

On Earth as it is in Heaven

Suellen Shay

Edited by Helen Hacksley

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Seeds of expectation

Preface

'Let us offer to God our prayer of praise.' These are amongst the first words many a newcomer to Rondebosch United Church has heard – Suellen's voice centring the community in prayer at the start of the service. Ever since I first listened to her on Good Friday in 2006, I have been inspired by her prayers – moved by their honesty and longing, drawn to the faith they express.

They have been markers in the life of the community, reflecting its journey, envisioning its future. In times of celebration, they have expanded our gratitude. In pain and grief, they have released healing tears, given comfort. In the radiance of summer, she has stirred our hearts in praise. In the fullness of autumn, her words have harvested joy and encircled God's generosity of being. In the darkness of winter, she has given voice to fears and gestured towards the light. In the tenderness of spring, she has nurtured hope and expectant trust.

Mindful of the lives of others in our city, our nation, our continent and the wider world, she has kept us alert to our interconnectedness. Her voice has continually called us to worship and to action in the face of injustice – to be God's hands and feet, mind and heart, bringing about Christ's kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven', a refrain which echoes throughout the prayers.

I began compiling this book in 2012 shortly before my first child was born. As motherhood overtook me it was left incomplete, a seed of an idea waiting for another time. In January this year, as I battled for words after hearing of Suellen's cancer, I returned to her prayers. I was struck anew by their beauty and richness, as well as by how they voice our common struggle to reconcile hard questions, and yet reach out in hope again and again. I wanted to give them back to her that she might receive the gift of herself at a time when words are difficult to find, these words that have been a warm embrace to others in the past. And so I began gathering more prayers until I had filled in the missing years. It has been an honour to pore over her words, spanning the last fifteen years, and shape them into this book of prayers for all seasons. It is a book I will use with my family at home, one I know will be treasured by all who receive it.



Summer

... to hold up our hands and catch you as though through a thousand rain drops

The river

O God, River of Life,
we think of rivers we have known –
the Olifants running through the Cape,
the great Orange River that slices through South Africa,
the Black River that hosts our beautiful flock of flamingos –
these rivers evoke in us peace, adventure,
others tragedy and loss.

Like the spiritual songwriters, we too find in these rivers images, experiences, words that capture something of the risk, the longing, the familiar and unfamiliar territories into which our faith, our relationship with you takes us.

The river ...

whose freshness cleanses and restores,
whose shallow waters reveal awesome creatures and plants,
whose sandy shoreline calls us to rest in the warmth of the sun,
whose rapids invite us to risk and adventure,
whose rocks may cause us to stumble, slip, lose our footing,
whose flat, worn stones allow us to cross with grace,
whose depths call us to depths,
whose powerful currents may take us where we do not want to go,
whose distant bend alerts us that we are nearly home.

We praise you, our God, deep River of Life. Run through us – through each encounter, through our families, communities, our land.

Exuberant Spirit

Exuberant Spirit of God, bursting with the brightness of flame into the coldness of our lives to warm us with a passion for justice and beauty, we praise you.

Exuberant Spirit of God, sweeping us out of the dusty corners of our apathy to breathe vitality into our struggles for change, we praise you.

Exuberant Spirit of God, speaking words that leap over barriers of mistrust to convey messages of truth and new understanding, we praise you.

Exuberant Spirit of God, flame,

wind,

speech, burn, breathe, speak in us; fill our world with justice and with joy.

Faith for the here and now

O God, we are inspired and challenged for you have filled us with your Spirit, freeing us to be a community of love, a community of faith, a community for action.

We are not a people who mourn some golden past, nor do we only live for some future state of perfection. Ours is a faith for the here and now, for this time, this place.

And thus we strive to be fully present, fully aware of the opportunities and needs, our resources, our collective giftedness, fully aware of your reign on earth, your vision for our world.

We are free then to live out those kingdom values –
to love and honour ourselves,
to take risks for the sake of what we know is right,
to enlarge the lives of others,
to respect one another's unique calling,
to be kind to strangers,
to protect and care for your creatures,
to tread lightly and respectfully on the earth,
to recognize the sacred in all we meet.

Such is the freedom that is ours in Christ.

Images of God

O God, we hold together the varied and sometimes contradictory images we have of you.

You are God in the garden pleased with your creation, God, sad and angry, calling forth the flood, our liberating God who swears to deliver, God of veils and holy spaces, God of kings and prophets, God of the chosen people, God of exile. God of homecoming, God the baby, God the carpenter, working with his hands, God hanging out with women, God heralding a kingdom, God asleep in a boat, God, lonely, praying on a hill, God crucified. God as fire, spirit, contagious, God in all that is good, within us and beyond us.

We praise you for all these diverse images from our tradition. Forgive us when we reify one at the expense of the other. Give us courage to challenge images of you that reduce you, images in which you are merely a projection of our own prejudice and fear.

May we continue to search out these images in our scriptures, in poetry, in music.

May we be willing to dig for you as treasure, to search for you as the lost path, to hold up our hands and catch you as though through a thousand rain drops. Bless us on our journey as we re-image you.

Glimpsing the divine

God, we join with the Psalmist of long ago in praising you for your greatness and your beauty –

'you are clothed with majesty and splendour',

'enfolded in a robe of light'.

In our attempts to connect with you, we experience, as the Psalmist must have, the poverty of language to capture something of your transcendence.

And so we thank you for those who have moved us beyond language, whose art, music, performance have taken us to new realms of experience, whose inspired works have moved us beyond the rational, taking us to heights which touch the divine.

We praise you that you long to reveal yourself to us, that your beauty is not simply there to behold but it draws us in, it reflects upon us and through us.

We ask you to open our eyes so that we might see and experience you in new ways and thereby be transformed.

Seekers of the sacred

O God, we come to you as seekers of the sacred. In our seeking we find an open place, a place of safety and freedom, a place of ever-widening circles where you are both the outer ring that we stretch towards and the very centre where we stand rooted.

It is a place where honesty is a requisite, a place where we embrace our shadow, where we push through our pain, where our imperfections are stepping-stones of grace taking us closer and closer to your heart, closer to intimacy with each other.

God of the heights and depths

God, we are a community of faith – believers, seekers, doubters – all of us responding to something both deep within and far beyond us, calling us from ourselves towards one another –

from cynicism to hope, from indifference to love, from complacency to action.

Thank you that you expect nothing more of us than that we answer that call.

We praise you that you are God of the heights –
we marvel at the beauty of the bright moon,
the stunning peach and pink of the sunset,
Table Mountain against the bright blue sky.
You are the source of all that brings us joy and pleasure,
those moments of elation when life feels too good to be true.

We praise you that you are God of the depths –
we are in awe of the ocean and its teeming life,
the mystery of the earth and the damp winter smells,
the turbulent river as it rushes over jutting rock.
So too you are there in the depths of grief and loss,
in the turmoil of our anger and discontent.
You are there in the valley and its shadows.

So whether we are strong in faith or weak, it matters not for you are there –
God of the heights and depths,
God of all life as we know it and beyond what we know.

Palm Sunday

Like the children of long ago who shouted as Jesus rode by, we too lift our praises:

Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed are you,
the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

But, unlike those children of long ago, we know the full story. We know that all is not as it appears to be, that this Jesus rides to Jerusalem not to become King, as we had hoped, but that he rides to his death.

O God, we praise you for your love that endures forever.
We cry out for eyes of faith
to see you for who you truly are wherever you appear.
May our daily living be part of the life of your Kingdom.
May our love be your love reaching out into the life of the world.

God, our rock

We praise you, O God, that in the midst of uncertainty, you are steadfast and unchanging.

In the midst of that which saddens us, you remind us of what is beautiful and worthy.

In the midst of that which seduces us towards the easy road, you are our example of courage and commitment.

In the midst of suspicion towards the 'other', complacency towards the needy, and even neglect of those closest to us, you urge us to love deeply, to hold on to one another without conditions.

In the midst of a disposable culture – where we consume to our fill and then discard without a care, you remind us of our calling to be caretakers, to tread respectfully and lightly.

