

PENTECOST 14
25/8/24
CAVES BEACH

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 (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

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 217 Love divine, all loves excelling

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPbD2G3i-7Y>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Holy and all glorious God,
we praise your name for all you are
and all you mean to us.

All creation reflects your beauty and grace.

The heavens declare the extent of your majesty
and the universe shines with your eternal light.
We thank you for revealing yourself to us in Christ, that we do not only see
you in nature,
but know who you are through the teaching,
life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
In him, we have seen the extent of your love for each one of us.
May every aspect of who we are be an expression of our love for you.

God of the ages,
you know us so intimately.
You know our thoughts and the secrets of our hearts.
You know our fears and anxieties,
the things that keep us awake at night
and prevent us from living the full
and vibrant lives you want for all your children.
Forgive our lack of trust in you, we pray.
We acknowledge just how limited our perspective is.
We behave as though the short span of our years
is all that matters, losing sight of the vastness of your creation
and the extent of eternity.
Help us to live out of your perspective,
to know that you hold all things together and that ultimately we are held in
your embrace forever.

Eternal God, we pray that you will forgive our lack of faith and the way we
lose sight of your purposes.
Grant to us humility and understanding as we seek to serve you,
and enable us to live more confidently in the knowledge
that we have been given the gift of eternal life. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Have you not heard, have you not seen,
God has created us to live freely
and in harmony with the Spirit.
Christ has brought us into the family of God
through his saving grace.
Peace, forgiveness, and new life are ours.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

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 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 the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness ¹⁵ and lace up your sandals in preparation for 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 the 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 a 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 beginning who were the ones who did not believe and who was the one who 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 111 Praise to the Lord

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vegvb1u5s4

SERMON

Before I get too far into the sermon this morning I want to explore some of what Paul is telling us in the passage from Ephesians.

Paul points out that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’

What is Paul talking about when he utters these enigmatic words?

In part, Paul is seeking to make a crucial distinction between what we can see, touch, hear and taste, and what we can't. There are things in this universe, he wants to say, which we cannot sense in any ordinary way, and yet they are real – as real as this lectern, or that book, or you and I.

Let me elaborate a little. Let's look at the example of this Bible. In one sense, it is just a book. It is made of paper, of pulped wood and chemicals. Perhaps there is a little leather. Certainly, there is a lot of ink, ink which is distributed liberally on the pages to create words. A book, just a book. And yet it is not just a book, is it? For there, in those pages, resides the trace and the effect of a story and an event that is far bigger and more cataclysmic in their import than any mere book could be.

The trace and effect of the God who has made our world from nothing and passed through it in cloud and fire and a people liberated from slavery; the trace and effect of Holy Wisdom becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us, full of grace and truth; the trace and effect of life bursting forth from the tombs in which we would enclose it; the trace and effect of transformation, salvation, the liberation of the world from its bondage to death and decay.

The trace and effect of things far larger and more deeply complex are interwoven into more than mere pulp and paper, vellum and ink. What we

see and touch and taste is a book. But what we feel, especially when it is read aloud, is the shaking of the earth and the remaking of the cosmos.

So when Paul talks about rulers, authorities, dark powers of evil who dwell in heavenly realms, he is asking us to look beyond the surface of what things might mean and listen, instead, we should be seeking the resonance and influence of a great opera that has been unfolding since before the universe was made, a cosmic drama concerning good and evil, making and unmaking, faith in the God of life and the appetite of humankind for mayhem and destruction.

Here Paul wants to teach us what literature scholars call a 'hermeneutic', a strategy for understanding the times and places in which we now live.

Take, for example, some of the events that dominate the news.

- A few years ago ISIL terrorists killed many thousands of people in Iraq and Syria, most of them were fellow Muslims.
- The government turns back boats of desperate asylum seekers.
- Too many Aboriginal people die in police custody.
- A pop star goes into rehab for drug abuse.

What are these events all about? What do they really mean? Some – including many journalists – might read them as examples of the ongoing struggle between the weak and the strong, the ones who will form the future and those who will not. Such readings assume, all too pragmatically, that history is written by the strong, and that it is the strong who always win.

But if we read those same events in the light of that opera an apostle might sing:

- They are about faith and disbelief, flesh and spirit, light and darkness.
- They are about the struggle of the people of God with forces that can never be reduced to mere flesh and blood, to bodies that are either weak or strong.
- They are about the struggle with an ancient and cosmic evil that would seek to enlist anything and anyone to its cause, and without caring whether those enlisted understand what is at stake or not.

By reading things this way, those of us who have heard the Gospel come to understand that the events that dominate our televisions or, indeed, our own lives, have a cosmic significance. They are important not simply because these events apparently determine whether we can expect a comfortable future or not. They matter because they are traces and effects of God's eternal desire to wrest life from death, light from darkness, faith from doubt.

