

PENTECOST 24

12/11/23

CAVES BEACH

### CALL TO WORSHIP

We come into the realm of the divine.

We worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We come to encounter mystery: the Spirit of God.

We worship God who has become flesh, yet is beyond flesh.

We come bidden and welcomed:

By God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Here we have work to do:

We will worship, we will listen, and we will honour the One  
who is waiting for us.

### OPENING PRAYER

We ask you O God:

to open our hearts to receive your goodness.

We ask you O God:

to open our lips to proclaim your praise.

We ask you O God:

to open our minds to receive Christ's eternal truth.

Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen

HYMN TIS 155 – HOW GREAT THOU ART

<https://youtu.be/3GKhDCsLrUg>

## PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of love and goodness,

you overwhelm us by your truth and beauty.

In you we find the words of eternal life,

words that strengthen and renew.

In creation, we see your glory revealed.

In the smallest atom we see the wonder of your wisdom.

In the far-flung galaxies we glimpse

the magnitude of your being.

Before your presence we can but

sing songs of adoration,

offering thanksgiving for all that is.

All glory, praise and honour be given to you O Lord.

God of mercy and compassion,

you invite us into the realm of your presence,

unencumbered by guilt and sin.

All you desire is that we play our part

in the fullness of your mission of reconciliation.

Yet we come, yawning and lethargic,

expecting little and complacent about all manner of things.

In this moment, we ask that you forgive our tardiness.

Forgive us for our lack of passion,

for the work you set before us

and wake us up to the extraordinary tasks you have given.

Enliven us, for we take so much for granted

and do not comprehend the urgency of our present moment.

Have mercy upon us, we pray. Amen

#### WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God is patient and just,

willing to forgive us and invite us

to bring light and life to all.

We are forgiven and empowered for service.

Thanks be to God. Amen

#### READINGS

\* 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 – 18

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

\* Matthew 25: 1 – 13

1 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

## HYMN TIS 136 THERE'S A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

[https://youtu.be/vJwfT3SY\\_PU](https://youtu.be/vJwfT3SY_PU)

### SERMON

Perhaps because my parents were not church-goers when I was growing up I tend to look at the scriptures and think about what would people who don't have a faith connection, think about some of the passages of scripture that we read Sunday by Sunday. Would they be able to connect what is said there, to their living in today's world? The passages today are a good example, I think, of the challenge of working with Bible passages in the 21st century, whether you are a Christian with a long background of worshipping Sunday by Sunday, or not. Most of you here this morning I would think have heard sermons on these passages many times over. I wonder if anyone could beat Gwen who had her 97th birthday on Wednesday!

We all realise that Biblical times are very different to our time of November 2023. Some things stay the same of course: unfortunately wars - though how they are fought has changed dramatically. Other things have certainly changed: our understanding of the world - given scientific knowledge nowadays; our own life span - given medical advances. Changes and differences too many to mention. Many wonderful, but some not so good, no doubt.

So as I was looking over these Bible passages set by the church lectionary today, those were the thoughts going through my mind. And I wondered: does the application of scripture alter given changed times. I'm not questioning Biblical truths, but rather, I'm asking as we ponder scripture, are there perhaps different aspects that come into more prominence for instance, and others less so? How do we handle passages of scripture written long ago when life now for us, compared to then, has changed so much?

All right, here's an example: you will have noticed that both passages this morning are about the Second Coming of Christ. Now, I've already had one conversation with a person (not someone any of you would know) who believes that the second coming is imminent given the current Israeli-Gaza war. I suspect that that is not the general belief amongst us here in this room. Most of us will say we have no idea - when Christ will come. But that's not what people believed in Bible times - not even what Paul believed! So, is it O.K. for us to believe somewhat differently?

You see, that Christ's return was imminent was certainly the belief of both Paul, and the Christians in Thessalonica to whom Paul was writing in around 51 AD. This letter (Michelle read part of it for our first reading) is the earliest extant Christian writing that we have by the way. The passage from Matthew's gospel, written about 30 years later than that, takes up a similar theme of the Second Coming: it is an allegory that Jesus tells about the bridesmaids being ready for the wedding banquet. It is about being ready for the end times. Both these passages of scripture are speaking to early Christian believers who are trying to come to grips with Jesus' having left them, but longing for his return amongst them.

