

Video: 'We are still the church'

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To see a preview version: skitguys.com/videos/we-are-still-the-church

1. Welcome and introduction

Welcome to worship this morning, especially if you are visiting Bathurst Uniting Church virtually for the first time. My name is Rev. Claire Wright, and I have the privilege of ministering in this community which – though scattered, is nevertheless still the *ecclesia* – the gathering – the Church; and part of the scattered-gathered family of God around the world.

On this fourth Sunday of the Easter season, we continue to celebrate the ripples of the resurrection of Christ. Jesus himself saw his mission as bringing Life – God's own full and unquenchable *aliveness* – to the world. Today, we will explore what that means for us, and for God's people – as we begin a series in the book of Acts. What does it mean to be the people of a *living* God, followers of a *risen* Lord? What does it mean to be a *family* of faith, called together – for *life*?

As is our custom, we pause to acknowledge the Wiradjuri nation, the first people to hear the voice of Spirit in this place. **We honour the importance of connectedness in their culture, and their heart-felt custodianship of the land from which we, too, now draw life.**

And we pause to acknowledge, to pay attention, to the presence of Christ in our midst – scattered-gathered though we are. 'All things came into being through him. And what has come into being in him was *life*,' says the Gospel of John, 'and the life was the light of all people.'

[The candle is lit.]

2. Call to worship - Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

**We will worship the Lord with gladness,
And come before God with joyful songs!**

Know that the Lord is God.

It is God who made us, and we are God's.

We are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.

Enter God's gates with thanksgiving and God's courts with praise.

Let us give thanks to God and praise God's name.

For the Lord is good. The Lord's love endures forever.

The Lord's faithfulness continues through all generations.

3. **Hymn:** Your hand, O God, has guided (TiS 456, verses 1, 3 and 4)

We can't generally post the words to hymns for copyright reasons. They can easily be found on-line – or in any hymn-book you have at home. If you would like to borrow one of the church's copies of *Together in Song* for home use during the 'shut-down', please contact us and we'll arrange to drop off a copy.

4. **Prayer of thanksgiving [SLIDE]**

Today, the Lectionary gives us Psalm 23. These famous words are remembered and held as precious by people all over the world. They are often spoken or prayed at moments of stress and tragedy and loneliness.

I wonder what these words mean to us – and have meant to us at various moments in our lives... I wonder what phrases stand out to us this morning... I wonder what paths we – or our church families – might be walking right now, in our journeys of life and faith, that may be touched by these words ... I invite us to just take a minute to close our eyes, and breathe, and pray along with the Psalmist. This may be a quieter prayer of thanksgiving than we usually open our worship with, but sometimes – especially at moments of stress and tragedy and loneliness – thankfulness runs deep...

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he stores my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

5. Prayer of confession

Continuing in prayer, in these moments of stillness and silence,
we reflect on the way we go through our days.

We confess that despite our faith and followership,
there is wandering and aimlessness,
worry and anxiety,
threat and difficulty.

Despite our faith and followership, there is a tendency
to let the shadows prevail and the fear overtake us,
To forget the one who guards and guides, feeds and comforts,
calls and leads us out into the paths of life ...

Shepherding God, help us to live with glad and generous hearts,
in the goodness and mercy
that follow us, always...

Amen.

6. Affirmation of forgiveness

Friends in this season after Easter, we do not dwell on our wounds –
for Christ has risen to heal us!

We do not dwell on our fears and failings –
**for Christ has risen to restore our souls,
and to call us forth into abundant life!**

Thanks be to God. Amen.

7. Hymn: In heavenly love abiding (*Together in Song* #588)

8. Bible readings

John 10: 1-5, 10

Jess McLeod

“Truly I tell you,’ said Jesus, ‘anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate – but climbs in by another way – is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life – and have it abundantly.”

Acts 2: 42-47

Various

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Friends, I've struggled to write a sermon this week. I don't know why. God knows, it's not that there's nothing to be said about today's readings. How deeply we could dive – as we have in the past – into the images of sheep and shepherding; into what it means to know the voice of Christ, to be known by name, to be called his own... We could perhaps play with the Acts reading as a picture of the gospel going 'viral'; the word 'spreading'; the radical sharing of 'glad and generous hearts' being 'contagious'; the joy and hopefulness 'infectious' – as such things are... We could have an instructive conversation about the role of teaching and sacrament, fellowship, hospitality and prayer in the life of the church; an *inspiring* conversation, perhaps, about worship and mission and church growth. We could notice – as last year's Synod noticed – that for the early church, growth in numbers was less an end in itself, than a natural outcome of growing discipleship, growing relationships, growing impact...

