

## MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom), and for the Alpine Uniting Church in Jindabyne (face-to-face!). We have been with the Old Testament Lectionary readings for quite some time now, so today we return to the New Testament, to the gospel of Mark which is the focus of the current Lectionary year (Year B). We encounter Jesus' teaching about the "greatest commandment".

Today is also Reformation Day – the anniversary of that day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his "Ninety-five Theses" to the door of the church in Wittenberg in Germany. Luther's act was the catalyst for a great movement of which we are the heirs, though it was not by any means without its negatives. So we begin with a special prayer for Reformation Day.

### 1 **Reformation Day Prayer**

God of salvation,

Today we give you thanks for the great movement we call the Reformation.

We give thanks for the insight and the courage of Martin Luther,

who realised anew the wonderful good news of the gospel,

that your forgiveness is not something that can be earned,

but is your free gift, showered upon humanity through Jesus Christ.

We give you thanks, too, for the many other reformers, across different nations,

who shared Luther's insights, or followed him;

who brought the power and inspiration of the Reformation to their own nations.

We give thanks for the great legacy of the Reformation,

of which we are the inheritors;

and particularly we thank you for the three original uniting Churches,

the Presbyterian, the Methodist and the Congregational Churches,

who courageously came together forty-three years ago

to form Australia's first indigenous Church, the Uniting Church.

Father, we acknowledge

that there was much about the Reformation that was destructive –

that the numerous wars fought in the name of religion

cost many, many thousands of lives;

that some of the reformers inflicted harsh regimes on their followers,

and enforced them with the same ruthlessness as those whom they criticised;

that ardour sometimes turned to fanaticism and bigotry;

and that the many breakaways from the Roman Catholic Church

divided the Church into what are now hundreds of thousands of denominations.

Even today,

there remains ingrained prejudice against the Roman Catholic Church

among many Protestant believers.

So our thanks for the great movement of the Reformation

are accompanied by our repentance of its concomitant evils, past and present;

and we pray for the reconciliation of the Church,

that we might come to be one body of Christ to witness to the world.

And yet, Father, we still do give thanks for the great legacy that is ours –

the theological insights, the centrality of the scriptures,

the empowerment of lay people and democratic forms of governance,

and perhaps most apparent in our regular worship,

the great musical tradition that has been born of Protestantism.

Our God, we give you thanks as we commemorate the Reformation today.  
Amen

**2 Prayers of Adoration and Confession**

Our Father God.

We offer you our thanks and praise  
that you have sent your Son, Jesus, into the world.  
While we were mired in our sinfulness,  
addicted to a life in which we placed ourselves as priority number one,  
you reached out to us in love and mercy and grace  
to defeat the forces that held us prisoner,  
and to teach us ways that are life-giving and joyful.  
We give you thanks for the love and sacrifice of Jesus,  
and thanks that Jesus was able to overcome death itself,  
to rise from the grave to new life,  
and to open the way for us to share in that wondrous new life.  
Father, we fall to our knees and give thanks and praise  
for your mighty act of salvation in Jesus Christ.

And we give you thanks that, when we stumble and fall into sinful ways,  
we can come to you in Jesus' name to seek your forgiveness.  
For we do stumble, despite our good intentions.  
Sin still enmeshes us in its tentacles, and we fall back into old habits.  
Our deeds are sometimes not loving,  
our words are sometimes not uplifting or encouraging,  
our thoughts are sometimes self-serving and ignoble.  
We sin in what we do, and what we fail to do;  
in what we say, and what we fail to say;  
in the priorities we set, and those that we fail to set.  
We set ourselves at the centre of all things,  
and expect the world to fall into orbit around us.  
Forgive our waywardness and our backsliding, we pray.  
For the sake of Jesus our Saviour, grant us a clean slate,  
a new beginning,  
and the strength to live according to your holy law of love.  
Amen

**3 Declaration of Forgiveness.**

The writer of I Timothy assured his correspondent,  
*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,*  
*that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ...*  
Having made confession of our sins in the name of Jesus,  
we are assured that God will forgive us.  
Thanks be to God.

**4 Bible Readings –**  
Mark 12:28-34

**5 Sermon:** See below

**6 Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**  
Heavenly Father,

We are not much more than a week away from Cop26,  
 opening in Glasgow at the end of the month.  
 We have failed at this task all too often before,  
 to take decisive action to address the climate emergency that now confronts us.  
 We have been warned that this really is our last chance to do so,  
 that another failure will set us on a certain path to catastrophe.  
 So we pray for your oversight and shepherding of this conference.  
 We can be sure that world leaders will come armed with encouraging rhetoric,  
 that most will proffer promises of serious commitment and action,  
 and probably enter a bidding war on aspirations and goals.  
 But, Father, we've seen all this before.  
 After the self-congratulations, the backslapping and the applause,  
 too many of the nations fail to take real action,  
 fall short of their stated goals,  
 or find excuses to alter course for political or economic reasons.  
 Our prayer is that this time be different,  
 that the conference deliver substance, and not just feel-good statements;  
 that commitments be real and binding and locked-in,  
 that every nation,  
 but particularly the wealthiest and most carbon-intensive nations,  
 understand and be prepared to act on the gravity and urgency of the situation.  
 We pray that our own Federal Government,  
 which has dragged its heels for too long,  
 enter into Cop26 with genuine commitment,  
 and with the strongest intention  
 to take the drastic and difficult decisions that are vital.  
 We know that  
 for any nation to do otherwise would be to gamble with our precious earth,  
 already groaning under our thoughtless and rapacious assault.  
 We know that we are at five minutes to midnight,  
 and we beseech you that your Spirit move in Glasgow,  
 and help achieve the miracle that is now so sorely needed.