Alright, now let me come back to the present day for a bit: I want to say that I've thought particularly over the last few months coming up to The Voice referendum, and now during this time of the Israeli-Gaza war, that we ourselves have needed to get rid of the noise, and

get into a quiet place with God to ponder historical truth with honesty, and ask God for wisdom so that we are able to pray with a sense of good, clear ethics. And I think that with these passages of scripture today we need to at least come to them with a similar attitude. We need to delve until we get to the essence, the foundation, if you like. Otherwise, I for one, find these passages too difficult - there is too much if you like, going on, and I get confused. It's like peeling an onion - we need to peel the outside stuff away to get to the core. And the basic, foundational core always needs to be that God is love.

Let's look at the earlier passage first and see how it might speak to us today. Paul is writing a pastoral letter to these people of Thessalonica, a group of early Christians, who are struggling and who Paul is worried about. He has heard from Timothy that they have kept their faith despite now facing persecution - he is worried that they will defect due to obstacles both from their families and associates who were proving hostile to their faith. And we find in today's passage that there is another reason for anxiety amongst some of them and that is, that time is passing and believers are ageing and dying - and yet Christ has not yet returned as they believed he said he would do. We need to remember that Christ's imminent return was an early Christian tradition. In Thessalonians Paul speaks of the Lord's cry of command - a shout if you like - and an archangel's call, a trumpet sound. We find Paul writing in a similar way about Christ's return in 1 Corinthians which was written just a couple of years later than what we've heard read this morning. You'll know 1 Corinthians 15 because Handel has immortalised it: "The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised....." - we need Ev here to sing it!

Do we need to take this writing as literal truth? Or can we agree that Paul is using imagery, writing poetically, reflecting the thinking of his own times, his own society? History records that in those times people were used to trumpets accompanying important events. It was common in that era to imagine divine figures making themselves known with loud shouts. People being embodied in different forms of reality had its roots in texts from the Old Testament book of Daniel. Embodiment like angels, shining like stars - a new order of shining reality. All this was part of society and culture.

So if historians are correct, then there's no need for us to take this passage in a literal sense. In any case, does it matter terribly if we do or if we don't? Personally I don't think so. 2000 years have now passed. But that doesn't mean we should walk away from this altogether, and I certainly don't wish to do that. Let's take a look at it..... Surely we can realise that even though Paul was embracing the imagery and poetry of his day, that it's possible nevertheless, to identify with his faith, and the way he was dealing specifically with uncertainty and adversity. His ultimate aim, using ways that people would understand in those times, was to get across to this community of faith his confidence in the nature of God - that all would not end in oblivion, or hopelessness.

Surely, we too, agree that our faith does not depend on our attempts of explanations and the limitations of language, but rather on the nature of God: that God is love, that Christ provides our hope. That the resurrection is what encourages us to hope beyond our physical death.

Look, there is so much in this passage. Listen again to what Paul writes at verse 13: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope". The text here is talking about being able to grieve in a particular way, that is, with hope - not with hopelessness. Of course we suffer

loss, we deeply miss loved ones, we might even go through patches like a Gethsemane, or even sometimes sit as if we were Job. It is the nature of our humanity, we need to be able to face pain, our own, that of loved ones, and that of the world. It is not helpful or sensible if we are in denial. But underscoring our grief will be hope - knowing that Christ who suffered and died on the cross has gone before us. What do we say?: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! Paul is one who speaks so eloquently of all this because he modelled his own life on that of Christ.

And don't forget those lovely last words of that passage today, where he writes (v 18): "Therefore encourage one another with these words." Here Paul is placing the ministry of consolation squarely within the community of all believers. Grief is often individual yes, but it is a time for holding each other and resting in the arms of God's love for one another. The essence for Paul is God is love and we are to love one another with that love we are blessed with, not only in times of uncertainty and adversity, but indeed every day. This was his message to the little fledging Christian community at Thessalonica, and we can incorporate that well and truly in today's 21st century world.

In that the passage from Matthew's Gospel is also homing in on the Second Coming of Christ, are you able to stay with me, so we can take a brief look at that too? This passage is about readiness - it is essentially about sustaining faith. The bridesmaids represent Christians who await the bridegroom, that is, Jesus the Messiah, and his delay alludes to the fact that Jesus has not returned as soon as many had hoped. It is then not dissimilar to Paul's writing, but it is coming to the topic from a different angle if you like - using different language, painting a different picture or poem. This time it is an allegory - a picture revealing a hidden meaning. Here in this story we are being asked to emulate those five wise virgins (sorry to the men amongst us!). And note that the lamps that burned well for a while, didn't guarantee they'd continue to burn. Likewise being Christian means nothing if it not a continuing part of our being, our living. Will we allow God's Holy Spirit to continually fill us with God's love - are we able to travel our journey of faith with a quiet consistency, a quiet readiness? Being watchful, meaning being ready to live out the fruits of the Spirit for those who are Christ for us - our neighbours who are both close and far away?