When all else swirls around us, you are our Rock, When darkness threatens to engulf us, you are our Light. When the noise of the world confuses us, you are the Word. You are the One through whom we live and move and have our being.

A wedding blessing

O God, in this most anticipated of moments, we pause.

After the rush, the heat, the bustle of preparation, we now stand in the deep shade of your presence. The coolness of your Spirit holds us; here we quench the dryness of our inmost being. We know we cannot stay here, but, God, in this most anticipated of moments, we pause.

We pause to marvel at how these two come to unite in love. We marvel because two journeys –

each with their own mountains and valleys traversed, each with particular passions and hopes for the future, each holding a special place in your heart – come together today to become one journey.

So, with their blessing-filled journeys behind them, with their shared journey before them, O God, we pause in this most anticipated of moments to offer their commitment to you.

Our prayer is that in their journeying they will find their home in the intimacy of the other, that they will find their home in you.

In celebration of diversity

We come together with gratitude for our diverse community – from different corners of the world, with different stories of joy and pain, different journeys that have brought us to this place.

We celebrate what brings us together –
not even necessarily our beliefs,
which are diverse on many points –
but we gather around the table.
In our vulnerability, we are drawn to the light.
We are drawn to the love and acceptance we find here.

May being in community continually transform us. Give us eyes to see the things that separate us from each other, parent from child, partner from partner, neighbour from stranger. Give us courage for inner work – the healing of ourselves. Give us an intensity of passion, a depth of insight, for those things which will make the world a more hospitable place, especially for those most marginalized. Protect us from denialism, indifference and despair.

The gift of community

We praise you, God, for the gift of our community gathered in love week after week.

For our community gathered in faith –
faith in you,
faith in each other,
faith that even in our times of faithlessness
we will find your Spirit in our midst,
we will find strength in one another and be replenished.

We praise you for our community gathered in hope – we gather because there is hope for each of us; we gather to renew our hope for our communities, for our world.

May any hardness that we harbour against another be softened.
May the strain of stress and business be released.
May the preoccupation with the urgent but often insignificant recede.
May our narrow constructs of who you are be challenged and expanded.
May our sense of our own calling burn within us.
May we be emboldened for your sake.

Turning to God

God, source of all wisdom, we praise you.
As a human community we have trusted in our own wisdom, we have believed in our own power to solve our problems, but we are no longer so naïve – our idealism has been shattered. We turn to you –

we acknowledge you as the source of all wisdom.

God, source of all truth, we praise you.
But what is truth?
We do not really know anymore.
In our world power is more important than truth.
Truth is sacrificed at every turn for personal gain.
Integrity of actions and words is so rare it startles us.
We turn to you –

we acknowledge and praise you as the God of truth.

God, source of all power, we praise you –

a power that creates something out of nothing,
a power incarnate in human form,
a power embodied in wisdom and truth,
a power that heals, liberates and transforms,
a power that will overcome all that is not well in our world.

We turn to you -

illuminate us with your wisdom and truth that we may be channels of your power.

Hearts full of praise

God, our hearts are full of praise.

You are the love that banishes all fear.

We cannot see you and yet in so many ways we have seen you. We cannot touch you but we have experienced and felt you. You have been in the warm sunshine on a cold winter's day. We have glimpsed your handiwork in the full silver moon suspended in a soft blue night.

You are the rock that anchors when doubt overtakes us.
You are the hope that keeps us going with no certainties to hold to.
You are the presence in that empty, lonely place.
You are the groaning in our hearts when we know not what to pray.
You are the compassion that knits us to strangers.
You are the justice that tugs at our complacency.
You are the joy that unexpectedly overwhelms us.

We praise you for revealing yourself to us in all these ways.

God omnipotent

We praise you, God, for your majesty that exhilarates us, for your glory that overwhelms us, for your power that consumes us.

We wonder how such an awesome and overwhelming presence would come to us with such compassion and grace, would touch us where we are most vulnerable to bring healing and wholeness.

How can this be?

Though it is incomprehensible to us,
we know through Christ that this is the kind of God you are –
omnipotent and intimate,
present glory,
God in the flesh.

God with us

God, we acknowledge that you are God with us.

More than mere presence, you are the one who reigns –
sometimes through us, often in spite of us.

You are the one, as the writer to Philippians reminds us,
working out all things according to your own purpose.

And so, we can come as an expectant community, searching for signs of your purpose.

Like the Wise Men of old we read our sacred texts, we read the events of our times, knowing, hoping, that you are not far from us, knowing that we are likely to find you in unexpected places.

Where the darkness of grief, sorrow and loneliness threaten to overtake us, you are there.

Where voices speak out against wrongdoing, whether it be in the home or the nation, you are there.

Where the hopeful and the sceptical come together, seeking solutions to seemingly intractable problems, you are there.

Where two or three are gathered in your name, you are there.

Where dreams and visions will not die, you are there.

All these and so many more acts bring your kingdom down, here and all around us, on earth as it is in heaven.
Rouse us from our complacency, discouragement and weariness.
Open our eyes that we might see and that we might believe.

The dawning

As our days lengthen in the southern hemisphere we welcome more and more light, we enjoy the warmth of the sun, we are full of gratitude for the rain – for the little shoots of green grass out of the hard, dry, dusty ground.

Our worship is full of these symbols of light – we light a candle of hope week by week, we raise up in our sanctuary our beautiful golden angels, we remember the magi who followed a star.

But we are also not afraid of the darkness –
the darkness of the night as Mary and Joseph fled,
the darkness of the hillside where the shepherds waited.
At this time of Advent the darkness draws us inwards,
beckens us to slow down.

In darkness is the place of gestation, of quiet, invisible growth, the place of the unsayable and the not-knowing, the place of Mystery.

In this place we will await the stirring of our hearts, the dawning of new clarity, the birth of something new.

A Cape psalm

From the top of Table Mountain to the depths of Table Bay, may God the Creator be praised.

From the corners of Long Street, where the homeless lie exposed, may God who is with us be praised.

From the anguish and hope in Pollsmoor to the prisons of our own lives, may God the Liberator be praised.

From the corridors of state power, to the bustle of business and wealth, may God who reigns above all be praised.

Let all that has life and breath praise God.

On greatness

God, we pause to praise you for your greatness, which we can only glimpse indirectly, your light refracted to us through the prisms of creation, of history, of our own faith that there is someone greater, beyond our individual and collective experience.

We turn to praise you for the many invisible, selfless, unthanked and unnoticed acts of greatness all around us.

We think of those, often women, who wander our streets, who hang out in front of grocery stores, struggling day by day to keep food in their children's stomachs, to keep them in school.

Forgive us for our judgements and misjudgements of greatness.

We think of parents and grandparents across all strata of society raising their grandchildren and even others' children

We think of the refugee and the displaced around our globe eking out a living, not for their own advancement but to support family more destitute than themselves.

at tremendous expense to themselves.

We think of people in business, in government, in our communities, who appear to have no influence but who in small and unassuming ways fight to break the cycles of injustice, poverty and ignorance.

We are touched by each and every one of these acts of simple greatness.

Fire, wind and sword

God, you are the light of the world, bread of life and living water, but you are also fire, wind and sword.

You are compassion and justice, healer and consumer, the great uniter and divider.

You are the one who comforts us and disturbs us; you are our source of joy and our cause for mourning.

You meet our deepest longing and yet we are restless inhabitants of this earth. You satiate us with your love but stir within us a longing for more.

While we can never fully grasp you, you have come to us in Jesus Christ. May we see and experience you afresh.

God in a manger

As in the lyrics of the song,
'What could be stranger than God in a manger?'
At Christmas more than any other time in our church calendar
we are struck by the incongruities of our faith –
a God who becomes flesh –
omnipotent, yet God Emmanuel, God with us,
almighty, yet come as an unexpected baby to a poor unmarried couple,
visited by shepherds and foreigners,
a refugee, on the run, separated from home and family.

We praise you, God, for this Christmas story. Burn it into our hearts, not for its sentimentality but for its stirring reminder to us of where we are most likely to find you today, not where we expect you to be, in sermon, song and religious display, but where there is poverty of spirit, where there is an openness and vulnerability, where there is yearning, where there is expectation for what is yet to come.

