

PAPER CHURCH

Finishing Well - Acts 12-15

Sunday 9 August 2020

Some Tips

Our hope is that this is a resource that will help us all to engage meaningfully with God's word for us and invite an open and experimental sense of worship today. Use it in a way that feels comfortable and helpful to you. Here are a couple of suggestions that might help the process.

Get prepared for worship

Have your Bible close by, perhaps set up some favourite music to listen to, find some food and drink to have during communion. It doesn't have to be bread and grape juice; it could be whatever is available (tea and a biscuit) to use in this symbolic time.

Get into a 'sacred' space

When we are not physically in a dedicated worship space (like a church building), it is important to mentally and spiritually shift into a sense of worship.

Be intentional. Sit somewhere where you feel receptive and responsive to God (e.g. a cosy chair or outside in the garden). Have some visual representation of God (perhaps a small cross, your Bible, a symbol or image). Start with a few moments of silence and deep breathing.

Consider your environment

Consider your environment and what will work for you. If you have others in your home (housemates/family), consider sharing this time with them, each reading or participating as appropriate. You might simply reflect individually, in your own time and space. Afterwards, you might connect with others through technology to share your reflections, or an encouragement, with them.

Introduction & Call to Worship

Andrea Salmon

You know, throughout our lives we constantly adapt and change. And we have been doing a lot of it this year haven't we?

Penny encouraged us last week to pray for how we might reimagine church and this weekend we have been spending time thinking about how we can reimagine ourselves.

With my occupational therapy training I know the importance of life roles and how these change over time. We start as children, as brothers or sisters, we become friends. We are cousins, sports people, teammates, students. We might become partners and spouses. Some of us become parents, aunts, uncles, workers, grandparents even. There are so many roles we can have – volunteer, mentor, cook, driver, letter writer, neighbour.

We often get our sense of value and contribution through our roles and if they change, we sometimes need to think about how we too can change. We do that as we get older, and especially as we approach an age where we might retire from work, but we've also all been doing it during COVID-19, as we cannot do the usual things. We have developed relationships with our neighbours, we have become bakers and gift people with our home-made sourdough, we drop little gifts into people's letter boxes. We have sent more letters. We have made more phone calls.

We don't do less, we fulfil our roles differently. We can become bolder at inviting people to church, we can express our opinions more overtly, we can get more involved in the things that matter to us.

I really do believe that it is the hope and faith in God that enables us to keep looking forward, to keep seeing how we can contribute, to keep looking for ways to share what we have with others. The opportunity and the desire does not become less, in fact it becomes more and I am encouraged to see people making the most of their retirement years, when they could be stepping back, they are stepping up.

I share two prayers from Michael Leunig:

God help us to change. To change ourselves and to change our world. To know the need for it. To deal with the pain of it. To feel the joy of it. To undertake the journey without understanding the destination. The art of gentle revolution. Amen

Lord God,

We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and the mind. The sense of meaning. So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned. The careful, ongoing construction of love. As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth and as easily abandoned.

Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology. Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend, this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order. This sanity.

We shall be careful. With others and with ourselves. Amen

Song: I Will Run To You

Your eye is on the sparrow
And Your hand it comforts me
From the ends of the earth
To the depths of my heart
Let Your mercy and strength be seen

You call me to Your purpose
As angels understand
For Your glory may You draw all men
As Your love and grace demands

And I will run to You
To Your words of truth
Not by might not by power
But by the Spirit of God
Yes I will run the race
'Til I see Your face
Oh let me live in the glory (of Your grace)

Oh let me live in the glory
Oh let me live in the glory of Your grace

CCLI Song # 1959901

Darlene Zschech

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Song: Consuming Fire

There must be more than this
O breath of God come breathe within

There must be more than this
O breath of God come breathe within

There must be more than this
Spirit of God we wait for You

Fill us anew we pray

Fill us anew we pray

Consuming fire fan into flame
A passion for Your name
Spirit of God would You fall in this place
Lord have Your way
Lord have Your way with us

Come like a rushing wind
Clothe us with power from on high
Now set the captives free
Leave us abandoned to Your praise
Lord let Your glory fall
Lord let Your glory fall

There must be more
There must be more
There must be more
There must be more

Stir it up in our hearts Lord
Stir it up in our hearts Lord
Stir it up in our hearts
A passion for Your name

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Tim Hughes
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Bible Reading: Acts 12:25 - 13:13

²⁵ Barnabas and Saul, once they had delivered the relief offering to the church in Jerusalem, went back to Antioch. This time they took John Mark with them.

