

Opening verse

For freedom Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1)

Call to Worship**Amelia**

Good morning, it is wonderful to be here with you all in our church again and remembering those of you who are joining us from home. Please stand for the Word and the light.

Justin is ringing the church bell in the tower above us. Listen for the sound that echoes the joy we feel at being able to worship together again. Proclaiming that we are here waiting to welcome our neighbours and one another as we gather to worship God and sing the freedoms that can be found in the love of our community. Let's sing together.

Gathering Song - Come as you are TIS 693

- 1. 'Come as you are: that's how I want you.
Come as you are; feel quite at home,
close to my heart, loved and forgiven.
Come as you are: why stand alone?'*
 - 2. 'No need to fear, love sets no limits;
no need to fear, love never ends;
don't run away shamed and disheartened,
rest in my love, trust me again.'*
 - 3. 'I came to call sinners, not just the righteous;
I came to bring peace, not to condemn.
Each time you fail to live by my promise,
why do you think I'd love you the less?'*
 - 4. 'Come as you are; that's how I love you;
come as you are, trust me again.
Nothing can change the love that I bear you;
all will be well, just come as you are.'*
-

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Acknowledgement of Country**Amelia**

We continue to receive recorded acknowledgments of country from all around Australia, from places where our members live or travel. As we gather here on Wurundjeri Country, and acknowledge the original custodians of this place, let us remember all the peoples of this land, now called Australia. Today we hear from Richard Arnold.

Recording: Richard Arnold, Yarra Yarra.

We acknowledge and respect the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, the traditional custodians of this land since time immemorial.

We are learning that the land is not ours to own, but to look after; and that if we listen, we may hear in it the calling of the eternal Spirit.

**Responding to this call, we commit ourselves
to work for justice, reconciliation, and care of the earth.**

Welcome and Introduction

Amelia

Welcome to worship this morning. It is wonderful that we can start gathering in person again. My name is Amelia and I will be helping Ian and Dave, our ministers, with the service today, along with many others.

Today we will celebrate Holy Communion and consider what freedom means to us as a community. Please stay for morning tea in the hall after the service.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession & Word of Grace

Amelia

Let us pray.

God, who brought our world into being,
We reflect on what it means to be part of your creation.
Forgive us for overwhelming the balance of life.
Guide us to a sustainable future
as we support and celebrate all the things you do to bring freedom and make things new,
inspiring us to live in harmony with all creatures.

Jesus, who gives freely,
You embody the faithfulness of God's promise to us.
Forgive us for when we have not loved others as you love us,
For the times we have taken our liberties without thought of the cost to others.
Show us how we can bring freedom to our communities,
celebrating the new life that emerges.

Holy Spirit, light in the darkness.
Still our minds and let us find a path of purpose in our lives
Forgive us when we become shackled by our own fears and anxieties.
Encourage us to share your healing spirit with those around us,
so that we may give freedom to one another.

Amen

Word of Grace

For freedom Christ has set us free.
Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
Believe the Good News that comes from God:
In Christ we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God

Children's time intro

(props: Dave to bring in a camping chair for Ian)

Dave to invite any children down the front, Ian has a nice comfortable chair he is lounging in.
Encouraging the kids to grab a comfy cushion, lie back and relax. Aah, so nice to be back in church, Dave, back in God's house, in this temple...

Dave: aah, don't get too comfortable there Ian, with what we're about to hear. quick reference back to Bartimaeus two Sundays ago – heading in to Jerusalem now for part 2 of Mark's gospel.

Gospel Reading – Mark 12:38-44

Julie/Peter

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

For these words of witness and for Christ the Word:

Thanks be to God

Children’s time

Dave

Dave asks the children: what did you hear? Any characters, events? What’s Jesus like in the story?

We might need to borrow that comfy chair you’ve got Ian, and have one of the kids sit in it as Jesus – sitting in judgement over the temple – the way they took from the poor, all they had. Between Bartimaeus and this poor widow we’ve had Jesus go in to the temple and... anyone know? Upend things, turn them upside down.

So, very nice to be back in church, but... Jesus flips things on their head. What we think is important, vs what really is important.

Light candle from Christ candle. Primary school aged kids out to SMP for 20 minutes. Secondary aged kids can stay in church.