Give us open, yearning, expectant hearts for you are the one who awaits us quietly at the centre of all things, at the centre of creation, at the centre of our being. We welcome you on this day.

Autumn

there would be no harvest if not for the darkness - the invisible dark places of silent growth

Boundless generosity

We praise you, God our Creator, for small seeds planted in faith, for the dark places of silent growth, for the sweat of unseen human labour, for the promise of something to come.

The harvest table reminds us of your boundless generosity, that you are the one who sends rain on the just and the unjust, that the depths of your love are beyond our comprehension.

The harvest table symbolizes not only your generosity but is a sobering reminder to us that there is enough in our world for everyone, if only those of us who have plenty shared with those of us who do not.

May our praises not ring hollow but spur us forth into acts of giving.

May our anxiety for what we do not have

not blind us to the riches that we do have.

May we learn to give as you gave,

beyond what is simply comfortable and convenient.

We praise you for Christ's example of selfless giving.

Following a radical script

God, from the very first stories recorded in Genesis, we understand you to be a God who places us in a garden of beauty and plenty, a place of freedom and great possibility where we are stewards of all things – to nurture, to care, to protect, to enjoy.

Throughout our scriptures
and revealed to us best in Christ,
we recognize a script that is radical in its themes –
that rewards those who come last,
that cherishes what is small,
that goes to the furthest margins to seek what is lost,
that challenges the powerful,
humbles the proud and sufficient,
drawing us all into community.

We praise you for the garden of our life together. Far from perfect we are, but trying to live by your script and its countercultural ways of thinking, being and acting. We thank you for the ways in which those who join our community challenge us and extend our reach.

Strengthen us.
Forgive us for our mumbling ambivalence.
Give us clarity of mind and vision.
Rekindle our hope.
Stir within us compassion.

Guardians of nature

Divine Creator, you have privileged us with responsibility over creation, but we have abused the earth through arrogance, ignorance and greed. We have hurt and extinguished, we have neglected and destroyed. We ask for your forgiveness, in sorrow for what we have done.

Divine Creator,

You offer us the opportunity to make peace with all creation, to live not in competition but harmony with the earth – that we too may stand back and survey our co-creative work and declare: 'It is good!'

Ask much of us.

Expect much from us.

Enable much through us.

Encourage many through us.

May we be guardians of nature, healers of misery, messengers of wonder, and architects of peace.

Intimations

Praise you, God, the Artist, and we your creative outpouring.

Praise you, God, the Baker, and we your warm yeast.

Praise you, God, the Gardener, and we the receptive, fertile soil.

Praise you, God, the Caregiver, and we your eager yet vulnerable children.

Praise you, God, the Word, and we your voice.

We praise you, God, for though there is no metaphor that captures you, each one says something about who you are; and about who we are in relation to you.

We praise you for Christ, your full revelation, and for your ongoing revelation in and through one another in this challenging and complex world in which we live.

Circles of dignity

God, we gather in your name, encircled around the table, around the light, reminding us of our centre, our grounding, our rootedness in you, reminding us of our connection to one another, reminding us that you are the source of all hope, all love, and all that is good.

You are the ferment out of which we grow.

We praise you for all circles that mirror this powerful truth –
for circles of fellowship around a shared meal,
for circles of friendship gathered to celebrate a special occasion,
for circles of support around the bedside of the ill,
for circles of comforters around the grieving,
for circles of shared enjoyment of music or film or book,
for circles of play and games,
for circles of community that are enlarged
when love crosses boundaries.

We dedicate our lives to building circles like these of dignity and love.

Worthy of praise

O God, we look up at the heavens, at the mountain, at the sea – all the work of your hands – at the moon, the stars, the galaxies that you have set each in its right place, and with the Psalmist we ask ourselves, 'Who are we that you would be mindful of us?'

That you would not only take notice of us but charge us as caretakers, commanding us to consume, but with care and respect, to take, but to replenish, to sow and reap, and sow again, and from whatever abundance we might profit, to share. This is our status – 'little less than God', the Psalmist says – so much power in our hands for the good of all.

We praise you, God of the universe, and we are overwhelmed by our place within it. Make us worthy of our praise.

Paradoxes

God, with the Psalmist we want to acknowledge your majesty, your greatness, your holy perfection. And, like the Psalmist too, as we reflect on your greatness, we reflect on one of the great paradoxes of our faith, the already but not yet –

all things are made perfect, all is accomplished through Christ's life, death and resurrection and yet we are still so imperfect.

We long for perfection, and yet we are flawed.
We yearn for wholeness, and yet we are broken.
We strive for certainty, and yet uncertainty is our modern condition.

But we know from our scriptures
and we know from our own experience
that it is precisely this yearning, longing and striving,
our doubts and self-doubt,
that brings us, like the discipline Thomas, closer to you –
to touch, to feel, to see, to taste,
to reaffirm our humanity in all its imperfection,
to reaffirm our faith with all its ambiguities and doubt.

A prayer for change

Dear God,

we are part of a history which has trampled on the rights of those who by society's standards are weak and vulnerable.

We are part of a society that has devalued work in the home, the raising and education of children,

caring for the sick and elderly.

We are part of communities where women in particular feel insecure, are victimized and humiliated in many ways.

We are part of families and extended families

where women are taken for granted, where their bodies are valued over their minds.

We pray for your forgiveness for how we have contributed to these problems. We thank you for the opportunity each day to change our lives, and to work for change in the world, starting with those closest to us.

We praise you that the Spirit we have received is not one of failure and regret but of power and possibility. May we walk in the light of your grace.

People of vision

O God,

from the opening story of our scriptures to its last page, you are a God who works intentionally, purposefully, with compassion, to bring freedom, wholeness, healing, new life.

We praise you for those magnificent people throughout history, known and unknown,
who trusted in a bigger purpose,
who saw through the evil of the day
to a better world on the other side,
who stretched beyond themselves,
beyond conventional paradigms and cherished myths of their day,
and envisioned something different,
who worked tirelessly, courageously,
often for freedoms that they themselves would never enjoy.

We come with heavy and sobered hearts as Madiba struggles towards his last breath, a man who trusted in a bigger purpose if ever there was one. As a nation we will grieve, indeed the world will grieve, but when we rise up out of the ashes, may it be to follow in the footsteps of all who hoped and worked for your reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Kairos

We praise you, God, our Alpha and Omega –
you are the eternal I AM.

And yet, you have entered into our history.

From a timeless, painless place
you took on flesh,
you too experienced deep loss and grief,
you too wept and begged that the cup of suffering would pass you by,
you too asked of your father why it had to be.

We praise you for entering into our time and space, turning our time into kairos, not simply the passing of years but the making of something new – the fruit into good wine, the night into a new morning, seeds sown with faith, sown in hope.

This is the time that restores, heals and even redeems. This is the time that will heal our hearts, heal our land.

We give thanks that you are with us – that the fullness of time is here, that this is our kairos.

The fullness of time

We are reminded in the Christmas story of those extraordinary moments in the 'fullness of time' when ordinary people find themselves caught up in something so much bigger than themselves. Out of simple obedience they find themselves lead actors in your unfolding plan for wholeness, for healing, for justice.

As we ponder these events in our scriptures,
O God, we long for our own 'fullness of time'.
Whether we look at our world
and the growing divide between the rich and poor
or our country and its uncertain political and economic future,
our education system that denies so many any chance of a future
or some distress in our family, friends or community,
we long for the 'fullness of time'.

We long for the convergence of the right people, seemingly ordinary acts of obedience, seeds planted in faith, in hope, but coming together in a way that brings about something extraordinary, something which changes us forever –

the crossing of a threshold, a milestone or a step towards something new.

We boldly pray that our longing will turn to reality, and for eyes to see your reign on earth as it is in heaven.

We praise you for you are the God who is with us, who is relentlessly and compassionately at work in our world. We believe and put our hope in you, God who became flesh. In the fullness of time you entered into our space in order that we might experience and indeed become ourselves, the Light that shines in the darkness.