¹⁻² The congregation in Antioch was blessed with a number of prophet-preachers and teachers:

Barnabas, Simon, Lucius, Manaen, Saul.

One day as they were worshiping God, fasting as they waited for guidance—the Holy Spirit spoke: “Take Barnabas and Saul and commission them for the work I have called them to do.”

³ So in that circle of prayer, they laid hands on their heads and sent them off.

⁴⁻⁵ To start their new assignment, by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul went down to Seleucia and caught a ship for Cyprus. The first thing they did when they put in at Salamis was preach God’s Word in the Jewish meeting places. They had John Mark along to help out as needed.

⁶⁻⁷ They travelled the length of the island, and at Paphos came upon a Jewish wizard who had worked himself into the confidence of the governor, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man not easily taken in by charlatans.

⁷⁻¹¹ The governor invited Barnabas and Saul in, wanting to hear God’s Word first-hand from them. But the wizard stirred up a ruckus, trying to divert the governor from becoming a believer. Saul, full of the Holy Spirit, looked him straight in the eye, said, “You parody of a devil - you are constantly inventing schemes to cheat people out of God. But now you’ve come up against God himself, and you are about to go blind—no sunlight for you for a good long stretch.” He was plunged immediately into a shadowy mist and stumbled around, begging people to take his hand and show him the way.

¹² When the governor saw what happened, he became a believer, full of enthusiasm over what they were saying about the Master.

¹³⁻¹⁴ From Paphos, Paul and company put out to sea, sailing on to Perga in Pamphylia. That’s where John Mark called it quits and went back to Jerusalem.

Acts 15:36-40

³⁶ Some time later, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit all our friends in each of the towns where we preached the Word of God. Let’s see how they’re doing.”

³⁷⁻⁴¹ Barnabas wanted to take Mark. But Paul wouldn’t have him; he wasn’t about to take along a quitter who, as soon as the going got tough, had jumped ship on them in Pamphylia. Tempers flared, and they ended up going their separate ways: Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus; Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia

The second last verse of Paul’s letter to Philemon

²⁵ Epaphras, my cellmate in the cause of Christ, greets you. Also my co-workers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

In the last chapter of 2 Timothy, verse 11

¹¹ Get here as fast as you can. Demas, chasing fads, went off to Thessalonica and left me here. Crescens is in Galatia province, Titus in Dalmatia. Luke is the only one here with me. Bring Mark with you; he’s a great helper in the work ...

Finishing Well

Acts 12 - 15

Message

Harley Kitchen

Let me start by saying the topic 'Finishing Well' or 'Finishing Life Well' was my own suggestion for this morning's sermon! No-one else suggested it to me! I think that's important to say!

The idea came to me when plans were underway for Saturday's Wellness Day seminar on things like Life's Fourth Quarter, Will-making, Aged Care, etc. Seemed to fit!

I remember being at Bible College when I was 21, when on the afternoon of the 7th day of July (the 7th month), a much-loved lecturer suffered a heart attack on the golf course. He had just hit a lovely shot from the tee on the 18th – and as his friends were watching his shot landing on the green and exclaiming "Well ... you ARE going out in a blaze of glory, aren't you!" he was being taken ill and collapsing. Of course, they did their best to revive him and an ambulance came quickly, but a little later that day in hospital, he passed into the presence of the Lord he loved – into the blaze of REAL glory!

We were all shocked, of course. He had been teaching us from the Scriptures that very morning. There were a lot of tears. It was afterwards that the significance of the date struck me. The number 7 in the Bible speaks of maturity, almost perfection – and he died on the 7th of the 7th, a person of maturity and depth, much respected and loved in the faith. And his funeral service later that week was a great tribute to a person who had ... finished well.