Song - Hamba Nathi (MV45)

Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu
Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu
Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu
Hamba nathi mkhululi wethu

Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu
Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu
Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu
Mkhululi mkhululi mkhululi wethu

You are freedom, you show us the way (4x)
You show us, you show us you show us the way (4x)

SONG: [Hamba Nathi](#), from [More Voices](#), United Church of Canada, Woodlake Publishing Inc.
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Bible Reading – Galatians 5:1, 13-15

Julie/Peter

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

For these words of witness and for Christ the Word:

Thanks be to God

Offer a theological reflection on freedom, inspired by a paper that Matt Julius' wrote on the subject for the Uniting Church Assembly (I'll post a link on our website and facebook).

Let us pray... For freedom Christ has set us free. And here we are. So, friends, how are you enjoying your freedom?

Beth and I decided to get away for a couple of nights last weekend and booked an AirBnB on Mt Dandenong – not far away, but far enough to feel like liberation – and I was so excited. But then, a couple of days before we were due to go, as you may remember, Victoria was battered by “freak” storms and much of the state lost power, including Mt Dandenong. And our accommodation was cancelled the day before we were due to go. It is like the universe had decided that we had something to learn about freedom. “Ha, you think the removal of governmental coercion makes you free?! Well, see how you like a bit of natural disruption of your plans.” Dan says we're free to go. Nature says no. I was devastated for the 30 minutes or so it took us to get another booking – in Woodend this time – they lost their trees and powerlines in the freak storm back in June, so we went there. Free at last!

But, freedom is a slippery thing isn't it? How free can we ever be in this creation with all its storms and viruses? Today those of us in this room have exercised the freedom to come back to church after our long ordeal – but not everyone is free to come to this service, so we've got a second service coming up for a mixed vaccination congregation – but some of us have health conditions that mean we don't feel free to go to that service either, some of us aren't ready to come back to in person worship at all, perhaps feeling that our freedom from disease is better preserved by remaining at home and watching the livestream (acknowledge to camera). So how free are we? How free do you feel?

I read this week that the federal attorney general is preparing to introduce that extremely divisive religious freedom bill to parliament in the next few weeks, because that is the most important thing to be doing right now. Some religious people do feel that their freedom is under threat. And I'm not just talking about religious people in North Korea – they really need some religious freedom over there in order not to be killed – but today I'm mostly talking about people in western democracies. Those who lost the battles against marriage equality and banning Conversion Therapy and are now looking for a trade-off. Religious freedom – is that what we've got here this morning? – or is that what we're lacking today with these vaccination mandates?

Religious Freedom. Here is Jesus, sitting opposite the Temple in Jerusalem, sitting in judgement on that great religious institution, and a poor widow comes to exercise her religious freedom. She freely gives her two micro-cents as an offering to the institution – all that she has – and Jesus commends her self-sacrifice. “But,” says Jesus, “Beware of the religious authorities who devour widows' houses.” Yes, she is free to give, and willing to give her all, but she is being exploited by those authorities who give higher value to their own freedom, their own honour and status. She is not free from poverty and her (quote unquote) “religious freedom” is actually further impoverishing her.

Freedom is a slippery thing.

This month the internet has been talking about the TV series Squid Game, the most watched show ever on Netflix – anyone else here been game to watch it? – a dystopian survival drama horror story in which hundreds of poor people deep in debt are invited to play children's games for a huge sum of money. It turns out that the games are to-the-death for the entertainment of uber-wealthy gamblers, and only one survivor will get the money.

All the participants in the game freely sign their lives away to compete. And there is a clause in their contract that says, if the majority of competitors vote to end the game, it stops. You see, they have democratic freedoms just like us. And, spoiler alert, they do exercise those freedoms and vote to stop the game in the second episode ... but once they all get back out to their normal lives in the world they realise that the constraints of poverty mean they are not free to

live life in its fullness and the majority of them freely choose to return to the game for the slim chance of surviving to win millions of dollars.

And I wonder, what is it about this story that has completely captured the popular cultural imagination – particularly among young people? Is it just very entertaining to watch poor people die brutally? Or is this scenario a metaphor for the way many people feel? – trapped by the freedoms of capitalism. Free FROM the constraints of tyranny and economic regulation, but not free TO live life in its fullness.

