

PENTECOST 15
1/9/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Ever-present God, you are with us at this time of worship.

In our praise, you are the note of joy;
in our praying, you are the still small voice;
in our listening, you are the word that hits home;
in our fellowship, you are the friendly hand held out;
in our call to serve, you are the source of inspiration.

With confidence and trust,

We will worship God!

Opening Prayer

God of all of life's seasons, you are with us.

In the glory days of summer and in the frigid depths of winter,
you are with us.

You are with us, God.

In the enthusiasm of youth and in the reflective advancing years,
you are with us.

You are with us, God.

In the rushed days of productive work and in the slower pace of
retirement, you are with us.

You are with us, God.

In the dark night of the soul and in the morning when joy
overflows, you are with us.

You never leave us, God.

You will never leave us, in time or beyond time. Amen.

HYMN 454 Worship the Lord

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytBTMr0K_I

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Holy God,

we come before you, delighting in your Word.

In the darkness of our world,
you shine as a beacon of truth.

In the hostility between nations,
you are a source of hope.

Where people are at odds with one another,
you bring reconciliation.
Your love is the greatest power in the universe
and we rejoice in your goodness.
Receive our adoration and praise,
for you are wonderful and worthy of all love.
May the words of our mouths and the
meditations of our hearts glorify your holy name.

Loving God,
through your Word, you have taught us to value truth and goodness.
In Christ, you have shown us how to behave and act
with justice and loving-kindness.
We are sorry for the times we have failed to live
up to your expectations.
We regret the words we have spoken in haste
that have brought pain to another.
We are ashamed of the ways we have let our
tongues spread lies, rumours or undermined
another's integrity.
We pray not only for forgiveness but also to
use what we say to build others up and to share
your love with them.
We pray that our professions of faith may be
matched by actions of kindness and generosity.
Help us to turn from our greed and selfishness to
ensure the wellbeing of others.
Enable us to overcome anything that prevents us
from being examples of your loving kindness and grace.
In all things, may we shine with the light of Christ. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

We are held in the grace of God,
and through Christ, we are a forgiven people.
As we seek to live according to his commandments,
we can be confident that our sin is forgiven.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

READINGS

- **James 1:17–27**

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

19 You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, 20 for human anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

26 If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- **Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23**

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?" 6 He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

7 in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

8 "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

HYMN 618 What does the Lord require

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySZs91dylKo>

SERMON

This week we are back following Mark’s Gospel and we have a selection of verses about Jesus interacting with the Pharisees. In the Gospels and in much of our preaching we give the poor Pharisees a bit of a hard time. I am sure that today those following the Lectionary will be generally preaching sermons about how wrong the Pharisees were.

Well! I am not going to be one of those preachers today. In fact I don’t intend to say too much about them, preferring instead to reflect on how we deal with people who we might think are different from us.

One of the reasons that Jesus seemed to come into conflict with the poor Pharisees was that they were probably the predominant group leading the Jewish community at that time. In many ways Jesus was in agreement with their overall approach, but isn’t it the case that we tend to have the biggest arguments with those who we would normally agree with, rather than those with whom we are diametrically opposed.

The issues surrounding rituals seem to be a bit of a recurring theme in Mark. The idea of following the law and traditions of the Tora seem to be a bit of an anomaly to most of us today.

In some ways this passage might be just a simple statement on what we would consider normal hygiene today. However their rituals were purely religious and not based around hygiene. What lays behind this particular discussion was the phrase that: “the Pharisees do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, and they do not eat anything from the market

unless they wash it”, and “they also have some other practices about washing the utensils for eating and cooking.”

So what is wrong with washing our hands before eating? After all we don't know anything about the cleanliness of the people who picked and packed the produce we buy at the shop. Most of us would agree that we need to wash things like fruit and vegetables and salads before we prepare them for the table. We also tend to wash our hands before preparing food. So, we can see that we are not necessarily in disagreement with those Pharisees about washing.

When we start to see people not following good food hygiene we start to feel uncomfortable. I think that this is what happened with those Pharisees. Those looking on simply said ‘Oh Yuk’ after seeing the disciple's actions, pointing out their lack of attention to accept etiquette. Their actions were so outside the Pharisees' ideas that they felt that they had to react. They thought that if it was disagreeable to them it would, of course, be an affront to God as well! After all these rules came from God, *didn't they?*

Imagine if we were having a simple meal of fish and chips at the church and someone went to the toilet and then came straight out without washing their hands and grabbed a hand full of chips from a bowl with their grubby mits. I am sure that with all of the experience of kitchen people in the church we would have provided plenty of tongs to handle the food. I wonder if the people doing all the good work setting out the food would feel the need to throw out the rest of that bowl of chips!