I think, in the back of all of our minds, is a desire to finish well, at whatever age we reach. Not with regrets or bitterness – or a cloud over our name ... rather, with a sense of "a life well-lived, to the glory of God". That through whatever life had thrown up – good and bad, joy and sorrow, health and sickness, achievements and disappointments – that there had been a sense of growth into maturity, a completion of life's purpose - some worthwhile contribution which helped to make this world a better place.

Life is like a river, which starts off as a tiny spring, runs splashing down sunlit mountainsides, grows a bit bigger, moving on with great purpose and energy, sometimes crashing into obstacles at great speed and making quite a scene, developing some strength, beauty, then, reaching a slower pace, with depth and nourishment, to be giving life to all around us. And after all of that, to let go at the end – and enter into the bigness of God.

The ancient Greeks used to enjoy a "torch race" that would captivate the crowds. The goal of the race was not to just outrun the other competitors with the torch (like the Olympic flame) and be the first to cross the finish line. The object was to complete the race with a lit torch. If the flame was extinguished, the runner was disqualified, but the ones with the flame still burning were the ones who finished well, receiving a prize. (And I think) ... the real challenge for a Christian is to make it to the last breath with a burning heart full of spiritual life and reality.

(The Cross and the Crescent, p 302)

One of the very interesting characters in the Bible is that of John Mark. A man who started well, had a time of failure as he dipped out of the race, then came back to not only be a great Christian, a team member of both Paul and Peter, but also to be the one who wrote the first Gospel to be written, which we are told Matthew and Luke used as the basis for their Gospel-writing - thus Mark's work has been an ongoing blessing to the countless millions of Christians since. He finished well!

Of course, some Christians may never have a dip - of mistakes or failure or rejection by others or wandering off course ... always strong – and that's the ideal, of course.

We read in Acts that John Mark grew up in a large home in Jerusalem – a home that was a meeting place for Christians in the early years – and he, therefore, imbued the faith and prayer life of the disciples of Jesus there.

It was his family home where "many people" gathered quickly to pray for Peter's release from prison where he had been put for preaching publicly – and where, as they were praying, Peter came knocking at the door after being miraculously released. Young John Mark would have been pretty impressed by that.

Soon after that, his cousin Barnabas arrives from Antioch with a friend – Paul. Paul who had been Saul the red-neck Pharisee who had hunted Christians right there in Jerusalem, putting all their lives in danger ... but now was a changed man, a preacher – and a leader of Christians. And as they talked together, Paul invites Mark to join him and Barnabas in a journey north to Antioch – where for a few months they work together in the marvellous fast-growing Church there, then some time later, the Church there sends the three of them off on a journey into areas where the name of Christ was unknown.

And what we read in Acts 13 is that they had a ship voyage to Cyprus – in which Mark probably was seasick, being a city-dweller – they walked through the whole island – at least 150 kms, probably in the heat, taking a few weeks to do so - felt the hostility as well as the reception as they preached about Jesus – at the end of their long walk they get to Paphos on the south coast – and a dangerous riot is instigated by a devilish wizard against them. Well, they survive that, then there is another sea voyage, this time going north-west – to the city of Perga on the coast of what is now Turkey.

And young Mark staggers off the ship, onto the dock, turns to Paul who is ready to set off walking again, into the wild interior - and says "Can't do it, sorry – think I'll go home to Jerusalem, guys". And he sets off to find a ship to take him home. With Paul watching him go and probably saying "They don't make 'em like they used to ..."

Well, the intrepid Paul and Barnabas continue on, then return to Antioch. And some time later they start preparing for a second journey, so Barnabas suggests taking Mark along with them again, to which Paul strongly objects saying Mark "had deserted them before and could not be trusted to finish what he started. It was going to be a long and arduous journey and the team needed complete trust in each other's ability and support." Obviously, Barnabas objected to the objection (!) and it led to a parting of their ways.

