

PENTECOST 13
22/8/21
CAVES BEACH

NOTICES

I need to let you know that I have a series of operations coming up, starting at the end of this month. On 31/8 I am having surgery for an aortic aneurism. This will be followed a fortnight later with a trial of a nerve stimulator to help me deal with chronic pain from my initial cancer surgery.

This will probably be followed some weeks later by a permanent implant of electrodes into my spine. This means that I will take the whole of September off on sick leave.

I am sure that you will all continue to care for each other in the usual generous approach that is the mark of Caves Beach Uniting Church. I would appreciate your ongoing prayers and I look forward to coming back feeling much stronger.

Arrangements are being made for ministry support to continue for the congregation.

Prayers are with Leiza Steele for her brother's family as he passed away this week after a long battle with cancer.

We also pray for the people of Afghanistan who are suffering so much turmoil follow the collapse of their government after 20 years of war.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Follow God's signs to the place of worship and open your hearts with praise and thanksgiving. The beauty of flowers, the chorus of birdsong, the glimmer of sunrise,

invite us to worship God, creator and sustainer of life.

The smiles and laughter of children at play like running through the sprinkler,

invite us to worship God, who wishes us to enjoy life to the full.

The struggle of persons who are sick or enduring life's trials,

invite us to worship God, whose way is compassion and wholeness.

The crying needs of our well-populated planet,

invite us to worship God, the source of justice and mercy for all people.

Opening Prayer God :presence of

You have walked with us, O God, in the joys and challenges of daily life.

You will walk with us now.

You have been our companion in the families and the faith communities of which we are a part.

You will accompany us in the coming days.

You have gone with us into the heartache of this small corner of the world.

You will never leave us.
You have been an instrument for peace and compassion in the past and you will renew your dedication as we worship this morning.

In all the changes of life, you were there, you are there, and you will be there. Thanks be to you, O God! Amen.

HYMN 143 Immortal, invisible, God only wise

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c59R-Ry8q50>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Bird song reminds us of fragile nests that keep them safe.
Waves recall us to the constantly moving deep water,
Providing home for such a variety of life.
Rustling breezes remind us of trees anchored deeply
In ancient soil that offers nourishment and protection.
You, O God, are beyond our understanding.
We are transient and so small a part of the greater creation.
Yet, we shelter in you, are part of the family of God,
who bring a sense of belonging and welcoming grace.
In you we find shelter and offer our heartfelt thanks.

God of peace, we seek your forgiveness.
Too often we are distracted when we come to pray.
Our busy minds flick from ideas to concerns,
from choices to decisions,
diverting our attention from time with you,
and disturbing the peace that we seek.
Forgive us, God of peace

God of truth, we seek your forgiveness.
As people of faith, we wander from your truth,
hearing the noise of the rowdy world,
and focusing on words that dishonour truth
to appease our wrong decisions.
We long to listen to your word of truth.
Forgive us, God of truth.

God of shelter, we seek your forgiveness.
We grieve over what we have not done,
and groan over what we do not have.
In this world, we create home and shelter
that is so easily replaced or updated.
We fall for the relentless change to uplift our souls,
rather than seeking shelter in your consistent presence.
We long to shed what is unnecessary
and be surrounded by your unchanging love.
Forgive us, God of shelter.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God brings us to a place of peace,
Where truth rings out as a song on the wind,
Where shelter is found in the gentle, kindly grace

That is welcoming to us all.
In peace, with truth, we are welcomed to rest our weary soul.
Thanks be to God.

READINGS

* Ephesians 6:10-20

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole Armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

* John 6:56-69

56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." 59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" 61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." 66 Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

HYMN 133 O worship the king all-glorious above

* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv2BqFgm6_M

SERMON

Hi from lock-down!

All throughout Christian history, and even today, Christians have been under threat of violence and separation from the wider community because of their beliefs. People throughout Africa, Asia and in fact across a lot of the world report that they have been attacked for their beliefs. Some attacks come from other religions, like Islam, and some from state sponsored controls on life and faith, like in China.

If we listen to some Christians you would think that the whole world is turning against us. They try to infer that we are in terrible danger. There are groups within society like some fundamentalist Moslems, or atheists, or some political movements who oppose Christianity violently.

