

EASTER 5

15/5/22

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

The chorus of morning birdsong proclaims it;
the grandeur of the mountains displays it.

The glory of God, the glory of God!

The laughter of playing children affirms it;
the warmth of a mother with her baby reflects it.

The glory of God, the glory of God!

The relief of a refugee finding a country sighs it;
the joy of the unemployed person finding a job, shouts it out loud.

The glory of God, the glory of God!

God in Highest Heaven, God at home with humankind.

The glory of God, the glory of God!

Opening Prayer

With the loving vulnerability of a tiny baby,

We open ourselves to you, O God.

With the infinite curiosity of a growing child,

We search for you, O God.

With the joyful responsibility of young parents,

We rely on you, O God.

With the reflective experience of maturity,

We sense your presence, O God.

With the creaking wisdom of advancing years,

**We rest in a hope strong and secure, O God.
In all our living, in all our striving, in all our forgiving,
to you we look, eternally present One. Amen.**

HYMN 440 Christ from whom all blessings flow

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

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Creator God, source of power and majesty and glory, we worship and adore you. Your word brought light and life and order out of darkness, emptiness and chaos. Such awesome power leaves us speechless with wonder. Yet our wonder is even greater, for you chose to show us that power and majesty and glory are made visible in and through the servanthood, humility and sacrificial love of Jesus. His love revealed for all time that glorifying you means loving one another as he loves us. Only through such love are we identified as his disciples and as your people. All blessing and honour and glory be to you.

INTRODUCTION

Jesus says in today's gospel lesson, that "Now the Son of Man is glorified". If we did not know what had gone before, we could assume that the 'now' referred to some glorious achievement or victory. The 'now', however, refers to the movement of Jesus towards the cross following Judas' departure into the night. Now - God's love would be shown to be stronger than evil – sins would be forgiven - for the time of salvation is near. Through his obedience - even to death - Jesus glorifies God. Glory is therefore inextricably linked to sacrificial love.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Gracious and loving God, as we reflect on the wonder and glory of your being, and the depth of your love for us, we are conscious of our failure to learn from you and from the sacrificial love of Jesus. So often our understanding of glory is linked with prestige and power and position. Jesus' understanding of glory was linked to a love that was prepared to go to the uttermost limits of love.

Forgive us when selfish pursuit of glory takes precedence over Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us.

“As he has loved us”- we confess our lack of commitment to make Jesus’ self-giving love the truly identifying mark of our community of faith.

Forgive us when we put economic, racial, social or other boundaries on our love.

When we express his limitless love in all our relationships and dealings with people, both inside and outside the church - then - Jesus said “everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

Remind us, O God, that even when our love falters, your love remains constant.

You have the power to make all things new.

Renew and rekindle our love for you and for one another.

Fill our hearts and minds with Jesus’ selfless love so that, like him, we glorify you in all we do and say. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

God makes all things new. (Rev 21:5) Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation The old has passed away; everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Friends, believe the gospel: in Jesus Christ we are loved, we are blessed, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **Acts 11:1–18**

Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the

voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter;¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

- **John 13:31–35**

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him."³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

HYMN 217 Love divine, all loves excelling

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

SERMON

I think that just about everyone sitting here today, or watching on-line, would want to think that the community here at Caves Beach was stable and beyond criticism. We don't seem to get too involved in any sort of scandalous arguments about who can be members of our church. I would hope that we are open to everyone who wants to join with us.

But what happens when our complacency is challenged by someone or something from 'left field?'

If we genuinely follow the teachings of the risen Christ and the experiences of His disciples in the period after His crucifixion we might just have to be

prepared to be even more open. The Christ we follow was called out as being blasphemous and a threat to public order. If we are truly following Him then we need to be prepared to stand up for those groups who many people in society would seek to ostracise.

To fully understand the ground breaking passage about Peter in the reading from Acts today we need to have a little understanding of Jewish religious history and the associated customs. Peter is accused of defying some of the most fundamental and unchallenged customs of the Jewish community and consequently putting the whole Jewish faith at risk.