And I can imagine soon afterwards, Barnabas quietly slips away, gets himself down to Jerusalem, and knocks on the door of the big home there and is welcomed by Mary (possibly his aunt) and he

asks if he can sit down with Mark. So, in walks disconsolate Mark with head hung down and he flops into a chair. And Barnabas doesn't need to ask him how he is ...

Well, whatever is said, all we know is that it wasn't long before the two cousins Barnabas and Mark become a second missionary team, sail across to Cyprus again, to retrace their footsteps and encourage the new believers – and in the process Mark heals up, regains his mojo plus more (!) and powers on – later being back in Paul's company as a helper as we read earlier – (as does Barnabas, too, according to 1 Cor 9:6).

Then Mark links in with Peter as well (1 Peter 5:12) and, as the historians tell us, he gets Peter to tell him the story of Jesus, which he writes down – and it becomes the Gospel of Mark as we have it in our Bible's today.

I find a story like that encouraging. Have always been thankful that God gives people second chances. Sends along a Barnabas-type friend who brings God's own mercy and encouragement to get us back on our feet. And to enable us to move on - and finish well.

Mark's story has been repeated in countless lives over the centuries. A good start, then maybe something happens – whether a failure of some kind, a disappointment in life and relationships, maybe rejection by others as being not-good-enough in your work, or temptation-being-too-much and a fall into sin or a fall to the lure of big dollars ... whatever – then later on, through God's grace, turning around, deciding to get back into it again, renouncing the things that waylaid you, receiving God's forgiveness and healing, forgiving others or seeking their forgiveness and gradually developing trust in God's goodness and strength, trust in yourself – and in the minds of others about you also.

And from that point, making what may be your best contribution because it comes from a humble recognition of personal weakness and vulnerability – a recognition that Jesus' words "apart from me you can do nothing" are very true about the most important things.

He said, "If you live in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing". Then Paul encourages us with "I can do all things for which Christ strengthens me" Phil 4:13.

Paul's prayer for the Philippian Christians is, I think, the way we should be praying for ourselves and each other as we get older – and especially in this time of pandemic anxiety (1:9) "... this is my prayer: that you may grow more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless, ready for the day of Christ".

Listening for, and discerning God's voice, as well as the voices of our community leaders at this time, is a great need.

As Christians, older and younger, we have quite a responsibility on our shoulders – to be affirming the hope we have in our God who is greater than COVID-19, and affirming that His Church is strengthening, not weakening, during this crisis time, (remembering that Jesus IS building His church as he assured Peter He would do), and that He will bring us and this world through this time we are experiencing.

One day as a young minister, I asked a mentor friend about what happens to people as they get older. What sort of changes take place? (So I could understand my people better ... and what I should expect will happen to me too.) His answer has always stuck in my mind – he said “Most people don’t change much from the sort of people they have been all along – they just get more so!” More so!! That means we are building now the sort of people we are going to be in our later years – and when we get there, we will be even more so!

What does that say to you about your attitudes now, your responses to others, especially annoying ones, now? What does that say about your hope level for the future because of your faith in your loving Heavenly Father who watches over you?

Billy Graham wrote a book at 93 years old in 2011 in which he said he was surprised at having lived so long! In fact, he lived till he was 99! He hadn’t expected to live much beyond 50 because of the gruelling schedule of his life. So now in his mid-90s he wrote “I know that in Christ I am prepared for death, but I had no idea how to grow old well.”

He said he started to recognize he couldn’t do the sort of things he had always done physically, he couldn’t sustain talking with someone or coping with a discussion or meeting for more than an hour ... started to marvel at how young the police and doctors were becoming ... and how shop assistants gave him the Seniors discounts without even asking for his card.

And as for remembering things ... he tells the story of an older couple pulled over by the police for speeding – and when asked why, the answer was “Sorry officer, we were speeding to get to the place before we forget where we are supposed to be going”.

Growing older isn’t something to be denied or dreaded, endured with gritted teeth, (whether we’ve got teeth or not!) it is to be embraced as a normal part of life – part of the continuing unfolding of God’s big purpose for your life.