And you're welcome to engage me in those conversations some other time, if you wish. But I can't preach them today. Perhaps I'm just hitting the social distancing wall and feeling a bit lonely. Perhaps it's the image of the shepherd – the pastor – and the flock that's got under my skin. But all I can see in our readings today is *togetherness*: the joy and beauty and hopefulness – the *abundant life* – that comes from the family of God being *together*. The joy and beauty and hopefulness – the *abundant life* – that comes from the family of God – electrified by the resurrection of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit – sharing their lives together in the Temple, in the home, in the fields and streets and market places: connecting people to God, people to people, people to community. The family of God, connected *by* God – for *life*...

It's easy to pray Psalm 23 when one's alone – it's especially consoling and strengthening when one's alone: 'The Lord is *my* shepherd'. It's a beautiful word-picture of the most important 'togetherness' of our lives: the presence of God, with us and for us, each of us, on every step of our journey. But in Jesus' hands, this image blossoms into something a little different. The Shepherd still cares for the sheep – still guards and guides – but now it is unambiguous: this is not just the experience of one sheep, of *each* sheep – it is the way of life for a *flock*. The flock is sheltered and protected *together*; the flock is called out to find pasture and life *together*.

And then, electrified by the resurrection of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit – the flock becomes movement – the people of The Way – and the movement becomes the church – in the language of the New Testament, the *ekklesia* – the gathering, the people called together, the people called together – for *life*... It is our connectedness — not just with God, but with one another and with the neighbours Christ calls us to love that *makes* us 'church'. It is that *inter*-connectedness – that belonging and enfolding, that mutual responsibility and care – that opens to the reality of the resurrection and the power of the Spirit: the abundant life that Jesus came to offer; the rich, full, vibrant life that he said he came to offer 'them', 'us' – not singular, but *plural*; not individually, but *together*. We cannot say that our life is 'abundant' – can we? – if we can't bring ourselves to share it...

Let's hear them again, these words that have caught at my heart this week. 'They were together and had all things in common; they shared with each other, and anyone who was in need; spending much time together in the temple; breaking bread together at home; having the goodwill of all the people.' Can you hear it? This is what people electrified by the resurrection of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit do. They don't uproot mountains, or sprout haloes, or overthrow empires: they gather and share together, pray together, eat together, remember together, work together, weep together, laugh together, and invite and enfold others into their togetherness – because this is who they are. The church. The family of God, called together – for life. 'And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were (also) being saved, being restored, being made whole...'

Friends, in the days before coronavirus – I don't know if you noticed, or if you remember – but another pandemic was gradually being recognised by social scientists and the media and the medical and caring professions: a pandemic of loneliness; a pandemic of dis-connection; of fractured families and communities; divided nations...

For centuries, the Church has taught that the world's greatest problem – its greatest *sickness* – is *sin*, and that the only solution – the only path to *healing* and *wholeness* – is God's forgiveness through Christ. But there is a new problem now – a new pandemic which has only been *highlighted* by this season of isolation and distancing... And thank God, friends, there is still Good News. Because the only solution – the only path to *healing* and *wholeness* – is still ours by grace, through faith: the abundant life that Christ came to give us, *together* – *with* one another and *for* one another as Christ is with and for us; the abundant life of belonging, and sharing, that alone makes us truly the 'church' – the *ekklesia* – God's family called together – for the life, healing and wholeness of the world.

Dear flock, dear family: I miss seeing your faces every week. I *mind* that we cannot share a cup of tea, a meal, a shared space. Holy communion feels less 'holy' when we do not break the one bread, and share the one cup, the sacrament of Christ in each other. Church feel less *real* when I cannot hear your voices raised together in song – when we cannot be a shelter to the homeless, or a held hand to the aged, or a hug to the grieving, together.

But bless you – is I guess what my heart has been full of this week. Bless you – as you seek new ways to share *life* with one another and your neighbour. Bless you as you seek to embrace, even when we cannot embrace; to be there for one another, even when we cannot gather; to meaningfully connect, even as we are physically distanced. Bless you as you continue to look out for the other, the isolated, the lonely – the lost – sheep who need en-folding. Bless you, as you live out your calling to be God's family, called *together*, called to the world *together* – for *life*.

10. Hymn: Fold to your heart your sister and your brother
(*Together in Song* #587 – to tune Londonderry Air)

11. Prayers of the people

Gracious and loving God,
You call us to love you with our whole being,
and to love our neighbours as ourselves.
At this time of continuing upheaval and distress
for nations and people across our world,
may your love hold us together.