If we travel back over a few centuries before this passage to ancient times, we can see that the Jews have held closely to their way of life in the face of many different cultures and societies who lorded it over them. The Jews practiced their own brand of culture and faith. Over the centuries they had been dominated by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon followed by Greece and Rome. In modern times they have lived all over the known world especially once they were exiled from Jerusalem.

Interestingly the Jews seem to be the only minority ethnic/religious group who have maintained their distinctive culture and religious practices while most other belief systems were assimilated into the varying dominant societies of their day.

When the Jews were forced into exile in Babylon, about six centuries before Christ, they set out to maintain their culture and laws in such a way that it would set them apart from the surrounding people. There were four main aspects to this practice:

1. Sabbath keeping. There were very strict rules about what could and could not be done on their Sabbath.
2. Food laws. They maintained their strict rules around what was acceptable to eat and how it should be prepared.
3. Circumcision. This set the men apart from all surrounding cultures.
4. Marriage and social contact laws meant that they were almost living in a separate society within the surrounding cultures.

While these rules might seem a bit strange to us they served very effectively to make clear boundaries between the Jews and surrounding people. In time the rules became ingrained to the point that Jews would not dream of eating ritually unclean foods or mixing with other faiths. It is more

than not eating pork products and even today Jews closely guard their access to acceptable foods and defend their social & religious practices.

Now let's turn our attention to the story about Peter from Acts. When he was shown those unclean foods Peter was revolted because of his upbringing and cultural understanding. It was like his whole world was being turned upside down. However that voice kept telling him that if God says that it is ritually clean then who was he to argue? Even with the power of the visions Peter does not try and change things until he has been challenged three times. Being challenged three times is also a very Biblical way of expressing that the change came from God and not human sources.

The next day that challenge becomes an obvious step to widening the family of Christ beyond just the Jewish people who had made up most of the community until then. Peter unexpectedly receives an urgent invitation to the home of a gentile family. Previously Peter would have been prevented from even sharing a meal with them. It is over a meal that Peter is invited to share about God. The purpose of the dream became very obvious when they sought baptism.

By the time that Peter returned to Jerusalem there was a great debate about his actions.

Had Peter sold out for a simple conversion?

Had Peter lost his connection with hundreds of years of Jewish faith and traditions?

Peter simply explained how God has changed those rigid rules so that it now becomes obvious that the community were in the middle of a massive change in their whole way of life as Christians, compared to their way of life as Jews.

Over the centuries since, the Christian church has struggled with boundaries. Who or what is acceptable and who is excluded? Many of these disputes have centred around what is to be believed. The passage we had from Acts today is certainly one of the first debates.

Others of that time included:

- What Jewish laws should be kept.
- The need for male converts to be circumcised.
- The way the wealth was distributed to those in need.

- Were people allowed to have private property.
- Was Jesus human or just a spiritual apparition?

Later there were councils of the early church debating issues like the Doctrine of the Trinity. In more recent centuries there was the reformation when it became very personal and dangerous for those who tried to comply with the constantly changing rules about what was acceptable in Christendom.

In the USA there was a war basically about the Biblical legitimacy of slavery, let alone ongoing discrimination based on the colour of a person's skin. It is not so long ago that civil war raged in Northern Ireland over the divide between Catholics and Protestants.

Even in recent years many of you will have been subjected to debates about where the boundary markers should be set for who is acceptable in the church.

What sort of person is acceptable?

- People who smoke or drink alcohol.
- People who swear.
- People dancing.
- People watching movies at the theatre.
- Women's role in the church.

Each of these debates have in their own way broken down artificial barriers which tried to restrict people from becoming Christians. We do need to constantly keep our eyes open so we are not keep putting artificial barriers in the way of people seeking to follow Christ. To do this we need to keep our hearts and ears open to people in the community around us who are feeling excluded.

The true nature of Christ is one of welcoming the outcast and alienated people into the family. Looking through the Gospels we can see that Jesus welcomes the most marginalised people who had been rejected by Jewish religious and social customs. There were no conditions on this acceptance.

