

To be like Birrarung or, Putting the ‘U’ in MUC

MUC@10, 8 February 2026

Alison Sampson, reflecting on Isaiah 58

‘Why have we fasted and you haven’t seen?’ the people ask God. ‘Why have we humbled ourselves and you haven’t paid attention?’ We’ve given up coffee, chocolate, alcohol and even social media: so why aren’t you answering our prayer?!

Along with the people of Isaiah’s prophecy, I’d sure like to know. The world is so broken right now. What with war, fire, flood, pandemic and the violence of AI; what with oil oligarchs and billionaire tech-bros and land-grabbing everything-grabbing presidents; what with the anti-trans anti-brown anti-Muslim hate machine and the Bondi shootings and the attempted Perth bombing, it’s everything, everywhere all at once and I feel overwhelmed.

With overwhelm comes feelings of inertia, despondency, despair. I feel hopeless, I feel helpless. Capitalism is intractable, climate collapse is inevitable, we are all going to die. So come on, God, get your act together! I’m fasting, I’m praying, I’m down on my knees beggin’ you please, now it’s over to you. Hurry up, and fix things!

To these pleas, the God we encounter in Isaiah’s prophecy in effect says, No. Like the God made known in Jesus Christ, this God says, You do it. You feed them. You give them something to eat.

It turns out, we are not being asked to go around in sackcloth and ashes, nor to bow our heads and look glum. Instead, God asks, ‘Isn’t this the kind of fasting I choose: to ease injustice, to free the oppressed, to remove people’s burdens? Isn’t it to provide food, shelter and clothing to the poor?’ Isn’t it to see a need, and meet it? And isn’t it to let the world rest from time to time by stepping off the hamster wheel, saying no to work and shopping, and ensuring the gift of the sabbath?

To put it in MUC terms, isn’t this the kind of fasting I choose: to drop off a casserole, or give nappies to the nappy project, or milk to the food pantry? Isn’t

it to collect unused hearing aids, and clean them, and send them where they are urgently needed? Isn't it to knit warm clothing and blankets, or to write to politicians urging justice, or to visit the sick or imprisoned, or to make space for neurodivergent young people? Isn't it to meet regularly with those who are lonely and grieving, or suffering from dementia, or exhausted by the demands of constant care? Isn't it to facilitate playgroups and youth groups, and to spend quality time with your own flesh and blood? It might even be to feed people through worship, to share words of truth, liberation and healing, and to perform all the mostly invisible thankless tasks which ensure people nourished by scripture, song, connection and prayer! Surely this is the fast I seek, says God: to repair ruins, to restore right paths, to serve the shattered, the sorrowful, the struggling.

In Isaiah's vision, the brokenness of the world is a given. People's desperate need is a given. But our capacity to love, to act, to serve, to share and to participate in God's creative work is also a given. This is what it means to be the people of God, this is the work set out by Isaiah, and this is our ultimate fast: to perceive need, to set aside our own comfort and convenience, and to serve.

How? Well, through all the ways I just named and all the things I didn't mention! Through the sharing of time and attention, or food and clothing, or resource, money, a listening ear. Through an act of kindness; through a relationship restored. Through a commitment to a task, a role, or ongoing service. Through prayer, a letter, a much-needed hug. It's through justice in our politics and in all our relationships, but especially for those who work for us. It's through reaching for a world which cares about everyone and not just tax breaks for the rich.

We don't need to do everything and of course we can't, but we can all participate in the work of healing and serving, each and every day, one thing at a time. And unlike performative fasting which is depriving and gloomy and serves only to feed our egos, the fast Isaiah calls for benefits our neighbours, and leads to our healing, our wholeness.

Indeed, getting involved is both counterpoint and cure for our sense of overwhelm and helplessness. Even one small action generates hope. To put it in Isaiah's terms, when you do these things, says God, then your healing will appear

quickly. Your night will be lit by the dawn. You will call and God will answer; you will ask for help and God will say, 'I'm here.' You will be like a well-watered garden; you will be strong; you will thrive.

We can't depose the oligarchs, but we can thread our little corner of the world with love, with tenderness, with care. We can't cure all social ills, but we can be a church which shines like a beacon in the dark and which uses its resources for good. We can't heal ourselves, but we can serve each other and our world. And, according to the prophets, in seeking the welfare of those around us, we will find our own welfare (see also Jeremiah 29:7).

Today is Commissioning Sunday. It's the day when we recognise and commission all who are doing the work of the church here at MUC: which is all of us! Some of us have formal roles, with clear titles and job descriptions. Some of us have informal roles, yet without our ongoing commitment the church will shudder to a halt. Some of us are focused on MUC: its operations, its worship, and all the other projects which feed and love and serve. Others pour their energies outwards, working for good at school, at work, in the neighbourhood and further afield. And some of us serve simply through the gift of our presence, even when we don't realise it, and even if we have forgotten who and whose we are. For through our baptism we all have gifts to share, and together these gifts form the church.

So whatever is happening, let us never give in to overwhelm or despair. And let's not waste energy on performative fasting or loud self-righteous prayer. When we fast, let us fast quietly; when we pray, let us pray humbly. At all times, let us work for justice, live with kindness, and address the world's need. For then God shall draw near, and MUC and all who share its life 'shall be like a well-watered garden, like a creek which never runs dry.' We shall be like Birrarung, who winds her way through our neighbourhood and waters the city. Indeed, we shall thrive. Thanks be to God. Ω