

**EPIPHANY 4**  
**28.1.2024**  
**CAVES BEACH UNITING CHURCH**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

People of faith, come and worship!

**We rejoice in this opportunity to worship together.**

People of faith, come and praise!

**We rejoice in this opportunity to sing with heart and voice.**

People of faith, come and pray!

**We rejoice in this opportunity to open ourselves to God's leading.**

People of faith, come and listen!

**We rejoice in this opportunity to hear the scriptures and to respond with faithful service.**

**OPENING PRAYER**

You give us people for the times, O God.

**In the earliest days, you gave great leaders to Israel: Abraham, Jacob, and Moses.**

You give us people for the times, O God.

**And when a word of correction or justice was needed, you sent the prophets:**

**Jeremiah, Amos, and Isaiah.**

You give us the people for the times, O God.

**To a world crying out for salvation, your Chosen One: Jesus, who came to teach, to die, and to rise again.**

You give us people for the times, O God.

**And still you send your messengers, your challengers, the agents of your love:**

**Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and unsung saints we know.**

**We thank you, O God. Amen.**

**HYMN** TIS 215 You Servants of God

[https://youtu.be/ptLLr\\_WjCz8](https://youtu.be/ptLLr_WjCz8)

**PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION**

God of life's journey,

there are so many family members, friends and acquaintances who have helped us on our way from when we were very young until now. We thank you for lessons taught and learnt, especially for those who have been wise counsellors, for those whose patience and understanding guided and supported us. We thank you for those who have taught us the meaning of love, and that you, O Lord, are the source of love. We thank you that through the many uncertainties of life, that you are the Holy One, steady and changeless who gifts us with hope.

God who seeks goodness and wholeness, we however, have not loved as you teach us to do. At times we have hurt each other with our words, sometimes with our silence. For all the hurt we've caused each other, we're sorry. We grieve the wounds that haven't healed properly, and the hurts that have become internalised. Forgive us, loving God, for the times we haven't had the courage to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation.

So turn us to you so that we may restore places of brokenness. Help us to build others up in love, to weave together communities of wellbeing, to remove stumbling blocks that hinder people knowing you.

Come, Jesus Christ, source of truth, show us the way of truth. Where fake news corrupts and trust is eroded, call us to account to reshape the world around us with honesty and justice. We ask that your Holy Spirit will help us discern your truth as we explore what your word teaches us today.

## **WORDS OF ASSURANCE**

Jesus knows our experience and our struggles as humans because he himself came to us in the flesh. Today God's Holy Spirit offers to transform the unhealthy dynamics that is our broken humanity. At the core of the Spirit's dynamic presence is love, drawing us into an experience of forgiveness.

St John writes: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Hear then, Christ's word of grace to us: Your sins are forgiven.

**Thanks be to God!**

## **READINGS**

### **\* Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20**

<sup>15</sup> The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup> This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' <sup>17</sup> Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup> But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'

### **\* Mark 1: 21 – 28**

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

**HYMN** TiS 655 O, Let the Son of God Enfold You

[https://youtu.be/kjVLUY\\_dNLk](https://youtu.be/kjVLUY_dNLk)

## SERMON

On Wednesday at Craft 'n Chat I asked the women if they'd help me with my sermon for today. I'm not sure if the look on their faces was shock, horror, or amusement! I said I was thinking along the lines of leadership. I asked whether people had someone in their lives that they looked up to, or someone who mentored them, was important in their own formation. But actually what we got talking about was leadership in the world today - which I'm sure you'd agree, leaves us wanting.

One night last week I'd heard an excellent interview, regarding the shocking and escalating current situation in the Middle East - along with the other wars going on at present. Reference was made to the continuing retaliations and stalemates - the brick-walls that defy solution. Towards the end of the interview, the person was asked, "What do you think then, is needed to enable a way through this dilemma?" "We need a leader of the stature of a Martin Luther King, of a Nelson Mandela," was the answer given. Interesting, don't you think?

Now I'd already read the scripture passages set for today and had been thinking about the qualities that we see in our Lord and his style of leadership. So I tossed this out into the Craft group's conversation, and one of the women said she thought that the important thing is that leadership needs to be by example. And she's right isn't she? People in leadership need sound personal integrity - for instance, they should not be indicted on corruption charges!