At the same time there are even groups within Christianity facing off against each other as if the other faction was a mortal enemy. They believe that failure to follow their dictates will destroy us, or destroy our families. For some it is about their view of the purity of the Gospel they demand we must follow.

I have no doubt that some people in the world are convinced that Christians should be hated and despised like some enemy. It is probably not as prevalent in a lot of the western world as some people would have us believe. Sometimes these fears can be pure paranoia. I remember the story of a judge in Texas a few years ago declaring that if Barak Obama was re-elected as President then that President would transfer the running of the USA to the United Nations and that civil unrest and war would break out in Texas! Some people's religious paranoias can be just as extreme.

Having said all of this, what we need to consider is how we respond when someone opposes us, especially where there are attacks on us.

Do we see them as enemies?

Do we set out to attack them first?

Surely the best response is to attack them before we are in any real danger?

Why can't we defend ourselves to the point that they are defeated?

Do we risk becoming just like them in the way we respond to them?

Is there any alternative action we can take?

Here we come across an interesting connection between our two readings today from John's Gospel and Paul's letter to the faithful in Ephesus. The connection comes in the phrase 'flesh and blood.' It is used differently in each place. Reflecting on this difference can give us some real insight into how we should treat one another.

Today we are coming to the end of our series from Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. In the first verse we hear Jesus say: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." Here Jesus is referring to the very intimate connection between Jesus and each of us. This is called 'incarnation.' That is what we call the fact that God became human in Jesus. In this event God broke down any barrier that ever existed between the divine and humanity. We are no longer in a them-and-us relationship. God is

connected to our humanity and fully connected to our frailty and gifts. We are as one!

In this act of solidarity we have a whole new perspective on how we connect to one another. We can no longer divide ourselves into groups. God is no longer the possession of any race or group who try to claim exclusive access. If we were to try and separate one from another then we are going against the connection that Christ achieved in His birth and the gift of His blood and flesh on the cross.

So what has this to do with how we treat those who oppose us? If others will not connect to our solidarity how can we keep going with such a grace filled approach?

In the passage we heard from the Epistle to the Ephesians we come across one of the more war like sections of the New Testament. There is a strong undercurrent of militaristic language. There are repetitious references to girding up with armor ready for battle.

Are we actually being given permission to head into open conflict with those who would oppose us?

Simply put: NO!

Here we come across the phrase 'flesh and blood' again. "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood." ...Let me ephasise! ... "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil."

We can now see that there are no enemies made of flesh and blood. What it does show us is that even if there are people who set themselves against us and seek to destroy us, it is not really them that we are up against. It is something else. Something bigger. Something which may be using them, and working through them, but which we are not to identify as being them personally.

This is a bit like a soldier saying that they have no argument with any individual soldier on the other side but they do disagree with the ideology which is being put forward by their force. Let me repeat: "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the spiritual forces of evil."

If we now turn back to the Gospel reading the warrior approach does not hold so well. A soldier at war is expected the kill off their opponents. We must make a distinction between the individual and the ideology behind their attack. In John's passage, Jesus emphasises our need for solidarity and His death clarifies what it means to be a victim rather than perpetuate violence. John is telling us to struggle against the evil spiritual forces and not to physically attack people personally.

I was not part of the generation who read the Harry Potter series of books,

but I am told that the followers of the 'Dark Lord' could call on a weapon called the 'Imperious Curse.' People under this spell looked normal on the outside but inwardly they were controlled like robots. They were made to do whatever the Dark Lord wished. While they might not want to do these things, it might even be your best friend who has suddenly turned on you. The challenge there was to detect the presence of the curse and then to get them liberated from that curse. You did not want to destroy your best friend, only the curse.

Similarly our challenge is to oppose the forces of evil while at the same time seeking to help to free people who have been caught up in those powers.

This is not a simple matter of breaking some imaginary spell. It is no wonder that Paul calls on us to pray at all times and to be attached to the strength of God's power. It can be easy to identify someone who seems to represent what we are up against and to make them our target. But Christ has taken on their flesh and blood too, and our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood. So what do we do?

