is true,

though you might not have paused long enough to notice,

that this blessing is big enough for a table—

quite a sizeable one can be accommodated—

where your guests will want to linger far into the night.

And if they desire to stay, you will find that through this door—

you did not see it before? —

there are rooms in plenty where they can lay their heads

and stretch out with abandon in their dreaming sleep.

One room, many rooms—

in this blessing it is all the same.

The point is that there is space enough.

Enough to make a life, a home;

enough to make a world.

Enough to make your way toward

the One who has made this way for you.

People of God, stand firm in this blessing

Bestowed upon you, to keep with you,

Today and all days. Amen.