I am sure that they would think that person was very inconsiderate, to put it mildly. They would be inclined to morally judge that person for their indiscretion and I would tend to agree with them.

I heard of a pastor who driving through Guatemala a few years ago. He was reflecting on this passage and said:

“People had warned me about the crazy driving in Mexico, but Guatemala was a lot worse. Mexico seemed chaotic but I'm okay with that. Guatemala just seemed homicidal. And I very quickly found myself making value judgements about Guatemalans, or at least Guatemalan drivers. They were crazy, they were inconsiderate, they had little or no respect for human life or safety.”

“And very quickly I found myself making harsh moral judgements about people who were just doing what was absolutely normal in their culture. I still think it is fair to ask some questions about the driving culture there, but I suspect that Jesus would have responded to my judgementalism about the individual drivers with very similar challenges to those he put to the Pharisees over the hand washing incident.”

While things like people’s driving behaviour might get us riled up when we are worried about our safety, there are in fact lots of different behaviours which can get us all upset.

In some Asian cultures it is acceptable to eat dog and cat meat. It might be disgusting to you and me, but it is perfectly normal to some people.

Does the fact that something is disgusting to you and me mean that we should sit in judgement on those people? Are they contravening some kind of moral law that is written into the fabric of the universe? It might feel that way when it comes to dogs and cats, but that issue is not written into God’s laws.

Here lies the point that I have been developing. Just because we might have a strong personal reaction to another person’s actions it does not necessarily make it wrong in God’s eyes.

In recent years we have had massive debates about sexuality, race and theology and people have had very definite opinions on those topics. Making moral judgements just on the basis of feelings can very quickly get us into deep water. As the eating of some animals shows, we can very easily make quick and uninformed judgements about others. These judgements are not necessarily written into any part of the Bible.

So where does the Bible take us when we try to understand what is acceptable?

The basic approach in the Gospels and reflected in the reading from James is that we are being invited to become reconciled with one another. Where there was once division and separation from God and one another Christ has given us the message that we need to come together. In the past people who were different were seen as being stupid, unsafe and probably

just simply wrong. Therefore we simply kept our distance and separation from them. Some people's approach is that surely God would want us to keep our separation from their corrupting influences!

Just think the changes that have come with our attitude to slaves, women's rights and people from different racial backgrounds in the last few centuries.

In the Gospel accounts which Christ left with us He showed us that God wants us to take the risk of getting closer to others. Jesus spent time talking to a Samaritan women at the well one day. She was an outsider!

Even if all of our concerns about outsiders are correct, truth and righteousness are in fact more effective in addressing our way forward than attacking the cultures which we are concerned about.

After all Jesus spent time with the sick and the sinners and offered love and mercy and a freedom which was, and is, a much more virulent way of reaching people and that message has lasted through until today. In fact as we come into contact with different people we are given the understanding that many of the issues which caused us to be concerned are in fact not wrong or sinful.

As we discover their distinctive approaches to life and we share our approach to life with them all of us have our lives enriched with the experience of sharing together.

Now we move on to look at how we integrate the Bible message. Like some of us, the Pharisees, had no difficulty quoting selected extracts from scripture to sustain our approach and prejudices. This was even more vehement when they were condemning other people's differing ideas. It is a very well-known fact that we can justify and back up almost any idea by simply picking out parts of the Bible without understanding the message in its context. For many years people used selected verses from the Bible to justify slavery and discrimination against people based on the colour of their skin or their gender.

If we look at the Bible like a legalistic constitution or a book of rules we can find plenty of passages to support our prejudices, like the Pharisees did. In the Bible there are plenty of rules about how to ritually wash your hands

before eating. Then there are those rules which forbid people from eating prawns and needing men to have funny haircuts with a lot of hair hanging down around their ears. There are the rules requiring women to wear veils. This is not the way that Jesus related to that part of the Old Testament. The Bible for Christians is not and never has been a rule book but a gracious guide.

That is what Jesus gave us in the Gospels. The Bible is a very powerful collection of stories which gives us insight into people's conversations about God and who God is and how God approaches our world. Simply picking up a verse to support our argument on a particular topic is doing a massive injustice to God's message. Jesus took this approach with the Pharisees and their practice of selectively quoting scripture.

I am sure that if someone took the time to go through everything that you have said in your life they could, by quoting you out of context, make you appear to be a very different person to who you really are.

The message from God is revealed in comprehending the overall thrust of the Bible which in the end is about being included in God's kingdom. That message is constantly encouraging us to move out of our comfort zone and to become connected to others who we would have previously been divided from because of their beliefs, or habits or lifestyles.

When we come across passages which are expressed as laws we need to see them in context. As we see them in the context of the times and cultural circumstances of the original works we can start to see what was being expressed rather than being caught up in specifics of a particular situation which might no longer apply.