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

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,  
 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

## 7 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*The most important commandment is this:*  
*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul  
and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*

*The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Go from this place with these laws of God in your heart;

go into the world to love those around you,

as God so richly loves you.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

be with you, and remain with you always.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.

## SERMON

There's been a lot of research into job satisfaction. Employees who are not happy in their work, who don't find it fulfilling and purposeful, usually don't last very long. Staff turnover and constant recruitment are very costly to employers. It *pays* to do all that's possible to help people find fulfilment in their work.

A number of factors in job satisfaction consistently emerge. One of them is whether or not people find meaning in their work. There's an old story about the person who visited a stone quarry, and asked three men who were working there what they were doing. One replied, "I'm excavating stones." Another said, "I work here to earn money to feed and support my family." But the third man responded to the question like this: "I'm helping to build a cathedral." Same job, three men, three different replies. But only one of the men understood the meaning of what his work was all about. You could be pretty sure that he'd be the one who'd be most likely to stick at it, who found meaning and satisfaction in his hard work. He understood what the purpose of his daily tasks was, how they fitted in. He could see the big picture.

Most of us like to understand how what we do fits into the scheme of things. I love to cook, but I'm not particularly creative or inventive in the kitchen; I follow recipes. But I can think of nothing worse than simply starting at the top of the recipe, and working step by step through it, just waiting to see what might emerge at the end. I read the whole recipe through first; I form a mental picture of the end product; Then I read the various steps to see how they all come together to create the final dish. Doing that means that all those terribly unglamorous and tedious tasks entailed in cooking – like peeling and chopping and grating – cease to be mindless chores to be followed slavishly. Instead, they are vital steps in creating something desirable and wonderful. I am, if you like, building a culinary cathedral.

What has any of this got to do with our reading from Mark's gospel? The scholars of Jesus' day had agreed that the Jewish Law comprised six hundred and thirteen individual commandments. Among the various religious groups of the day, the Pharisees, in particular, insisted that each of these commandments must be scrupulously obeyed. They were, in that sense, each as important as all the others. You can imagine that a situation like that would be pretty daunting for people, and could very easily become just a matter of desperately trying to tick the boxes. It would be ever so easy to lose sight completely of what all these rules added up to, what it all meant, why you were doing all this. It could easily become a matter of slavishly following the steps of the recipe, without having much idea at all about what you were making.

Of course the Jews were not blind to that danger. There had been a lively debate over a very long period about how to distil the Law down to its most basic purpose. As long ago as the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, the prophet Micah had offered these well-known words:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?*

A generation before Jesus, the famous rabbi, Hillel, had given his own distillation:

*What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour.  
This is the whole law; the rest is commentary.*

So the question posed to Jesus by the scribe was not something out of the blue. *Which commandment is the first of all?* Matthew and Luke suggest that he was testing Jesus, or out to trap

him, but Mark's account, which we have today, and which predates Matthew's and Luke's, is quite different. The scribe's query is a genuine question – [what does this rabbi Jesus have to say about this important question? And, unlike in the other gospels, the scribe approves Jesus' answer, and Jesus pays the scribe a mighty compliment, that he is not far from the Kingdom of Heaven.

So what was Jesus' answer to the scribe's question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" The answer comes in two parts – not one commandment, but two.

*The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.*

It's interesting that neither of Jesus' choices comes from the Ten Commandments. The first comes from Deuteronomy 6:4.<sup>v</sup> This verse is the beginning of a longer passage called "the Shema". The Shema is a declaration that there is only one God, and no other; it was read, and still is, at the beginning of a synagogue service, and devout Jews recited it every day and still do.

Jesus' second choice comes from Leviticus 19:18, although in its original context, the "neighbour" was one's fellow Israelite.

It is the scribe, not Jesus, who draws out one of the many implications of what Jesus has had to say.

*... this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.*

The passage we mentioned before from Micah had made very much the same point. Making ritualistic sacrifices as atonements for sin was not what God desired; that fell into the category of mechanical box-ticking. What God required was, and is, loving devotion to doing the right thing, not unthinking adherence to formalities and rituals.

So far as we know, Jesus was the first of the rabbis to put these two commandments together, though his purpose was the same as those others who had come before him. It was to give meaning, and purpose, and shape, to all those six hundred and thirteen commandments. There was an *intention* behind each one of them. They were not just stand-alone laws, each a rule for the rule's own sake. It was to liberate Jews from simply following a never-ending set of mindless steps, to being able to proclaim the equivalent of, "I'm building a cathedral."