My reason for this beginning will come out more during the rest of the sermon.

All throughout Christian history, and even today, Christians have been under the 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 paranoias can be just as extreme.

Just in the last week or so we have been hearing about a coroner in Queensland looking into the shootout between police and some fanatical fundamentalist people in Queensland.

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.

This week we are coming to the end of our series following Chapter 6 of John's Gospel. In the first verse today 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 with God. In fact 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 Paul's letter 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 traditional armour 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 emphasize! ... "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 army. 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 to 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 other 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 a character called the 'Dark Lord' could call on a spell 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, today, 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 physical enemies of flesh and blood.

So what do we do?

No matter how violently those like the Taliban and Al Qaeda and governments 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 into 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 dispossessed 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 some radical preachers in the USA, for not blindly following their directives, our struggle is not against them personally. They, like a lot of our detractors, are 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 28 God is our strength

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA0zJnW1Rr8>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

United in Christ, we share a common mission,
the common goal of reconciling the world to God.

Loving God,

as disciples of Christ, we seek to offer all we are
to enable your realm to be realised on earth.

May the gifts we bring be used to proclaim the good news,
to bring peace and justice to the nations,
and to be a sign of our commitment to you. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

A note first about the congregation we are praying for this morning listed from our Hunter Presbytery Prayer Diary. Today we learn about and pray for Muswellbrook Trinity Uniting Church which meets on the 1st and 3rd Sundays of each month. They tell us their attendance is anywhere between around 8 to 15 people. They don't have their own Minister, or even a Lay Preacher, and so they have to borrow whoever is available from near and far in the valley for each service. They are visible in their community through a couple of groups who rent their hall on a regular basis, they donate the use of their hall to the local U3A throughout school terms, and also donate the use of the kitchen and hall every week to the local Community Kitchen in which they have an active representation as volunteers.

So keeping them in mind, we come now before God in prayer too for the world, for the church, our faith community, our friends and family and for ourselves:

Most loving God, we thank you for Jesus, who through His love for us in His life, death and risen life, brings all your creation together as one. We thank you that you lighten the darkness around us and journey with us each day, enabling us to experience forgiveness, joy and peace in our lives. We pray that in our living, by our words and actions, we might reflect your goodness and kindness to others, so that Jesus is proclaimed as Lord and Saviour.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Most gracious God, there are so many problems across the world at present. The suffering is beyond our comprehension as both the negotiation stalemate continues between Netanyahu's government and Hamas, and the war continues unabated in Ukraine with Russia. The hunger and general suffering due to civil war in The Sudan is horrific. The new and awful disease of monkey-pox spreading now in Congo and beyond is worrying. We pray to you O God, that people everywhere may learn of the compassion that comes from You alone, so that barriers of division may fall, whether they be fences of politics, race or religion.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we pray too for Australia. May we be a country that cares about all people as our neighbour who needs understanding and love. We pray for those whose ancestors lived here before colonisation, for those of us who have arrived since, and for newcomers arriving often from countries torn apart by conflict. We pray for cohesion across our social fabric of community, and we pray that our political leaders will be good role models, speaking well of others as they govern us and lead us into the future. We pray for your wisdom to be upon them in their decision-making and that always they will work not for themselves, but for the common good.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God, we pray that we will remember to put on the whole armour of God, so that we are dressed correctly to follow Jesus each day of our lives, and be enabled to trust Him as the way, the truth and the life. We pray for the Uniting Church community of faith at Muswellbrook, the congregation, their leaders, as they endeavour with your help to grow their congregation. We pray that you will bless them as they continue to extend their love and guidance in the community and maintain their buildings. We pray with them that they will remain a place of welcome and hospitality in their community. Similarly we pray for our own faith community here, that we too, may extend the love and care of Jesus both during our worship times, and other opportunities that come to us during week days.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We give thanks that you are the God who brings mercy and wholeness. Comfort and heal, we pray, all who are in sorrow, need, sickness, or any

other trouble. *Let us take time now to bring to God those we know who are unwell at this time.... there are a number who come along to Craft 'n Chat who are struggling with health issues at present, and maybe others of whom you are aware too. So let us take a time of silence for private prayer for others.....*And loving God, we ask that you would give to those who care for those for whom we have prayed wisdom, patience, and gentleness and, to us all, your peace.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we draw these our prayers together now, as we sing together the prayer our 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=ydPn31WCkNs>

BENEDICTION

Let us go as people of the resurrection,
aware that we are sharers in God's eternity.
Let us go to share in Christ's mission,
open to the leading of his Spirit.
Let us go with open hearts and hands
that we might share the bread of life with all.
May God's grace be in our hearts,
Christ's love be in our words,
and the power of the Holy Spirit be in our lives. Amen.

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