Whether you wish to hold to a literal understanding of what we've read today in Paul's letter and Matthew's Gospel or find that due to our 21st century thinking, that that is now not possible for you, we Christians surely believe that Jesus comes into our lives in any case, every day! Often I fear we don't recognise him. How or where does he come? He comes in the conversation we have with someone while waiting at the doctor's surgery, he comes in the urge we feel to go and volunteer to help, he comes when we're dealing with a difficult situation which requires patience and tact. He comes when we really listen. These are the times when you and I need to be awake, alert and prepared. In other words always. We ourselves are the ones who will make the decision whether we wish to identify with the wise or the foolish virgins. Identifying ourselves with the five wise ones will mean to be present to God in all our encounters with people and events with which we interact, each and every day of our lives. Now and always.

May God be with us all as we travel along our journey of life together. And may we all keep our lanterns burning brightly! Always. Amen.

HYMN – TIS 385 NOW IS ETERNAL LIFE

<https://youtu.be/Kwqi-jr2RNE>

#### OFFERING PRAYER

Gracious and generous God,

here we would honour you with the gift of our very selves.

Take us and our offering

to be used for the sake of the world and your mission. Amen

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

What did you remember yesterday at 11am, seeing it was the 11th day of the 11th month? Yes, it was the Anniversary of the Armistice that was the first step in ending the fighting with Germany in World War One. That was 1918 - 105 years ago now. Relief after so much loss of life.

Today as we come before God with our prayers, we will pray that today's current wars might cease, that hearts might be open to living lives of compassion. We will give thanks with grateful hearts for the peace that we enjoy, and we will pray for those we love, and for ourselves. Let us pray:

Loving God, we wait for your coming amongst all of us across your world. We long for your reign of justice and peace. We pray for all who are suffering the horrors of war, we pray especially for civilians, for the children caught up in it, for pregnant women, for the elderly, invalid and disabled who have nowhere to go. We pray for doctors, all medical assistants and aid workers who work under terrible conditions. We pray for all who endure disease, and hunger. We pray especially for the war-torn areas of the Palestinian/ Israeli conflict, for the Ukraine/ Russian war, and for the current war in Sudan.

We give you thanks for all those who are trying to bring an end to oppression and suffering, especially those who have given their lives that others might live.

Loving God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we wait for your coming, we wait for your reign of righteousness and truth. We pray for your church throughout the world. And today we pray especially for those who live to bring the message of the love of Jesus in dangerous places. We pray for those who have had their places of worship bombed, their communities disintegrated, their own lives threatened. We pray for our own community of faith and all who worship and fellowship in this place. May we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others

We give thanks for all who bring your gospel of salvation. We give thanks for the World Council of Churches and its work in helping people act with compassion across culture and political borders. We give thanks for Act for Peace, for Uniting World, for Frontier Services and all organisations that bring the light of Christ to others.

Loving God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we wait for your coming, we wait for your reign of forgiveness and love, your reign of compassion and healing. We pray for those in our community who are without work, for those who are burdened with too much responsibility, for those who are forgotten, unwanted, abused. For those who are in despair for any reason, for the broken-hearted and for those who mourn a loved one. We pray for the sick, and dying.

We'll take a time of quiet to pray for anyone we know personally at this time in particular need, including of course, Mark and Judy, for Ev still housebound at present and others unable to be with us today .....

We give thanks for all who give of their time to care for the needy, for all who bring comfort and hope and relief to others. We give thanks for our local doctors, for those nurses in our hospitals, and nurses who come to bring home-care, and for para-medics in ambulances. We give thanks for chaplains and those trained in pastoral care.

Loving God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, keep us ever watchful and ready for the day of your coming - may we be mindful of keeping our lamps filled and burning brightly so that our waiting will be consistent, reliable and ready always to share the love of Jesus, in whose wonderful name we pray, and who taught us to pray:

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 forever. Amen.



HYMN – TIS 231 AT THE NAME OF JESUS

<https://youtu.be/7w-tDjlpk>

BENEDICTION

Christ has work to be done,  
words to be said and a Gospel to proclaim.

Let us go, ready for all that lies ahead.

May God's love be in us,

Christ's call be clearly with us,

and the power of the Holy Spirit

give us strength. Amen