Freedom from and freedom to. Philosophers recognise these two forms of freedom. Negative freedom – freedom from the constraints of governmental regulation or other restrictive powers. And Positive Freedom, freedom to do what we want to do. The characters in Squid Game have some Negative Freedom, they can free themselves from the game, but they have no Positive Freedom, their poverty means they are not free to follow their desires. So also the widow in the temple.

In his letter to the Galatians Paul touches on Negative and Positive freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” he writes, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Paul is talking about freedom from the restrictions of religious law, circumcision and kosher food laws in particular, things no longer relevant to us in their particulars, but in a more general sense Paul is saying, “Christ sets us free from a legalistic approach to divine commandments, free from an approach that says, ‘God’s love is contingent upon us obeying the letter of biblical law.’” “Christ has set us free from such slavery,” says Paul.

But then comes the twist: “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” Christ has set us free FROM slavery to the law, in order that we may be free TO become slaves to one another. Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you ... that’s our freedom. The freedom to love.

This is a counter-cultural word in places where individual liberty is the primary understanding of freedom. And most of the protest against COVID restrictions and Vaccine Mandates has been on that basis. Did you hear that one American commentator comparing Australia to Afghanistan recently with no apparent irony – she asked, “When do we deploy troops to Australia? When do we invade Australia and free an oppressed people who are suffering under a totalitarian regime? When do we spend trillions of dollars to spread democracy in Australia?” Hashtag #SaveAustralia. But Paul is saying, True freedom, Christ’s freedom, is not the freedom to do anything I want. No, true freedom is the freedom to love. The freedom found in community, in caring for one another. This is the freedom expressed in getting vaccinated as an act of love for our neighbour. I am only free if WE are free – that is religious freedom for Paul. And that is the religious freedom that I am willing to fight for: the freedom to love.

I note the irony that our government’s religious freedom legislation is designed to give some religious people the freedom to apply legalistic interpretations of religious law. The freedom to condemn people on the basis of their gender identity, sexuality or marital status without losing their highly paid jobs. I would argue that this goes against the spirit of biblical teaching. In Paul’s terms, this legislation is “submitting again to a yoke of slavery,” a yoke of legalism. Paul doesn’t say we shouldn’t keep God’s commandments, but he does say, “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” Christ frees us from any requirement other than to love. And so, I will judge COVID restrictions not on the basis of the limits they place on my individual liberty, but on the degree to which they allow or limit my love of neighbour.

Frankly, for me the greater limits to my religious freedom, the freedom to love, are caused not by lock downs and vaccination mandates which are certainly challenging, but are there to preserve life. The greater limits are caused by the increasing storms of nature and our inadequate response to climate change, and by the constraints of poverty and injustice like those inflicted on the widow in the temple.

So how are you enjoying your freedom? – how are you loving your neighbour as yourself?

Offering - For the life that you have given TIS774

Ian

*For the life that you have given,
for the love in Christ made known,
with these fruits of time and labour,
with these gifts that are your own;
here we offer, Lord, our praises;
heart and mind and strength we bring;
give us grace to love and serve you,
living what we pray and sing.*

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Prayers of the People

Jim

Benevolent God of Spring rain

We pray for the World: we pray for leaders meeting in Glasgow to discuss climate change. May they be inspired, may they lead with wisdom. We pray for those leading Australia through a health crisis: may they lead with compassion. May we all feel joy at meeting loved-ones again.

Leader: In your mercy, hear our prayers

Response: **We feel our feet on the ground. We wait, quietly, for a warmer, gentler season.**

We pray for the Church: may Uniting Church leaders help those paying the price of the pandemic: may they find strength. May they help us to help others. May we all feel joy at meeting friends again.

Leader: In your mercy, hear our prayers

Response: **We feel our feet on the ground. We wait, quietly, for a warmer, gentler season.**

We pray for those in need: may those with loved-ones in hospital feel supported. May those with loved-ones interstate and overseas feel connected. We pray for those who are tired: for them, peace. We pray for those longing for community; may they find it, here. May we all feel joy at meeting in person, again.

Leader: In your mercy, hear our prayers

Response: **We feel our feet on the ground. We wait, quietly, for a warmer, gentler season.**

In the name of Christ; guide, mentor. Connecting us to spirit; ever-present, yet, renewed.

