

**40th Anniversary - Movement for the Ordination of Women**  
**Christ Church St Laurence, Sydney**  
**Sunday 17 September 2023**

Exodus 14:19-31  
Psalm 114  
Romans 14:1-14  
Matthew 18: 21-35

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Spirit of grace. Amen.

Fr Daniel, thank you to you and the Wardens of Christ Church for taking the care and time involved in the invitation you have generously extended me to preach on this Sunday. It's a day in which so many are celebrating and giving thanks for the foundation, the vision, the love, the laughter, the tears, the work, the people of the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), here in Sydney and of course all around the country at this 40th anniversary celebration. I acknowledge also the Archbishop's kind permission for this.

How appropriate of the Sydney marathon organisers to manage the date of this year's Sydney marathon to coincide with the MOW anniversary!

Our journey has certainly been a marathon. It has involved some aching and tiredness, the occasional sense of being disheartened when the finish line looks so far off, some sense of being dis-spirited when the Holy Spirit's energy feels more like being against a head wind than the exhilarating lifting up and carrying forward for which we long. It has produced some old wounds from harsh words and dismissive actions, some of those old wounds still open and weeping again, when the hostility was dressed up as speaking truth in love.

Yet this particular marathon is still being run! Thank you, Sydney MOW, for calling us together celebrating in the community of Christ's love as we call to mind so many of the women and men of grit, grace and spirit in 1983 and in 2023.

And how fitting, too, to have the story of the Exodus given as one of the texts for the day, the story of liberation from a place of slavery to place of shaping and learning and becoming in the environment of God's promise of more and enough.

Our reading stopped at the end of chapter 14, so we missed the opening verses of chapter 15, "the Song of Moses", after God's people land on the other side of the Red Sea. It's worth noting, and won't be surprising, that the Song of Moses is placed ahead of the more ancient text, the Song of Miriam. The Song of Miriam is one of the very ancient texts of the Hebrew scriptures and appears a few verses on in chapter 15 verse 20. It has Miriam taking a tambourine in her hand, and all the women going out after her with tambourines and with dancing as she sang to them, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea".

This is an image that is deliciously untidy. It's reminiscent of some of the crowds who follow Jesus in the gospels, including the Palm Sunday crowd, reminiscent also of the evolving, unfolding life of the church over centuries, and of the outspoken, untidy MOW community I remember looking to as a young woman, uncertain of the future, wanting to follow and do right, and scared of the church.

Remembering is important. The vibrancy of Miriam's song of thanksgiving of praise and of triumph was edited into another place to sit in the story, just a little lower down.

Remembering is important. Nostalgia is not always its best companion.

Many women know how that is, and like the discoveries about this ancient text have been discovering new exegesis, another hermeneutical lens through which to view sacred text, and to experience the life of the body of Christ and the life-changing grace of God.

There's a song of Miriam to sing in 2023. And there are voices ready to sing it.

I'm calling it a song of Grace.

I use the word "grace" a lot. We've all got our God-language, our theological language. When I sign a letter, I often sign it "peace and grace." I *need* to talk about God's gift of love, the abundance and power of the love which speaks mercy, which holds out its hand in welcome, which sees that which we can't, don't and won't see. When it's recognised, it's a gift to be cherished. When it's offered and we dare to lean towards it, it can hold us, even being a bedrock of hope, healing, transformation, for the going from one place to another. Perhaps even to a new land.

What grace was on the other side of the Red Sea? What hopes crossed with the people God had determined for a new life, a new world, in that astounding story?

Exodus recounts many stories of God's grace for that people who, we're told, spent 40 years being shaped, formed, forged into a people by God. What grace for them in the landing after that dangerous crossing, safely, but not necessarily sweetly?

I want to sing a song of grace, of *charis*, graciousness, goodwill, favour, gift.

I want to sing it right now in the life of our community because grace has the strength to hold the hard journey of forgiveness. Grace has the face of the person whose kindness and welcome reminds you of Jesus' love. Grace can feel like welcome reaching out and simply connecting you. Grace says you're included; and the power of inclusion cannot be underestimated, whether it's of those who have experienced vocations laid waste and unrecognised as people hang in on the edges of a church community, or it's Australia's First Nations peoples' invitation to be part of the song of the Statement from the Heart as we vote for recognition in Australia's Constitution and a Voice to Parliament; or it's those members of the LGBTQIA+ community and their families who know the cost of exclusion and the joy of inclusion.

Grace can deal with us humans in ways we find hard to allow, and it's often unexpected.

Grace is the song that fills us to the brim with a good and Godly 'yes'.

Some of those who will be remembered today will have been living signs of God's grace in this community.

I've been thinking of the people and places in which grace has shown up for me. This anniversary has brought some to mind.

One is a Noongar woman who helped me grow over years as a white woman into a deeper understanding of place, people, story, as a white woman in the 21st century. She died unexpectedly a couple of years ago. She was one of the group of elders who welcomed me to country at my installation as Archbishop in 2018. She was warm and generous and clear standing at the front of the cathedral: "we're expecting things of you. God is expecting things of you".

This was the embodiment of grace; gentle, and hopeful of better. In the crossing from one place to another, the hope of a new day, she'd say, "we have to keep yarning until we get there. God has got us and will be with us". She taught about trust, and welcome, and inclusion, all the while getting on with the business of working for change.

I want to keep singing grace, God's grace.

We hear it in Jesus' teaching of the "new Torah" in Matthew 18, as he points out the impossibility of getting a High Distinction for forgiveness as Peter does the maths. It's not about forgiveness as competitive; who can do forgiving best? It's not that the followers of Jesus really know how to do BIG forgiving. It's not about demanding forgiveness as a right. It's about knowing where this restorative mercy and grace resides.

Seventy times seven or 77 times isn't really the point Jesus teaches his first friends, and us. *The point is God*, the merciful heartbeat and centre of our faith. God calling us on, always faithful, never abandoning. Jesus' teaching in Matthew isn't for the faint hearted. It's real. It's our calling. It's asking us to keep on believing, keep on insisting that there's room for absolutely everyone in the new world order of the resurrection community.

A song of resurrection grace, living, breathing. Here and now.

This loving God is the one who can turn questions around, so that God's mercy, God's grace, God's gift of loving is at the centre of everything. This is Jesus who, in not clinging to equality with God, took the form of a servant. His dying makes our living different. His resurrection makes our life different. Romans 14:7-9 puts it this way: "*we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord; so the whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's*".

So perhaps we might leave today with some questions to carry us out. How does "living to the Lord" reorient us? How is it bread for the journey? How do we hold on, as we make our way from one place to the other?

The Exodus story as it continues to unfold teaches us that even after a victory, we never land in a completely safe place. When God's people landed on the other side, it wasn't straightforward. It took a long time for God to shape them into a people. Does that sound familiar? There may be a desert. There may be hunger, thirst, quarrelling, fear. Some will die along the way.

Yet in all our various not-completely-safe places, God is with us. And when God is with us, God draws other people to us. It's hard to be alone when there's Emmanuel.

So, sing out peace and grace to you, from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sing Peace and grace, and solidarity, and inclusion, and courage.

Sing Peace and grace, and strength and purpose, and amplification for the prophetic voices.

Sing Peace and grace, and perseverance in love, in laughter, in tears, and work.

*"For if we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. And whether we live, or whether we die, we are, all of us, the Lord's."*