Giver of life

We praise you, God, our Creator and Sustainer for you are the giver of life, abundant life.

We celebrate the harvest,

but there would be no harvest if it were not for small seeds -

the seed of an idea, a dream, a vision,

the seed of a conversation shared, a connection made,

the seed of encouragement given, an opportunity taken up,

the seed of hard work in the late night,

the seed of hope against all hope -

all seeds planted in faith.

There would be no harvest if not for the darkness -

the invisible dark places of silent growth,

the soaking rain that falls graciously on us all, just and unjust,

the efforts of unseen labourers,

the patient waiting,

the promise of fruit.

We celebrate the fruit,

all the good gifts freely shared from our community – for those whose daily work is a gift to the future of our country, for those who through their prayers bring healing, hope and comfort, for those who offer friendship, hospitality and a helping hand, for leaders, activists, bakers, teachers, writers, urban planners, parents. We are deeply grateful for all of their precious gifts.

May this harvest of gifts remind us of your boundless generosity and the depths of your love beyond our comprehension.

May we be transformed

from people who are burdened, anxious, obsessive and fearful to agents of hope, compassion and new life.

The olive tree

God, we know that you are expansive in grace and love, a love that covers our earth and all its creatures and all its people, a love that blesses the poor and offers them the inheritance of the earth, a love that abhors our agendas

which polarize and privilege one part of creation over another.

We draw wisdom and insight from the olive tree, deeply rooted in ancient history, its branches symbolizing peace, its colour –

the brown of the land, labour, toil and sweat, the green of the earth, of plenty, of abundance, its oil a source of health, healing and blessing – a beautiful symbol of life.

As we look back over the years, we thank you for memory –
for good times savoured forever.

We thank you for the healing power of writing, of poetry, of song.

We thank you for friendships formed through the solidarity of grief.

We thank you for our children
who have grown up in the shadow of our dreams,
whose branches push past us as they follow their own.

Re-ignite us in our struggle for a more just society. Inspire us with your vision to bring your reign here on earth for all of creation.

In honour of women

We praise you, God, for you have called us by name. In love and wisdom, each of us are made in your image in the fullness of our humanity, reflections of your divinity. We honour in particular women who have helped us to be more fully human.

We praise you, God, for Christ, who broke boundaries of society, and called his followers to do the same, calling us across boundaries of difference which harmfully divide. We honour women who are those very boundary breakers:

who insist on equal treatment in the workplace, who prove themselves in industry and politics and science, who bring courage and hope into the lives of our children, who reach out to the wounded, to those in prison, those with HIV/Aids, refugees,

and those who can only be reached through prayer.

We praise you, God, for entrusting us with a promise, drawing us into your redemptive plan for all. And so we honour all the people in our lives who inspire us to be ambassadors of hope and channels of love.

The harvest of days

God, we celebrate our life together as a community of faith. Around a strong thread of sacred traditions, you have woven together the strands of our diverse experiences and gifts, our beliefs and convictions.

We remember and honour those who have died.

We remember and honour those who have sojourned with us, shared their lives, and then moved on to other corners of the world – we hold part of them and they carry some of us.

We celebrate the young people who have grown up in our midst – our Holy Circus. Indeed, our faith has had children.

We celebrate the ministry of prison and soccer, magic and clowning, hospital and storytelling, tango, marimba and bells.

We celebrate the Word spoken, sung and experienced, the way it has unsettled and comforted, challenged and strengthened, the way it has inspired us to make a difference in our world.

We praise you and we celebrate our widening circle of dignity. Not only has it enlarged our community, it has also enlarged our hearts, our intellect and our commitment to action.

We praise you for Christ at the centre of us all. What we are most grateful for is that over the years we have come to see Jesus.

Written for the celebration of Robert Steiner's 20 years of ministry at RUC, 19 April 2015.

Invitation to Communion

At the Last Supper, Jesus, sharing bread and wine, invited the disciples to share his journey. Like many grains of wheat becoming one loaf of bread, the disciples were invited to become one body with him.

Through bread and wine, we renew our journey with Jesus and his disciples.

Through bread and wine, we renew our unity with one another, and with all those who have gone before us.

Through bread and wine, we renew our commitment to the earth and our interwovenness with all who suffer.

Christ invites us to be his guest. He invites all who believe and all who acknowledge their unbelief. Christ invites us to meet him.

*

Living God, we gather around the table as a family. We are here as individuals with our abilities and weaknesses, our problems, conflicts and anxieties; but we are united as one body by the love of Christ. It is in confidence that we come to you.

As we eat the bread and drink the wine, may we be filled with the life of Christ.

May praise and thanksgiving well up within us and find expression in love and generous service.

May we join ourselves to Christ's continuing work until all humanity eats to contentment, offering you praise and endless worship through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Table fellowship

We gather around the table, O God –
whether we come full of joy and happiness
or whether we are burdened with sadness or grief,
whether we come refreshed and energized
or weary and drained,
whether we come in faith and hope
or full of doubt and scepticism –
whatever we bring to the table or fail to bring, it matters not.

We gather around the table, O God, where there is no first and last, no head and no foot. We recognize the light of Christ at our centre. We acknowledge the friend and stranger on either side. Together we are filled with the breath of your Spirit. Together we are held by the roots of your love and grace.

O God, our centre is in you. Ground us as rock. Hold us as roots. Unsettle us as wind. Fill us as air.

Looking back

We turn to the Psalmist for words to express our praise: As we look back we call to mind your deeds, O God, we recall your wonderful acts of old, we reflect on all your works and consider what you have done, and we know that your way is holy. The Psalmist reminds us of the power of recalling, of reflecting on all that you have done.

We pause for a moment of quiet in the whirlwind of our days. Whether we gaze up at the galaxies or whether we look within our own lives, we see your imprint – both in the patterns of order and in the chaos we see traces of your image, things that cannot otherwise be explained.

Though it often feels to us that the powers of darkness prevail, if we look back on a lifetime, a season, a year, a week, we marvel at the work of your hand.

We remember the very particular ways in which you have intervened in our own lives – bread on our table, a neighbour's helping hand, the healing of an old wound, showers of joy and gladness.

And so with the Psalmist we stand in gratitude before your holiness, and cry out, 'What god is as great as our God?'

Homecoming

O God,
we are drawn by you, drawn towards you,
drawn out of the shallowness of our good intentions
towards your purposefulness,
drawn out of the self-seeking agendas that preoccupy us
into your inclusive plan for all,
drawn out of our apathy
into your deep love for the world,
drawn out of our ignorance
into your wisdom.

O God, who is both like a mother and father to us, we thank you that you draw us to you, that you do not wait for us to come to you, but that even when we are far off you run to us. And no matter what we have done or where we have been you throw a party upon our return.

Transfiguration

O God, we believe by faith that you are all that you say you are —
that you are all-powerful, almighty —
that all things are in your hands.

And yet these beliefs are often not felt or experienced
except on those rare occasions when,
like Peter, James and John at the Mount of Transfiguration,
we hear a voice, we see a light,
we feel a touch of something beyond us —
when the veil of that which is familiar to us
is ever so briefly pulled back
and we stand in awe, perhaps even fear.

We then know that beyond the boundaries of what we accept as real,
there is so much more.

So much which is mystery to us now

We praise you, Christ of the mountaintop, who beckons us to see God. May we experience something of that sacred moment so long ago.

is revealed to us in unexpected moments and humble places.

Journeying towards wholeness

God, we praise you for the many journeys which inspire our steps. We think of journeys in our tradition –

Moses leading his people out of Egypt towards a new future,
Abraham and Sarah travelling to the land of Canaan
holding on to the promise of a child,
Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem and his fate,
Paul on the road to Damascus
blinded so that he could see your fullness.

Each of these journeys, and so many others –
following a yearning,
heeding a call,
responding to something irrepressible –
urge us to seek for what is both far beyond us and deep within.
We seek those sacred places where you are present and at work.

We praise you that you are a God who is restless for justice, who longs for our healing and wholeness, who is compassionate beyond limits, who will not allow us to be satisfied.

And so we journey towards the restoration of human dignity, towards the renewal of our earth. It is a journey towards wholeness.