Praise

Amen

Holy Communion

Ian

Introduction and Invitation

- Standing in a circle around the space – socially distanced family groups
- Hands crossed on chest if not receiving
- Remain in your seats if you wish or are not able to stand
- All servers will hand sanitise
- Gluten free bread
- If you have an offering place it in the bowls by the font as you move into or out of the circle.

Refrain: Come to the feast of heaven and earth!

*Come to the table of plenty!
God will provide for all that we need,
here at the table of plenty.*

1. *O, come and sit at my table
where saints and sinners are friends.
I wait to welcome the lost and lonely
to share the cup of my love.*
 2. *O, come and eat without money;
come to drink without price.
My feast of gladness will feed your spirit
with faith and fullness of life.*
 3. *My bread will ever sustain you
through days of sorrow and woe.
My wine will flow like a sea of gladness
to flood the depths of your soul.*
 4. *Your fields will flower in fullness;
your homes will flourish in peace.
For I, the giver of home and harvest,
will send my rain on the soil.*
-

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Thanksgiving

We are the body of Christ: ***His Spirit is with us.***

Lift up your hearts: ***We lift our hearts to God.***

Let us give thanks to God who is Wisdom and Love:
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Father of goodness, Mother of kindness,
for creation in its wonder and mystery

We thank you

for Jesus your beloved Son
who calls us to freedom,

We thank you

for your Holy Spirit and her liberating grace,

We thank you

And with the whole realm of nature around us,
with earth, sea and sky,

we sing to you!

With all the saints before us and beside us,
with brothers and sisters,
east and west, north and south,

we sing to you!

And with our loved ones,
separate from us now,
who yet, in this mystery are close to us,
we sing the hymn of unending praise:

Holy, holy, holy (TIS764)

*Holy (Holy), holy, (holy)
holy Lord of power and might.
Heaven (Heaven), earth (earth)
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
All glory to your name.
(All glory to your name.)
All glory to your name.
(All glory to your name.)*

*Blessed (Blessed), blessed (blessed)
is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Blessed (Blessed), blessed (blessed)
is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.
(Hosanna in the highest.)
Hosanna in the highest.
(Hosanna in the highest.)*

Blessed is our brother Jesus,
who on the night of his betrayal took bread,
gave thanks, broke it and said:
***This is my body given for you.
Whenever you eat it, remember me.***

In the same way also he took the cup.
Again he gave thanks,
shared it with his disciples and said:
***This is the cup of a new covenant in my blood.
whenever you drink it, remember me.***

Come now, Holy Spirit of the living God,
love us into the unity of peace
through this bread and wine. For:
***Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again!***

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ
all glory be to you,
Source of all Being,
Eternal Wisdom and Holy Spirit,
one God and Mother of all creation.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

***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 for ever. Amen.***

Breaking of the bread

Christ is the bread of resurrection:
new life for all.

Christ is the cup of life:
who revives the faint-hearted.

We who are many are one body,
for we all share in the one bread.

Let us receive what we are.
Let us become what we receive:
The body of Christ.

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Distribution

*Communion served in one circle
Music: musicians' choice*

The Peace

The peace of Christ be with you all:
And also with you

Notices

Amelia

Sending Song - Freedom is coming ATOK355

- 1. Freedom is coming, freedom is coming,
freedom is coming, oh yes I know.

Oh yes I know, oh yes I know,
oh yes I know, oh yes I know.*
 - 2. Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming,
Jesus is coming – oh yes I know.*
-

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Blessing and Sending

Hear this, People of God,
 you shall love the Eternal One your God
 with all your heart, and with all your soul,
 and with all your mind, and with all your strength
 And you shall love your neighbour as yourself.
 There is no other commandment greater than these.

Go in freedom and peace
 to give all that you have in the loving service of Christ.

Let's bless one another for the journey of freedom saying together:

***The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God,
 and the communion of the Holy Spirit
 be with us all evermore. Amen***

Shalom to you now TIS778

*Shalom to you now, shalom, my friends.
 May God's full mercies bless you, my friends.
 In all your living and through your loving,
 Christ be your shalom, Christ be your shalom.*

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Thank You

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 Freedom is coming
 (Prelude & Postlude)
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Closing verse on screen

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
 "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)