That purpose may include your best contribution, like Mark, like other Bible characters such as Noah, Abraham, Elizabeth, Anna whose latter years were some of their most fulfilling. It also may involve simply giving others a smile – a smile that strengthens someone who is struggling. It may involve caring for a loved one – giving thanks to God that you can still do some things to help. It may involve ensuring your Will is clearly expressed in writing to bless others when you go – AND to prevent conflict and ongoing resentment in your family ... a pretty important purpose!

And, if you will allow me one little hobby-horse of mine (!) – write up your memoirs. It doesn’t have to be a great tome - even just a page or two of your take on life, your love for Christ and your walk with Him, the highlights and the things learnt in hard times. To someone leading your funeral service, a page or two like that is “gold” ...

I want to finish with a quote from Billy Graham’s book as he writes to parents and grandparents.

“Be an example”, he says “remember, your children and grandchildren learn ... through observing your actions and attitudes. Do they see Christ in you? Will they remember you as someone who was a living example of His compassion and love?”

And he finishes with this:

“Even when hard times come and the disabilities of age overtake you, will your family recall your underlying peace and joy?” (p124)

Communion

Have some food and drink prepared for this time

If you're able, join us at 11am Sunday through Zoom to share in communion together at rngwd.com/communion or after you have shared in communion below, consider who you can call to have a chat as you would on a Sunday morning after a church service.

One of the things that we can be actively doing to embrace the idea of spiritual formation is to press into spiritual practices. Communion is a dedicated practice that we do week to week – to set aside time to pause and remember Jesus' death on a cross and the loving sacrifice that he made for each of us. As we pause for a few minutes and take simple food and drink – we remember Jesus meeting with his followers:

*Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it saying,
“Take, eat, this is my body”.*

*Then he took the cup gave thanks and offered it to them,
and they all drank from it.*

Please share in your version of communion.

Communion is usually a time of being *in* community, breaking bread together as a symbolic remembering of Jesus' last supper with his disciples and followers. If we are not in our normal community it might feel strange to do this alone, as a couple or with only a small group of people.

Intentionally consider who you are communing with:

- Think of the people in close proximity to you e.g. neighbours. Give thanks for them.
- Consider and visually bring to mind friends in our church community who would normally be sitting close by at this time. Give thanks for them.
- Consider the community of the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit – a divine community into which you are embraced today as a beloved child of God.

Song: When It's All Been Said and Done

When it's all been said and done
There is just one thing that matters
Did I do my best to live for truth
Did I live my life for You

When it's all been said and done
All my treasures will mean nothing
Only what I've done for love's reward
Will stand the test of time

Lord Your mercy is so great
That You look beyond our weakness
And find purest gold in miry clay
Making sinners into saints

I will always sing Your praise
Here on Earth and ever after
For You've shown me Heaven's my true home
When its all been said and done
You're my life when life is gone.

When it's all been said and done
There is just one thing that matters
Did I do my best to live for truth
Did I live my life for You

Lord I'll live my life for You

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Prayer

Harley Kitchen

Loving God, we thank you for life itself, and for the privilege of walking with you through this life you have given. And we thank you that you give meaning and purpose to our years – that Jesus said “This is life, that they may know you”.

Our God we pray today that each of us, whatever age we are, will be growing to be the people You have in mind for us to be.

That Your work of making us more like Jesus will be happening – that whatever may be blocking that will be dealt with – and that we go on to further understand and grow, as Paul said “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me”.

And in this time of pandemic anxiety and restriction, may each of us be nourished by your love for us – and be strengthened to believe the best is yet to be – that you are with us, that nothing is impossible with you, that we are kept by the power of God and that your will for us is a hopeful future.

So may the God of hope fill us with joy and peace as we trust in Him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Connect cards online

Click this link or enter it into your web browser rngwd.com/connect.

We love to know that you have been able to connect through worship today. Please click on the link (or enter it into your web browser) to our online connect cards letting us know which ways you have been able to worship, and if you want to let us know how we can praying with you.

Thank you!