Lord Jesus our Shepherd,
As one who knows our suffering,
bring comfort and strength, healing and peace,
to all who feel lost in the wilderness at this time:
in need or hardship, stress or distress, loneliness or illness,
fear or uncertainty.

Life-giving Spirit,
who weaves us together as the Body of Christ,
strengthen our life together, even though we are physically separated.
Nurture us in faith and followership,
that we may bear witness through our living,
with glad and generous hearts,
to your abundant grace and liberating hope for the whole creation.

Through Christ our Life and Hope we pray.
Amen.

Adapted from the Sunday Prayer by Dr Deidre Palmer, President of the UCA,
from the UCA Weekly Cycle of Prayers for this season:
[\[assembly.uca.org.au/component/k2/item/3150-prayers\]](https://assembly.uca.org.au/component/k2/item/3150-prayers)

12. Hymn: You satisfy the hungry heart
(*Together in Song* #539, verses 1, 2 and 4 to tune Kingsfold)

13. Holy Communion for the Scattered-Gathered Community of God

Liturgy of the Empty Basket (by Rev. Claire Wright, adapting the liturgy from *Uniting in Worship 2 for Holy Communion, in order to be suitable for a dispersed community without access to bread or cup*)

Scattered-gathered family of God,
Come to the table of the Lord – wherever you may be.
Our Shepherd has prepared a table for us,
in the presence of all that threatens us –
and all are invited, called by name.
Come, find rest and restoration for your soul.

The Lord be with you
and also with you.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Life-bringing God,
all things, seen and unseen, have come into being
by your creative word.
We thank and praise you, for you have made all things well.
God our Shepherd, **you restore our souls.**

Life-sustaining God,
we live because you call our names;
and all your gifts of life – green pastures, still waters – are ours to enjoy.
God our Shepherd, **you restore our souls.**

Life-changing God,
You have filled the world with your presence and your voice,
You have filled our lives with your goodness and mercy.
God our Shepherd,
You restore our souls in righteousness, for your name's sake.

Above all, living God,
we thank you for Jesus Christ,
who invited himself into homes and hearts,
to eat and drink in any place,
with all who sought him.

For on the night he was betrayed, Jesus sat at table with his friends.
He took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and gave it to them,
saying: 'Take and eat. This is my body, which is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.'

In the same way also the cup after supper, saying:
'This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

And so, scattered-gathered as we are,
we come to *this* table, to do as our Saviour commanded:
Remembering him in his self-giving;
Choosing again to accept the abundant life he lived, and died,
and lives to offer us.

But friends, this love feast cannot be as it is 'normally' is,
for we are not side by side here, family at the family table,
the sacrament of Christ in one another.
Let us name this absence; let us feel it keenly,
lest we take for granted what it means
to break the one bread, to share the one cup...

So in this empty basket [*an empty basket is lifted and shown*],
we name a hunger that no earthly bread can satisfy.

In this empty cup [*an empty cup is lifted and shown*],
we name a thirst that no earthly cup can quench.

God,
pour out the Holy Spirit on this empty basket, this empty cup,
that they may be for us, in their emptiness,
the body of Christ given – the blood of Christ poured out –
for absent friends;
that we may take his Life into our lives,
sharing a deep communion of the spirit,
until the day when we can break bread together again,
with glad and generous hearts.

We say together the Lord's Prayer, in whatever language or version is closest
to our hearts.

**Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name;
Your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
And 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.**

Friends, it is Christ who is the bread of life,
Who satisfies the hungry heart, and makes us one.

It is Christ who is the cup of hope,
Who revives the thirsty, and makes us one.

Therefore,
from the abundance of Life and Hope that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Receive what you hunger for.... *[Basket is offered...]*
Receive what you thirst for... *[Cup is offered...]*

[Quiet music, as we receive in our hearts...]

We thank you, O God,
For all that we receive at your table.
We thank you, O Christ,
For the invitation which brought us here and makes us one –
and which we now take with us into our troubled world:
the invitation to all, to come to you and find abundant Life.
We thank you, O Spirit, for restoring our souls.
Amen.

14. Hymn: Now thank we all our God
(Together in Song #106)

15. Video: 'Mother's Day Reminder: Breakfast in Bed'

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To see a preview version: <https://skitguys.com/videos/mothers-day-online-reminder-breakfast-in-bed>

16. Blessing and sending out

Listen! The voice of the shepherd calls you into the world and the week,
Restored and refreshed.

Go then, with glad and generous hearts,
To live out the abundant life Jesus lived and died and lives to give you;
To be the 'church', God's family, called together for life;
Called out, together, for the life of the world Jesus
lived and died and lives to make whole.

Know that goodness and mercy follows you all the days of your lives:
the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Now and always. Amen.