No matter how violently those like the Taliban and Al Qaeda and others who are opposed to us act, our struggle is not against them personally. They are each creatures created in the image of God, so our struggle is not against them personally. We are called to honour them as individuals in God's kingdom and to pray for them.

We can certainly stand firm in unflinching opposition to their actions and spirit of hatred and attempts to leave us divided. If we don't maintain the distinction we end up being drawn in to that world of hatred, violence and destruction. We too become captive to the forces we are opposing. We end up being part of the problem. Not the solution.

It is not a matter of how inhumane the government of the day is with their refugee policies, our struggle is not with the politicians personally. We can stand firm promoting the needs of the disposed in the face of divisiveness and selfishness but this is just part of the current system of party politics both here and overseas. If we get drawn too far into the division and divisiveness then we become part of the problem, not the solution.

In practice this means that no matter how much our ways are demonised by people, like Pat Robinson in the USA for not blindly following his directives, our struggle is not against them personally. Pat, like a lot of our detractors, is human and created in the image of God. We need to honour and pray for those who would attack our faith and the actions we humbly take each day. We can absolutely stand against the attitude of arrogance and domination that people like him set up. But, if we don't keep our actions gently guided by constant prayer and humility, we will soon end up becoming part of the problem.

All of this means that we should allow ourselves to stand with confidence and affirm the freedom that Christ gained for us when He became the solution

to divisiveness and violence on the cross. Jesus willingly absorbed the violence and evil rather than becoming part of the problem.

We need to offer ourselves to God and one another to be part of societies reconciliation. We don't need to conform to the violence and destruction of our world pandering to the self-interest of being divided into the 'outsiders' verses the 'insiders.' We need to resist the temptations to violence and self-interest so that we can support our community breaking free from that cycle.

Our struggle is not against the enemies of flesh and blood but in fact it needs to centre on the rulers, authorities and all those who would propagate any opposition to God's word.

It is a constant struggle against that path which would divert us from God's promises. We are the people of the reconciling Christ. In this way we have the armour of truth and righteousness and peace and faith and salvation. We are God's humble and faithful followers.

HYMN 594 Fight the good fight

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YppcFC8mxKM>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

May these offerings combine with others to bring shelter and hope to the most vulnerable. With gratitude we receive them, and with humility we share them, for the flourishing of your realm.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE From Roz GOD CARES.

God cares for His people as is found in verses from Isaiah, Deuteronomy and Romans from the Living Bible.

"I made you and I will care for you.

The Lord who created you, O Israel, says !

"Don't be afraid for I have ransomed you! I have called you by my name! You are mine.

When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you

I will be your God through all your lifetime, yes, even when your hair is white with age.!

He spreads his wings over them ,even as an eagle overspreading her young

In His love and pity He redeemed them and lifted them up and carried them through all the years.

I am convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, angels. nor demons, fears for today ,nor worries about tomorrow

Let us pray:

O Lord our God we know you are beyond our earth, our solar system, our galaxy and our universe.

And yet we know..... that we are welcome to approach You - to talk

to You here in our individual homes this morning.
You have likened each one of us to a brick from which Your Temple or Church is made up and although we are prevented from meeting together physically - we are joined together by Your Spirit with all Christians, not only in Caves Beach or NSW or Australia but whole World this morning. How wonderful is that!!

Lord You are aware of the fear, anger, mistrust, distress and anxiety the world is experiencing as a result of COVID and the success of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Lord deliver us from evil.

You are aware of the floods, droughts, fires and wars - give people the strength and determination to begin again.

You are aware of our failures by abusing our beautiful earth in our consuming greed for more wealth and power and the "easy life" - forgive us we pray and help us to redirect our behaviour.

Lord we bring before You all world leaders community leaders the media and those who influence our youth. We ask that they all be guided by your Light and wisdom.

Let us now say the prayer the Lord taught us.

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 561 Who would true valour see

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiSAjwtpFUc&t=16s>

BENEDICTION

Go in the grace of the gentle smile
Be uplifted by the grace of the welcoming hand.
Join in the laughter with the grace of the humorous tale
And see where God greets you as you journey on.
May God's grace greet you, hold you, heal you, and journey with you each day.

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UIGh7GSMd0>