Winter

our prayer of forsakenness will be our homecoming

A prayer of forsakenness

O God, so much in our world is not what it should be, so much within us yearns for something more. In our most honest moments we wonder where you are, why you are so slow to act, why we do not feel your presence. Like the Psalmist we too cry out, 'Why are you so far from us, O God?'

And yet, we are blessed by the great mystery, revealed to us in Christ, that our anguish, our grief, our sense of helplessness, is perhaps the moment when you are closest to us – that our prayer of forsakenness will be our homecoming.

You are a God who weeps with those who weep.

Our cries and your tears mingle together as one, creating the possibility of something new –

a ray of hope,

a spirit lifted,

a heart softened,
the dawn of a new era.

On suffering

God, over this time of Lent, we have been challenged by new understandings of your cross. We have thought hard about this centrepiece of our faith, about what the meaning of Christ's suffering might be.

We have also had plenty of opportunity to think about suffering in our world – whether it be the regular visitor to our gate or the terrible violence perpetuated by war.

We wonder in what ways the cross casts its shadow forward.

You challenge us not to run away, to hide or to deny, but to gaze deeply into the suffering face of our world in whatever way it presents itself to us.

As we gaze, we praise you for the resurrected Christ.

We praise you for what Christ's resurrected life means for us.

We praise you for the hope it brings our suffering world.

O Christ, grant us courage and strength as we strive to make sense of our world through the reality of your life, your death and your resurrected presence.

From tribulation to blessing

God, we have mixed emotions as we commemorate the xenophobic attacks which swept through our city in 2008. We are angry and ashamed for the perpetration of such acts of hatred and violence. We are fearful that the underlying problems which brought it on have not really been addressed in any substantive way and so we are vulnerable.

But at the same time we are filled with gratitude, awe and hope at the way in which communities rallied in response, to comfort and restore, to provide and make a way. We are deeply moved by the stories of those who ran for their lives and have found a refuge in our midst. Strangers have become our brothers and sisters. We praise you for their courage, for their determination, for their forgiveness and for their generous giving of themselves. We give thanks for tribulation turned to blessing.

May we keep alive the memory of the capacity for so much evil and the capacity for so much goodness and grace.

May these memories keep us humble,
vigilant for injustice and quick to respond with loving action.

In the darkness

Luke tells us that after Jesus had taken his last breath it was the sixth hour, the sun was eclipsed and a darkness fell over the land.

As we picture the darkness that hangs over Jesus' lifeless body – over the robbers on either side of him, over those huddled around the cross and those watching from afar,
we feel the darkness which has fallen over our land – structural and systemic darkness, a form of darkness which oppresses those we love, our own personal darkness.

We name this darkness.

We acknowledge the feelings which it evokes. We hold it up to God without any judgement of self or others.

*

Luke tells us that they took Jesus' body off the cross, wrapped it in linen and laid it in a tomb cut out of the rock. A heavy stone was rolled over the entrance.

Once again we enter into the darkness –
it is the darkness of the damp earth,
the darkness of death.
We dwell in the darkness of this tomb,
in the cave of God's heart.
a heart that has been broken for love.

*

O God, in our darkness there is no darkness. We have found you and we will be found by you.

Overcoming death

Our thoughts and prayers turn to the suffering Christ, to God in Christ, who does not simply look down sympathetically on us but who comes to dwell –

who sets up his tent, who walks in our streets.

God who feels the sand between his toes, God who cries, laughs, feels frustration and fear, God who walks on the beach, holds a child, breaks bread with friends, God who wrestles with his own demons, God who overcomes the power of evil.

We praise you for being this kind of God, that in Christ Jesus enters our humanity. We praise you that you turned the darkest hour into the eve of new life for all and claimed power over death.

From death to life

God, we praise you that Christ has arisen out of the darkness of the tomb.

Like Jonah, caught up for a season in the chaos and turmoil of the deep, the darkness spat you out onto the shores of new life. We bow in adoration that the 'why' of forsakenness, cried out upon the cross of crucifixion, has been answered for all time.

And we can only but praise you that Christ's story is our story, for we too have been in the belly of the fish with the powers of death and destruction swirling around us, waiting and watching for signs of your grace, wanting to believe that in every suffering are seeds of resurrection.

We confess, though, that at times the darkness overwhelms us – whether it be the darkness of doubt, of prolonged illness, of depression, of grief and loss, or of sin – it threatens to crush us and to hold us captive forever. In the light of the power of Christ's resurrection, we ask you to help us trust in the darkness. In silence we surrender ourselves to you.

*

Like Jonah, we know that the darkness cannot keep us forever –
Christ has broken its power and we now rise forth to new life.
We hear Christ's promise, 'Because I live, you also will live'.
And, God, we praise you
that the mystery of Christ's passage from death to life is our mystery.

Easter reflection

O God, as we look back over Easter, different experiences come to mind. We have stood at the cross and watched you in anguish. We have visited the empty tomb and experienced both dread and hope. We have heard you call our name in the garden and recognized you as the God who lives.

But in spite of all we have experienced, we are at times overwhelmed by doubt; the world we live in turns us into sceptics. Can we truly believe in the resurrected Christ?

We offer our praise to you, God who is ever-present in our doubt. We praise you for the gift of faith, for the despair of doubt, for the deeper places of faith to which the road of doubt can take us.

Lord, have mercy

God, we are grateful that you meet us with grace, with promise, with possibility. Each time we come to you you do not give up on us, you do not turn your back on us. Day after day, week after week, great is your faithfulness to us.

We do, however, despair of ourselves at times.

Instead of searching for your mystery and being open to beauty, joy and light that is beyond us, we prefer to play it safe, to be comfortable, unthreatened, and ultimately unchanged.

Instead of acknowledging and confronting what is cowardly, self-centred and small-minded in ourselves, we rationalize, we deny, ignore, withdraw, hide or shut out.

Instead of recognizing your image in our loved ones, the neighbour and the stranger, we project onto them what we cannot accept in ourselves.

O Lord, have mercy.

Thank you for not giving up on us.
Thank you for prophetic voices.
Thank you for your word spoken to us from unlikely places.

In the storm

When we pause to consider our lives so much around us feels like storm, from the threat of global war to the uncertainties in our own lives. In many ways we can readily identify with the disciples in their small boat on the Sea of Galilee.

And yet we praise you because you are the God of sea. You are God of the storm, of the wind and the rain, God over the powers of destruction and chaos. Whether we feel it or whether we even believe it, you are truly the One who is in control.

We praise you that you are not an all-powerful distant force on creation, but that, like the disciples, you have called us by name. By faith, with the storm to our back, we respond to your call.

Africa Day

O God, our hearts are heavy as we commemorate Africa Day. We will not forget all that must be celebrated on this vast and beautiful continent, but we come with deep sorrow and shame at all that is not right.

We lift up to you those who are forced to leave everything behind, who run for their lives, who are displaced and fearful. We also lift up those who are disaffected and angry, who have given up all hope of a better life, for whom aggression is their only response.

Forgive us for our part in the complacency that leads to acts of desperate measure against another. Forgive us for our own fear of the other.

Break us free from our sense of helplessness and numbness.
Galvanize your people everywhere
to stand up with courage, with solidarity and compassion.
Out of the scorched earth of tragedies
may seeds of reconciliation, hope and renewed commitment find root.
Strengthen our resolve to do what each of us must do
in the face of great injustice.

As we think of Africa, we draw on the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

Heal us, Lord, and we shall be healed, save us and we shall be saved, for you are our praise.

They say to us, 'Where is the Word of the Lord?' Let it come, if it can.

On the global economic recession

O God, never before have we witnessed how intimately connected we are as a human family – that whether for just or unjust causes, the fall of one nation is the fall of us all; that the foolishness of the powerful on one side of the globe can result in the loss of a job, and even life, on the other; that celebration and triumph on one side can bring about weeping for joy and dancing in the streets for the most marginalized on the other.

We are sobered by the power of greed and selfishness to wreak havoc and destruction on so many. Equally, we are astounded at how a vision for justice and equality can restore hope, rebuild trust, rekindle action.