While Jesus clearly sought to have people seek repentance and seek to grow in their faith. He never made it a condition of being accepted. Critics

called Jesus a sinner for associating with prostitutes and tax-collectors. Nowhere does Jesus call on them to be ex-prostitutes and ex-tax collectors. Jesus did not call on these people to repent, rather he pointed out that these people had a greater chance of being accepted into heaven than the superior pious types who so willingly attacked His ministry.

Under Jesus' guidance we see people who had been pushed aside now being warmly welcomed. This even extended to children, who were considered too young to be expected to make a faith commitment. Women were excluded from religious life under Jewish rules but Jesus equally welcomed them into His fold. People of other races and nationalities were welcomed without hesitation. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven belonged to all of these people.

Jesus limited His words of condemnation to those who tried to put barriers in the way of people feeling welcomed by God.

Jesus ministry was a threat to all the barriers which had been built up over the centuries. Trying to put limits of God's love is a real 'hot potato' in my opinion.

One colleague tells the story of one of his youth workers.

I had a youth leader once who told me how, when he was a teenager, he had taken a Christian girl out in the days when many Christians still thought going to movies was a sin. When he arrived at her place to pick her up she and her father were both in tears and having a terrible argument about whether she could go out to a movie or not. And in desperation the father said, "But if Christians start going to movies there'll be no difference between us and the world."

That sort of logic might seem a bit crazy today but it was not long ago that people set these arbitrary sorts of boundaries on what was acceptable for Christians. There was a genuine fear at that time that there would be no clear distinction between Christians and others. So, what then does distinguish us from others?

Whether we are male and female, black or white, rich or poor, celibate or promiscuous, perfumed or smelly, smart or retarded, old or young, beautiful or disfigured, temperate or beer swilling, sane or psycho, serious or joyous, dressed to the nines or dishevelled, professional or welfare dependent, clean living or drug addicted, carnivorous or vegetarian ... who are we?

How do we distinguish ourselves from those who have not yet responded to God's grace in their lives? Jesus has only one answer: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." That's it. There is no other distinguishing feature.

We are a people of justice and this includes mercy and compassion. This is love in action. Any other marker by which we try to set people apart from us is not Christian.

And so Peter when he reported back to the church council at Jerusalem had to say, "I know these people were supposed to be outsiders based on all we had ever known, but God was clearly at work among them, and if God accepts them and they accept God, then I reckon the rest of us better get out of the way and let God's will be done."

There is no other distinction. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will know them." If the fruit is love, then they are living in response to the Spirit of God, because God is love. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

HYMN 640 Kneels at the feet of his friends

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tyNO9QVVK4>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Generous God, you welcome all to hear your word.

Jesus, your ministry was shared with all whom you met, wherever you met them. Spirit of God, you fill the hearts of all beyond culture or language.

May these gifts build your church into a welcoming family reflecting your Love. Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (Val Willoughby)

My prayers for today come from Together in Song Hymn No 648.

Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us,

Teach us as sister brother each person to embrace.

Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe

We are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live

Teach us, O lord, your lessons as in our daily life
We struggle to be human and search for hope and faith
Teach us to care for people, for all – not just for some,
love them as we find them or as they may become.
Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
In living situations to do the truth in love;
To practice your acceptance until we know by heart
The table of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.
Lord for today's encounters with all who are in need,
Who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread,
We need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on,
Renew us with your Spirit; Lord free us, make us one.

Lord, this is our prayer for today. *We say together the Lord's Prayer.*

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 106 Now thank we all our God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s99dNPKYtHk&t=15s>

BENEDICTION

Take a moment each day to breathe in the wonder of God's creation.

Allow the Spirit to fill you with a fiery passion

to be a follower of the way of Jesus.

Let us be open to God speaking through all God's people

and be delighted to see Jesus in the face of each other.

Filled with the Spirit,

go in peace.

Love with openness and serve with justice in God's world.

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