Jesus' own attitude to the Law falls very much within this teaching. When he declared, for example, that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, he was pointing to the fundamental intention of the law, and criticising those who demanded mindless adherence to it for its own sake. In modern parlance, we'd say Jesus was championing the *spirit* of the law over the *letter* of the law.

There are two important implications that arise from this teaching of Jesus. Although it's not at all clear that Jesus himself actually went this far, of the New Testament writers took Jesus' words to mean that Christians were not subject at all to the demands of the Jewish Law. Of course, we know very well that not all the early Christians agreed, and adherence to the Law was a matter of dispute between Paul and his critics. But Paul's view won the day, and it's Paul's view that we have inherited. In Romans, he declared this:

*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the*

### *fulfilment of the law.*

At first blush, that seems like liberating stuff – and it is. Certainly Christians should be thankful that they are spared the rigors of the Jewish Law. But like all freedoms, this one comes with important responsibilities. Concrete, specific rules are easy to follow, even if they do often become mindless and tedious.. But what does it mean to love your neighbour as you love your own self? That can require a great deal of discernment and prayer and anguish; and after all that, we may all arrive at different conclusions.

I recall hearing an academic historian speaking once, about giving money to homeless people. For my own part, I have always regarded it as too risky to give the homeless cash. Lauris and I donate to charities that assist homeless people; either of us would happily buy a meal for a homeless person; but too often we fear that cash will be used to feed a drug or alcohol habit, and that seems not to be a loving act. However, this particular academic was himself a former alcoholic. He said that he didn't care in the least if a homeless person used his money to buy drink or drugs; he willingly gave them money, because it might give them one more day when they might recover their lives. Both his and our choices were made in genuine love; yet they were diametrically opposite. You could multiply this kind of situation any number of times. The law of love is not an easy one. It's not often black and white.

The second implication is far *more* demanding, though, than “just” having to make difficult moral choices. Or at least it is, if we take seriously those two great injunctions of Jesus. What does it mean to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength? And what does it look like to love your neighbour as you love yourself?

For most of us, it means a complete reshaping of our universe. Nothing less than a total overhaul of the way we view the world. We are *born* with a predisposition to prioritise ourselves over others. We see that in children, of course, and part of raising children is to teach them not to be selfish, to learn how to share, to think of others.

But we're never completely successful. Expressions like “dog eat dog”, and “looking after number one”, and “charity begins at home”, all bespeak a world in which, at least when the chips are down, we prioritise ourselves over others.

That disposition extends to our relationship with God. We want God to be convenient, to “fit in” with our world view and our priorities. God's job is to look after us, to answer our prayers, and to keep out of our way. We're happy to blame God when things don't go our way, because he's clearly not doing his job. And we certainly don't want God to challenge us, or our values, or our way of life.

What Jesus' teaching demands of us is that we shift ourselves out of the centre of our universes, and let God take his proper place. As Micah put it, we are to walk humbly before God. Our love is to be poured out, not on ourselves, but on God, and on others. Jesus asks nothing less of us than that we overcome our deepest, most visceral, instincts that prioritise ourselves, and learn instead to love God first of all, and to love our fellow humans with as much devotion as we love ourselves. I wonder how many of us would continue with the thought that we had earlier, that Jesus' teaching is “liberating”? A whole lot of mindless box-ticking might find a new appeal to it after all!

But of course we cannot go back. And nor, even in our most secret thoughts, should we want to. I'm associated with an Independent Christian school, and for many, many years, our motto has been *In God my joy*. The students are taught that true joy comes from placing **J**esus first, **O**thers second, and **Y**ourself last. It's Jesus teaching in a nutshell, and it points to the true fruit of Jesus' words.

When we get the world right, with God at its centre, everything else takes on its true perspective. Relieved of our delusion that *we* are at the centre of all things, we realise that others are just as important as we. Charity no longer begins at home, because looking after number one doesn't seem quite so important. There is great joy indeed in that discovery.

Is what Jesus asks hard? Yes it is. Is it *too* hard? Well we do know that we shall sometimes fail – perhaps often fail. Does that mean we shouldn't try? Of course not! Jesus has given us a better way to live, a life-giving and life-affirming way to live, an understanding of how we can indeed find joy in our lives, joy as we have never known it before. Why would we want to go back, because we know that sometimes we'll not succeed? Because Jesus has done more than that for us. Jesus knows that we will continue at times to fall back into our sinful ways. But Jesus provides the remedy, as the writer of I John advised his readers:

*But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

For the gospel is not that Jesus came to saddle us with two new impossible commandments; the gospel is that Jesus came to free us from the destructive effects of our sin, and to show us a new way to live. The gospel writer John put it this way:

*„, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

We began by talking about *job* satisfaction and being able to see the big picture. Here is *life* satisfaction – the *joy* of taking our true place in the world and living as God would have us live; and here is the true big picture, that God has reached out to us in Jesus Christ, our teacher and our saviour, in love, and mercy, and grace, to overcome all of our stumblings and our missteps and our failures. In Jesus Christ, God is building a cathedral, and we have the privilege of being workers in the quarry.

Amen