We are in awe of a God who grants us so much freedom – freedom that can destroy, freedom to build anew.

We thank you for this renewed hope, in whatever form it might come to us.

We thank you for the tears of joy that have spilled freely.

We thank you for a vision of what is possible —
a foreshadowing of a better life,
particularly for those who have suffered most.

We thank you most of all for Jesus Christ —
our hope, our joy, our vision.

Protest prayer

God, we are deeply affected by all that has happened around us. We are a community of faith that inextricably binds us to our world. There is nowhere to run away or to hide; we cannot but respond.

When leaders want to build walls, we want to protest.

When seeds of hate and division are sown, we are angry.

When actions put obstacles in the way of those who are already suffering, we want to stand up and cry out.

But we come to you humbled because we know that we do not have to look any further than our own hearts, our own communities, histories and traditions, our own positions of privilege, to see our complicity in injustice.

Give us the courage to dig deep below our despair and anger to seek understanding.

Give us tolerance for those who have different views.

Give us empathy for others' burdens – so different from our own.

May we have ears to listen deeply, eyes that search for light, voices that speak clearly and compassionately.

The Lord's Prayer

God, so often we do not know how to pray.

And so, as we were taught by Christ,
we begin by acknowledging your holy name.

Even when we cannot pray because we lack faith,
the God-shaped vacuum within us
echoes your presence, your holiness.

We call for your kingdom to come, for your will to be done on earth as in heaven.

We don't always know what this means.

We know that you are the God of all – not of us or them.

We know you are the God whose compassion leans towards those who are oppressed, who have suffered.

We know you are a God who judges harshly those who are complacent, who hide behind words, tradition, power and privilege.

And so we pray for discernment as we try to make sense of our times, of our protesting world –
whether it is our own students, the attackers of Paris, or our drought-stricken earth.

Where is our own voice of protest in the midst of the disruption and violence? For we are your hands and feet, we are your mind, your heart, we are your presence in our wounded world.

Strengthen us for the days ahead.

God of all our years

God of all our years, our destiny in death, we praise you that you are with us in life and in death.

On the threshold of another year, we carry with us a heaviness for so much that is not right, in our own lives and relationships, and in the wider world. Therefore we praise you that you are always with us.

As we reflect on the year gone by, we thank you for the many ways in which you have sustained us through times of need, depression, sickness, confusion, grief, loss. In a world where life cannot be taken for granted we have been privileged with the gift of another year. In a world where well-being, employment, safety are not givens we thank you for the resources that have been ours.

We stand on the threshold of another year anticipating all the ways in which we will be challenged – challenges which will bring us both great joy and maybe pain. Therefore we praise you for your faithfulness, that no matter whether we are weak or strong in faith, you remain deeply committed to our world, to our community of faith, to each one of us.

Forgiveness

God of mercy, in your presence we are fully exposed. There is no covering up; there can be no pretence.

We have hurt those closest to us.

We have neglected the needy.

We have been anxious about what matters little
and hardly given thought to matters of great consequence.

With each of these acts we have fallen short
of all that you have created us to be.

And so in this vulnerable state we come before you
to know your grace, your compassion and your mercy.

You are the breath that in the beginning of time moved over the dark waters, bringing forth all forms of life. Continue to bring life to the dark places within us and in our world.

Grief

As the Mooi River flows, so too flows our grief, so too flows our anger, our disappointment.

We willed the strength of human nature to triumph over natural forces. We prayed for a miracle, for you, O God, to intervene.

But it was not to be.

And so our grief will flow,
like tributaries joining the great river of human sorrow,
a river so deep and turbulent on this African continent –
the tears of fathers and mothers,
sisters and brothers,
wives and children –
spilling forth on the banks of tragedy,
comforted only by those who have shared in their grief.

The prophet of Allah says that life is a blink of an eye. And so we come to this moment to celebrate life, to celebrate Steve's life.

We know that the river of his life will continue to flow. As water sustains all living things, so too the memory of Steve will sustain us all. Inspired by his life, we commit our lives to all that he lived for.

River of Life, flow over, in and through us.

Written for the memorial service for Steve de Gruchy, 2 March 2010.

For those in mourning

God, we lift up to you those in mourning at the loss of their loved one.

We will not ask, 'Where is God?' for we have seen God.
You have been in their suffering and their vulnerability, in their strength and courage.
We know we will see you as they pick up the pieces of their lives, and move forward with new determination, with new vision of possibilities.

We will not ask, 'Where is God?' for we have seen God.
You have been in the circles upon circles of comforters, in every SMS, every email, every call, every word, every touch. As grief has bonded with grief, so too we pray that strength will bond with strength.

And when they and when we rise up out of the ash of our grief, when we shed our Lenten robes, we will recognize you, we will see that you have been in our midst all along.

Now we give them over to your care, to God, our father and mother, to Christ, our brother and to the Spirit, our comforter.

Honest prayer

O God, we sometimes struggle
to articulate our prayers,
to find words that express our awe
but also do justice to the powerlessness,
the anger, the despair that we feel at times.
We thank you for the Psalmist's courageous, honest prayers –
we have much to learn from them about how to pray.

We are reminded that no matter what power we find ourselves in the grip of, whether it be powers from within us or from without, you are our deliverer.

However we may despise ourselves or feel despised by others, you are our lover – you have claimed us as your very own.

We bring before you the material of our own lives, knowing that you are there.
You are with those who have gone before us and those who are as yet unborn.

And so we praise you, God of splendour, God of the shadows, God our deliverer, for your power, your presence, your love.

Lord, hear our prayer

Lord, hear our prayer when we grieve with those who are grieving, when we have run out of words to comfort.

Lord, hear our prayer when we despair of peace and an end to violence, when we have given up on political solutions.

Lord, hear our prayer when we have planted a seed of something we care about, and we long to see it grow and flourish.

Lord, hear our prayer as we face the end of a chapter, of another year, and we long for some assurance for the road ahead.

Lord, hear our prayer when we have cared so deeply, with no promise of return.

Lord, hear our prayer when the decisions before us are not black and white, but grey and heavy with consequence.

Lord, hear our prayer when the commitment to our life together in community feels fragile and yet it is all we have.

Lord, hear our prayer, for those things which we feel most deeply seldom take the form of words. They are rather like a weight on our heart, an anxious awakening in the middle of the night, a warm feeling of gratitude, a wave of hopefulness, a deep certainty of your presence.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

The search for the star

O God, we look at our own lives,
we look at the world around us –
everything from our own woundedness
to the harm we have inflicted on our poor earth.

And like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, the shepherds,
we may ask, 'How can it be?'
How can it be that you have come?
How can it be that you are with us now?
And whatever might it mean that you will come again?

And yet, like these forefathers and mothers of our faith, we will hold you to your promise.

Like the shepherds, we will watch late into the night.

Like the Wise Men, we will search for the one star among the many.

Like Mary, we will feel your growing presence in our inmost being.

With these signs we will believe, despite our unbelief, that in the fullness of time you will come in your own way.

And most amazingly, as Mary experienced, you may come through us.

Keep us alive to your coming –
while we are weary at the end of the year,
while we may carry many burdens and our senses may be numb.
Rekindle in us an expectancy,
a watchfulness for your signs.

Ripples

O God, we feel like very small fish in the ocean of the world, a world where everyday we witness the power of evil over good. We often feel so helpless as hurricanes of destruction turn our world upside down and we are left to pick up the pieces, to try to make sense, gather strength to start again.

And yet, what gets us out of bed most days
is our desire to make a positive difference in our world –
to plant a small seed of hopefulness,
to light a candle in one corner of despair,
to drop one stone in a river,
praying that its widening circles will reach a distant shore –
circles of dignity and compassion,
circles of inspiration, new insight or innovation,
circles of renewed hope, an idea, a plan.

Strengthen us that we may be inspired to drop another stone.

Spring

It is out of the wellspring of consciousness of evil and good that hope flows from our circle.

Springtime of the soul

God, we praise you for this wonderful season of the year where we witness the slow renewal of the earth, its responsiveness to the rain and warmth and light bringing forth fresh growth and bright colour, the smell of lavender and freesia.

