

PENTECOST 14
29/8/21
CAVES BEACH

NOTICES

After the service today pastoral matters can be referred to Rev Lu Piper on 0439 508 658 or Bob Willoughby on 4971 0575. Any other matters should be referred to Jan Plumridge on 4976 1337.

I look forward to being back with you once the hospital things are over.

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: presence of
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 137 For the beauty of the earth
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUBMAi4jA1E>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Praise we offer to you, O Light of life.
When there is misery and sadness, there is also hints of joy.
When there is darkness of misunderstanding and anger,
there is gentle welcome to hear again in our hearts.
When there are rules to be followed that fall short of your ways,
You speak into these spaces with sympathy
and your Spirit brings new understanding to our generation.
For we are a pilgrim people, who continually journey with you.
We thank you for your presence in all our meaning and being,

allowing our questions and hearing our conversation.
We, your people, look with hope and joy to your Way.
Thank you, Jesus, for walking with us, always.

Truth-filled Jesus,
We are sorry that too often our beliefs do not match our living.
Regularly, we sit in worship,
gathering as a community of faith.
And yet, so many times we deviate from your call
to "Listen" and "Follow me".
We are so sorry, Friend and Brother.
We listen to your words of wisdom,
read them and ponder upon them.
And yet, we wander from your Truth and Light,
For we do not hear them in our hearts
and accept them in our living.
We are so sorry, Light of Life.

We may religiously attend to faith matters
and make rules and regulations
to help our Church focus on Godly matters.
And yet, we fail to see when those rules and regulations
cause grief to you and your people.
We are sorry we fall short to that which you call us to be, bringer of
Truth.

God of all, you speak through each and every one of us.
Help us to hear what is Truth
and to follow where your Light is leading.
Because we too often listen to the human voice
and miss your Spirit's presence.
We are sorry.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Faithful friends, listen to the words of Jesus.
Honour God with your lips.
Hear the Truth in your hearts.
For there, God's Spirit will lead you to the Light.

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 fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth 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: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your 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 thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live 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: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

HYMN 584 Just as I am

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxA0TFe3-Uo>

SERMON

Well here I am doing my last sermon for a few weeks while I have some surgical procedures.

Let us look to the Gospel message set for today. The Lectionary once again is following Mark's Gospel. This week 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 across the world there will be many sermons preached about how bad the Pharisees were.

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

One of the reasons that Jesus seems to come into conflict with the poor Pharisees so much was that they were probably the predominant group in Judaism at that time. In many ways Jesus was in agreement with their overall doctrines but isn't it the case that we tend to have the biggest arguments with those who we would normally agree with rather than with than we do with those people who we diametrically opposed to.

The issues surrounding rituals seem to be a recurring theme in Mark. The dictates of following the law and traditions of the Tora, or Old Testament, seem to be a bit of an anomaly to most of us today. It could also be the case that this passage might be just a simple statement on what we would consider normal hygiene today.

However their ritual was religious, not necessarily based around hygiene. What lays behind this particular discussion was 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 that "they also have some other practices about washing the utensils for eating and cooking."

So what is wrong with washing your 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 hygiene we start to feel uncomfortable. I think that this is what happened with those Pharisees. They simply said 'Oh Yuk' at the disciples, pointing out their lack of attention to etiquette. It was so outside the Pharisees' experience that they had to think about what it was that caught them off-guard. 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 they 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 the rest of that bowl of chips out! I am sure that they would think that person very was inconsiderate, to put it mildly. They would be inclined

to morally judge that person for their indiscretion. I would tend to agree with them.

I recently read of a pastor who had been 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 the moral aspects of 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 and people have had very definite opinions on that topic. Some people's sexuality is not something that a lot of people would find attractive. To me the attraction to the opposite sex is normal. 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 of the Gospels is that we are being invited into becoming 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. Surely God would want us to keep our separation from their corrupting influences!

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 their approach and prejudices. This was even more vehement when they were condemning other people's 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.

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. There are plenty of rules about how to ritually wash your hands before eating in the Bible. 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.

That is certainly not what Jesus gave us in the Gospels. The Bible is a very powerful collection of stories which gives us insights 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.

Moving on, we come to the last aspect of today's passage from Mark. 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 where people are getting into fights and disputes over self isolation and masks and vaccinations we need to be channels of God's love and grace.

HYMN 629 When I needed a neighbour

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fExR7eOhJO0&t=9s>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Gracious God, surround these gifts with your love.

Carry them with your purpose.

Direct us where they should go.

For through you, we will look intently at your Truth of loving our neighbour.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Today we are invited to embrace the freedom of God's grace and call upon our lives. We come with our prayers to God realising that our actions, when in

line with God's will, will be blessed. After the words, God of grace, would you respond please with the words: hear our prayer. Let us pray:

Creator God, as we leave the season of winter behind, and spring comes, we pray that all of us will live with an appreciation of the new shoots of life that we will see around us in our gardens, in the bush, and across our land. We pray for all who are being adversely affected by climate change, that sustainability and care of our environment might be the priority of us all.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Loving God, whose Son is the Prince of Peace, we pray for the peace of the world. We pray especially for the people of Afghanistan. We pray that as ideologies clash and hopes of so many are dashed, that the toll of human suffering may be tempered with acts of kindness and care. We pray that out of the turmoil and chaos, trust and goodwill may prevail.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Compassionate God, your world is hurting with this Covid sickness. We pray for a fair distribution of vaccines not only across communities within countries, but across nations as government leaders negotiate with one another. We pray for your guidance to be upon all who are endeavouring to keep people safe, for all scientists involved in medical research, for all doctors, nurses and paramedics who are overstretched. So many people are anxious and afraid as they live with uncertainty: we thank you that you never leave us or forsake us.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Caring God, we come before you today, as one community of faith although we are sitting separate from one another to keep us all safe. Thank you that we draw upon the love you give to us for one another. We pray together for those who have especially asked our prayers: for Jack and Myra, Maureen, George and Doreen, Elaine Roberts, Keith, Lois, and for Alfredo in Columbia. We pray for Marie as she prepares for surgery, as does Mark this coming week. Lord, we place them all in your care. There may be others known to you personally, so we will pause for a time of silent prayer..... May all who are in sorrow, need, sickness or in any other trouble be comforted; may all who care for them be given wisdom, skill, and gentleness, and for us all, we pray for peace of heart and mind.

God of grace, hear our prayer.

Loving God, accept our prayers through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And now, let us say together, wherever we may be, the prayer that Jesus 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 658 I, the Lord of sea and sky ...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zr9SMm1gII&t=31s>

BENEDICTION

People of God, take note of this

Listen with patience!

Speak with love!

Act with helpful generosity!

God is calling us to listen with our faith.

The Spirit is calling us to hear God's Truth in our hearts.

Jesus is calling us to follow his Way in our living.

Go, then, with love before you, patience as a guide, understanding as an
action

as we follow in the Light and Truth of our God.