These laws were a means to an end at some point in history. They were not an end in themselves. When Jesus was approached in other places about what was the greatest commandment He said that there are simply two:

- Love God and love your neighbour.

He goes on to say everything else, including all the laws and the words of the prophets, are just commentary and descriptions of those two commandments.

Paul tells us that we need to practice love to the fullest extent and let the law take care of itself. When Jesus was asked to define clearly who he considered His neighbour to be He looked to someone who might have been seen as an enemy, someone who would have been seen as an outsider in terms of culture, beliefs and practices.

In view of this I think that we, along with the Pharisees, have a lot in common. Despite our differences and our previous suspicions of one another we can be reconciled to God through His scandalous mercy and His fierce and tender love for all of us made known in the message of Christ.

In times of division we need to be channels of God's love and grace.

HYMN 607 Make me a channel of your peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2svZhZT6Pro>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Our offering is an act of discipleship.

It is a sign of our love for God

and our willingness to serve in Christ's name.

May all we are and all we have be used in his service.

Loving God,

receive the gifts we bring this day.

May they be used widely and wisely

for the sake of the gospel.

May they be a source of goodness and truth,

that the world may know of your reconciling power

and may they be a source of life for those in need this day.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Living Word of Truth,

we turn to you with our prayers for others,

praying that the world can be different

and the affairs of the nations transformed.

We pray for people who have power in our communities.

May they be strengthened in keeping their word.

May they speak the truth and act in justice.

We pray that every community may reflect your values – that those who do not have the means of life may be cared for.

We pray for peace. May the words that are used by those in power be a means of uniting the nations and build bridges of understanding.

We pray for the poor in every land, and especially those who are marginalised because of their differences.

We long for the day when gender and status, nationality, or religion or politics will no longer determine one's wellbeing.

May your kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 459 In Christ there is no east or west
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpITJOShix0>

COMMUNION

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you

Christ our Lord invites to his table
all who love him,
who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.

Be present, risen Lord Jesus,
as you were with your disciples,
and make yourself known to us
in the breaking of the bread;
for you live and reign with the Father
and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Hear the words of institution of this sacrament
as recorded by the apostle Paul:

For I received from the Lord
what I also delivered to you,
that the Lord Jesus,
on the night when he was betrayed,
took bread,
and when he had given thanks,
he broke it and said:

This is my body which is for you.

Do this for the remembrance of me.

In the same way also the cup,
after supper, saying:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it,
for the remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread
and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

And so according to our Saviour's command,
we set this bread and this cup apart
for the holy supper to which he calls us,
and we come to God with our prayers of thanksgiving.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Thanks and praise, glory and honour are rightly yours,
our Lord and God,
for you alone are worthy.

In time beyond our dreaming
you brought forth life out of darkness,
and in the love of Christ your Son
you set man and woman at the heart of your creation.
When the right time had come,
you sent your Son Jesus.

He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly
human.

And so we praise you
with the faithful of every time and place,
joining with choirs of angels
and the whole creation
in the eternal hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

We thank you that you called a covenant people to be a light to the nations.
Through Moses you taught us to love your law,
and in the prophets you cried out for justice.

In the fullness of your mercy
you became one with us in Jesus Christ,
who gave himself up for us on the cross.
You make us alive together with him,
that we may rejoice in his presence
and share his peace.

By water and the Spirit
you open the kingdom to all who believe,
and welcome us to your table:
for by grace we are saved, through faith.
Pour out the Holy Spirit on us
and on these gifts of bread and wine,
that they may be for us the body and blood of Christ.

Make us one with him,
one with each other,

and one in ministry in the world,
until at last we feast with him in the kingdom.
Through your Son, Jesus Christ,
in your holy Church,
all honour and glory are yours, Father almighty,
now and for ever.
The bread we break
is a sharing in the body of Christ.

The cup we take
is a sharing in the blood of Christ.

The gifts of God for the people of God.

Receive this holy sacrament
of the body and blood of Christ,
and feed on him in your hearts
by faith with thanksgiving.

DISTRIBUTION

Bountiful God,
at this table you graciously feed us
with the bread of life and cup of eternal salvation.
May we who have reached out our hands
to receive this sacrament
be strengthened in your service;
we who have sung your praises
tell of your glory in our lives;
we who have seen the greatness of your love
see you face to face in your kingdom,
and come to worship you with all your saints for ever.
Amen.

HYMN 531 Sent forth by God's blessing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVYNDtVqsMw>

BENEDICTION

We are God's people,
commissioned to share the power of the gospel;

commissioned to serve the mission of Christ, which is justice and truth;
commissioned to declare the love and goodness of God.
Let us go from here in the name of Christ.
And may the passion of God go with us,
the courage of Christ be in us,
and the wisdom of the Spirit ever guide us, this day and every day. Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74