We praise you for this seasonal reminder that you are the God of new beginnings. You promise a roadway through the wilderness, the shoot from the dormant bulb among the desolate charred veld, a stream out of desert rock.

Just as the earth responds to your light and rain, may we be receptive, expectant, open to your movement. May we be sensitive to those stirrings of newness within our very selves, our families, our communities, our city, our world. Save us from hardness, weariness and cynicism which blind us to your joy, drain our energy, choke our compassion.

May we experience the springtime of our being, giving rise to green shoots of vision and promise.

Light of the world

We praise you, God of Light,
It is your light that pierces the darkness of evil,
exposing our human cravings for personal power and control.
It is your light that shines
into the dark corners of our woundedness and our greatest fears.
It is your light that reveals the truth,
opens up our minds, softens our hearts.
In your light we find your love
and in your love we find freedom.

As children of your light, we pray for the freedom to love ourselves, to care for our neighbours, to love our enemies, to act justly no matter what the personal cost, to transform rather than to conform.

We thank you for men and women throughout history who have shone your light into the darkness of their particular time and place.

They are a sobering and yet exhilarating reminder to us of our own calling.

We thank you for the people in our own lives
who make Christ, the Light of the world, a reality to us –
whose quiet presence strengthens us during difficult times,
whose belief in us helps us to believe in ourselves,
whose acts of compassion melt our hardness,
whose faith restores our dying hope –
they are for us the incarnation of the living Christ.

God of love

We praise you, God of creative love, for the love and wisdom that spoke the diversity of male and female into being, each made in your own image, each different facets of your image.

We praise you, God of covenantal love, for the love that entrusted your redemptive plan to faithful men and woman throughout time – we honour in particular women throughout history and those whom we have personally known who have enlarged our lives.

We praise you, God of reconciling love, for the love that knows no boundaries of race, class, gender or creed – modelling for us how to treat one another with unconditional respect, affirmation and dignity.

We praise you, God of just love, for the love that empowers the abused, and punishes those who abuse their power – we think particularly of women and their many abusers and we long for justice.

We praise you, God of hopeful love, for the love that inspires us to believe in ourselves, to know our strength, to exercise our power, to be agents of change.

Come, Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, at the beginning of time you moved over the face of the waters; you breathe life into every living being. Come, Creator Spirit, and renew the whole of creation.

Holy Spirit, voice of the prophets, you inflame men and women with a passion for your truth, and through them call your people to the ways of justice and compassion. Come, Spirit of Righteousness, and burn in our hearts.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Jesus, by your power Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and release to those held captive. Come, Liberating Spirit, and free us from the powers of sin and death.

Holy Spirit, wind and flame, you filled disciples with joy and courage, empowering them to preach your word and to share your good news. Come, Spirit of Power, make us bold witnesses of your redeeming love.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of Peace, you break down barriers of language, race and culture, and heal the divisions that separate us. Come, Reconciling Spirit, and unite us all in the love of Christ.

Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, At the close of the age all of creation will be renewed. Come, Creator Spirit, and make us new creations in Jesus Christ.

Co-creation

God, we praise you as the source of all creative energy. You are the God of science, of art, of music –
in all these forms we glimpse your genius, your creativity, your beauty.
While we are awed by this, even more amazing is that you call us, your very own creation, to join you as co-creators.

In our acts of giving birth and nurturing, designing and building, sowing and reaping, discovering and naming, composing and playing, writing, acting, painting, we join with you and draw from you, from your creative spirit.

We praise you for trusting us.

May all that we set out to do, and all of our acts of creation, no matter how big or small, bring glory to you.

Redemptive rhythm

God, we are conscious that as we journey towards Easter, we will celebrate your resurrection, but now we journey with you towards your death. We praise you for this redemptive rhythm all around us.

We praise you for the darkness,
followed by the promise of a new day,
for the closing of a chapter in our lives,
and the opening of something new,
for the joy of birth
and the pain and loss of death,
for desert and garden,
for famine and feast,
for need and plenty,
for we believe by faith that all these have their place.

In faith we ask you to open our eyes to the patterns of your grace, to footprints of your presence, to small shoots of new life.

We praise you for all that awaits us.

Our calling

O God, our Christ, as we have followed your journey into Jerusalem, to the cross and finally into the Garden, we thank you for how the themes of life and death, hope and promise, amidst darkness, have challenged us to think again about our own calling.

We are aware of moments in our lives when,
as Mary must have felt,
all we had hoped for seems to lie in ruins.
And yet you come to us,
often in a form we do not recognize.
You unshackle us from the fears and anxieties that paralyse us.
You offer us gifts of peace,
of perspective and renewed hope for our dreams.

We praise you that you are the God who continually calls us out of ourselves and our forms of bondage into something much bigger. You call us to participate in the building of communities where there is healing and wholeness. You call us to use our gifts for the good of our world.

And so we offer ourselves to you – may we be equipped to rise to our calling.

After resurrection

Where will we find you, O resurrected Christ? Are you in heaven now, safe at God's right hand, far removed from harm's way? You've paid the price and death has lost its sting. And as for us?

Where will we find you, O resurrected Christ?

Are you that distant home far up on the hill
or are you the journey?

Are you the anchor in the storm
or are you not the storm?

Are you the thirst in the night
or are you the water?

Are you the neighbour we turn to when we are in need
or are you the neighbour that needs us,
separated only by a thin wall of circumstance?

Are you the helplessness, the anger we feel as we stand on Marikana hill

or are you the power we feel to grasp and shape our world

Where will we find you, O resurrected Christ?

Maybe, like Mary, in the midst of our confusion and despair, we will find you in the garden when you call out our name.

through protest, through march, through vote?

As with the disciples, maybe you will join us along the road and take us to places of deeper understanding and insight.

When we gather with other seekers, when we share the bread and wine, there you will be in our midst.

We will find you in all things –
 in the seed deep in the earth,
 'in the swelling of the roots,
 thinning as the trunks rise and in the high leaves,
 a resurrection' (Rainer Maria Rilke).

Renewed hope

We praise you, God, on this Resurrection Sunday.

The suffering and anguish of Good Friday are still fresh in our memory, but the grave clothes lie empty in the tomb.

And Christ, you walk among us – sharing bread and fellowship, your presence deeply comforting, dispelling our greatest fears.

You ask us to touch you and feel your scars and we know that nothing will ever be the same again.

Your resurrected body is our transformed world.

May we cherish this day.

May its joy, its promise and hope sustain us, for we know that before too long we will be plagued by doubt and uncertainty. We will forget this great moment, preoccupy ourselves with other things. We will bicker amongst ourselves about who is the greatest. We will insist on carrying within ourselves the shame which you nailed to the cross once and for all.

So strengthen us for the long road ahead.
We recommit ourselves to you.
We claim our liberation from all that oppresses and seeks to defeat us.
May every word we utter and song we sing
be a celebration of the new life that is ours.
May we move forward with a renewed hope
in the power of the living Christ for the world around us.

Ascension Day

Christ, we remember you this day – the day on which you departed, the day on which you were no longer available to our senses – for you could no longer be seen, or touched, your voice was no longer to be heard.

We praise you, for by leaving us you ushered in a new era, a new way of living – we live in you and you live in us.

We live not only by what we see and can touch but by faith in that which we cannot see. Your presence is all around us – your power at work everywhere.

So like the disciples we are emboldened. and we give thanks for the ascended Christ within and all around us.

Making all things new

We praise you, our God, that you are the one who has made all things new. We remember the story of Pentecost where your Spirit moved and, for those who were open, who had eyes to see and ears to hear, life was no longer the same, it was a new beginning.

And so we too come open and expectant.

We ask your Spirit to move
across our communities, our places of work and influence,
across our country and continent.

We lift up to you those who work tirelessly for justice and equity.

We thank you for all seemingly small acts of kindness and care.

We praise you for the fruit of that labour and love – seen and unseen.

Like the disciples of long ago, we confess that we don't always get it. We are filled with doubt, overwhelmed by inadequacy, distracted by so much of little consequence. But in hope and faith we offer you our worship, our prayers, our very lives.

May your Spirit move in and through us. Re-kindle our vision. Renew our energy. Stir us to action.

Salt to the world

We offer you praise, dear God, with hearts lifted high, for in the communion of your love the risen Christ comes close to us and we come close to Christ.

With hearts full of gratitude we thank you for the particular ways you have blessed us:

for home and family, for health and strength, for friendship and support, for faith when we struggle to believe, for hope when we are tempted to give up.

Go with us by day and night, strengthen us in work and sleep, and encircle our thoughts and prayers that we may take up the challenge of being salt to the world.

Mystery

We praise you, God who is both Father and Mother, God who is Son, God who is Spirit.

In faith we praise you for the mystery of the trinity for we cannot really fathom what it means.

But what we do know is that our own passage into this world was through another, and for this miracle we praise you.

We know that even as the cord which nurtured us in the womb was cut we were taken up into loving arms, and for this we praise you.

We know too that we often are most true to ourselves when we give ourselves up to another.

In all this there is mystery.

As so we praise you – God above us in holiness, God beside us in solidarity, God within us in wisdom.

May your name be honoured in our worship. May we honour each other in your presence.

16 days of activism against violence

Isaiah writes,

See, I am creating a new heaven and a new earth! The past shall no more be remembered, It will never come to mind.

God, we hear this prophecy of a new heaven and a new earth, where Isaiah pulls back a curtain and shows us your dream for our world,

a place where there is no weeping or distress, a place where children do not die in infancy, a place were people build homes and live in them, plant vineyards and eat of the fruit, where the lion lies down with the lamb.

May this radical dream fuel our vision for our own time. May it inspire us to imagine a world where there is no violence or abuse, where the most vulnerable are treated with care and respect, where the elderly are honoured, where women are recognized for their immense strengths, where children are protected and invested in as the future, where our earth, our skies and seas,

the very water that comes from our taps, are recognized as precious.

Grant us the courage, the commitment, the compassion to translate your vision into our vision, and from vision to intention, from intention to action.

Circles of hope

O God, we bring our hearts and minds into a circle – a circle of hope, not wishful thinking, not shallow optimism.

Our expectation is saturated with the tears of grief for the darkness both within us and around us. the evil that divides, degrades, dehumanizes, destroys.

But just as deeply we are energized by the light and beauty the loveliness of our own selves and of every creature, from the majestic whale to the starving stray dog. It is out of the wellspring of consciousness of evil and good

that hope flows from our circle.

An inclusive circle.

While others would burn the Koran in the name of Christ, in our circle we stand in defiance of this act.

Our circle will include all those who love -

the more tightly we are bound by the desire to love, the more we stand against those who call on your name but whose actions only breed hate and violence.

A circle of transformation.

We come as equals where the divisions of class, race and opportunity lose their meaning. We come to give a part of ourselves to each other. We come to see ourselves in the other.

From these simple exchanges of self, we are equipped to bring about acts of restoration to open up doors, to build bridges of possibility wherever we are.

There is so much more that will be nurtured from our circle and the many other circles of which we are a part. Keep us alive, alert and committed to its possibilities.

A new morning

God, you are the beginning and end of all we know. Although you frame our existence, we are not prisoners of some inexplicable fate. Each era, each generation, each year, each season is an opportunity for renewal, for growth, for discovery.

So we praise you for new beginnings, God who inspires new ideas, who encourages us to stretch further than we have before, who inspires us to take risks, who sustains us on the road less travelled, who rejoices with us when we succeed and comforts us when we fail.

We praise you that a new morning has broken, the morning of creation, the morning of resurrection the dawning of your reign on earth. the dawning of Christ within us.

At the start of the year

We stand poised at the beginning of a new year as always with mixed emotions.

We are filled with gratitude for another year, with anticipation of all that lies ahead – new chapters in our lives,

new journeys both inwards and outwards, new and renewed relationships, new economic possibilities

for our country, our continent, our world and all that this might afford our communities.

All this fills us with anticipation and hope.

At the same time, we are daunted by what may lie ahead. We may long for the comfort of the past and its certainties. We are aware of all the baggage we carry into the future – our failures, our stubborn imperfections. We are aware of the fragility of our own lives

and insecurity as a given in our modern world. All this fills us with fear, anxiety, even sadness.

And so, God, we stand on the threshold of this new year commemorating all your goodness to us. You hold all things –

> our past, our future, all its light and darkness, the valleys and the mountain highs.

You have promised that the poor in spirit will inherit the earth. So, on the threshold of this year, we come emptied of our self, open and receptive.

We await your filling.

Infinite possibilities

God of the universe,
God of all life,
God of light,
God of the past, present and future,
God of joy,
we are humbled but expectant –

For if you are God of the universe, there must be nothing that we cannot bring before you, nothing too small, nothing too big.

If you are God of all life, you must surely desire nothing more than to quicken within us all that is stagnant and stale, hardened and cynical.

If you are God of light, we need not fear the darkness around us, or the darkness within.

If you are God of the past, present and future, we can bring you all that haunts us from days gone by, and all anxieties for the unknown ahead.

If you are God of joy, we can in confidence bring you our hopes and dreams for ourselves, for our loved ones, for our brothers and sisters in need.

With Christ beside us, your Spirit within us, we join you, God of infinite possibilities, in your vision for a world where justice, peace and compassion flow like rivers in our midst.

Relational God

O God, we praise you that you are not simply a force which brought the universe into being, but you are a God who loves us.

In your very nature you are relational – three in one. You were flesh next to us.

You are Spirit within us.

Made in your image, we too are relational; we are only fully human in relationship with you and in community with one another.

We praise you for this mystery –

for our dependence on you and each other to be who we are meant to be.

However, we are deeply conscious
that we mostly live in denial of this interdependence –
we live as though you don't exist,
as though our concerns are all that matter;
we use each other for our own gain.
In so doing we dehumanize ourselves
and bring shame to your name.

Forgive us.

We bring to you those things which set us against ourselves, which divide us from each other, which alienate us from creation.

We turn to you for understanding and forgiveness, for courage to change.

Thank you that you meet us not with more anxiety and shame but with grace, peace and joy.

An unsettling message

O God, it is virtually impossible for us to imagine let alone identify with the main characters of the Nativity story, so separated are we by time, space, culture and custom.

And yet as we look past startled shepherds and stoic Wise Men, past angels and stars, sheep and donkeys, we find at the centre of the story ordinary people who unexpectedly are confronted with a message which changes their lives.

This was not the feel-good message of Christmas pageants; this was an unsettling, troubling message, one which had to be pondered, one which made them restless. one which propelled them from their ordinariness in search of what they did not know, a message casting out fear, and yet pointing to uncertain futures, a message of joy and hope, yet foreshadowing suffering and death, a message profoundly simple, and yet full of mystery, a message classic in its truths but requiring each generation to contextualize it anew, a message of joy to the world and the restoration of all things, including our depleted earth, our deeply divided world and our wounded sense of self.

For this we praise you
as we celebrate that message that took the form of a baby –
may we hear and be open to this message,
may we hold it and ponder it,
may we allow it to fill the lonely and restless places in our being,
may it burn in our hearts,
rekindling our compassion, hope and sense of justice.

Seeds of expectation

We praise you, God, for the light of a small candle.
We praise you for an unknown baby lying in a manger.
We praise you for a trickle of water as a sign and seal of your covenant.
We praise you for seeds of expectation
scattered among impoverished communities.
We praise you for the promise of life-sustaining treatment

We praise you for the promise of life-sustaining treatment to those who are ill.

We praise you for Africa, this continent which cradled humanity, with so much to offer the world.

For all this expectancy, O God, we are so grateful.

A voice cries in the wilderness,
'Prepare ye a way for the Lord.'
And so we will prepare a way for you,
a place where hope can flourish,
a place where we live the present with your end in mind,
where all will be reconciled,
where the streets will be full of jubilation,
where all will live with dignity and well-being,
where all will be well.

Open our eyes that we might see your ever-moving Spirit. Loosen our hands that we may join together across all barriers, ushering in Christ's reign on earth as it is in heaven.

All praise be to you. Amen