So what I'd like to do today, is look at the scriptures with you, and see if they can tell us more about our Lord's type of leadership so that we have a base line to work with as we are confronted with these global issues. We'll take a look at authority, and consider the meaning of power and how our Lord exercised it, and can that help us as we endeavour to know how to pray.

And I want to keep in mind too, that we are still in the Church Season of Epiphany. Let me remind you of the definition: "An 'Epiphany' is a revealing, appearing or manifesting of something or someone, and in this season the church reflects on the manifestation of Christ to all people." So what is it, that the scriptures today manifest or reveal, particularly about our Lord?

So let's move to explore the passages. I have selected Deuteronomy from the Old Testament as the first from today's lectionary to give us some insight before we look at the gospel. Deuteronomy is a complex book - in Jewish tradition it is known as the Book of Words; the Greek translation calls it the Second Law. It is a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

It is believed that the book was found when some repairs were being made on the temple in Jerusalem in King Josiah's time. Standards had slipped very badly in Israel's life, so it was to command immense respect, and it offered a high moral challenge. It issued a call to faithfulness to all those who read it or heard it read aloud. The writer of the book addresses the people on the authority of Moses, the giant of their past history, hence this book rests on ancient tradition. In our passage today we are told that, just as Moses did on Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given to him, that again there will be those who stand between them and God. These people will be known as prophets, and they will have great moral standing in the life of the people. Listen again to verse one of the passage we heard just now:

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." And a few verses later: "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command."

What we understand is that there was a succession of prophets, after Moses, for about 800 years - we read about them in the Old Testament right through to the last book which is Malachi. The requirement of the people was that they were to obey the prophets, and if they didn't they were to be held accountable. But of course, the people often trespassed against the moral law, and all kinds of excuses were dreamed up for ignoring the prophet's messages. And also, the prophets didn't get it right themselves all of the time. Remember Jonah who we looked at last week - God's extremely reluctant messenger! And just one other matter to remember: most of the prophets were recognised only after they died or were done to death by those whose comfort and security they disturbed. So being a prophet was obviously not any easy task!

There is a period of about 500 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. You can read about those years, as the material is available, but the early Church synods decided to leave those books out of the Canon of Scripture. If you want to read it I've got a copy. But the point is that there is this lengthy period between the last prophet Malachi, and God's entry into the world as human flesh which we call the Incarnation - the Christmas event.

Since Christmas Day in December our scriptures have covered our Lord's baptism, then the call of his disciples. Now we have what happens next. He is at the beginning of his ministry, and he already has a number of disciples with him. In Mark's gospel we read:

"They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

"Teaching with authority" - that is Mark's code for saying that Jesus looked like a prophet. Mark has chosen his words here carefully. It would seem that given the time lag (that 500 years of history) there was no rush to name Jesus as a prophet, let alone acknowledge him as the Messiah (the Anointed One). But people in the synagogue would no doubt have been intrigued. Note that Mark says he taught not as the scribes. So then, how did the scribes teach? Reading Mark's gospel we can conclude that much of their teaching was concerned with fine points of interpretation of the Law; whereas Jesus' teaching focused on central themes like God's compassion. And we find Jesus teaching with a directness which drew on common life experience - so His way was a shift from the knowledge of experts, to the common people. It was, we might say today, a different way of doing theology.

Some people might have been mesmerised by our Lord teaching in this different way, but we know that some became deeply emotional, and even angry. You'll remember that we read in Luke's gospel, that at one time there, people in a synagogue after they'd heard him teach, were filled with rage, and wanted to hurl him over a cliff. So, it is safe to say that there grew to be a very mixed response to his ministry.

Back to today's passage. On this particular day in Capernaum, into the synagogue comes a deeply disturbed person. He cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." It's ironic, isn't it, that this is the way that Jesus is recognised! But it is a harsh, angry voice that Jesus hears, and he would have realised that it had to be dealt with swiftly and decisively. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit commanding, "Be silent, and come out of him!" It is a precise, sharp-edged command. It has an immediate effect on the man, and maybe the effect on the people was an awed silence. And then we hear that they were asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching - with authority!"

They would seem not to be so amazed that he teaches, but they are amazed, perhaps astonished, at the authority by which he teaches. As I've mentioned, this is the first episode of Jesus' ministry that Mark records after the call of the disciples. This passage then is of particular

importance. It holds important clues about what is to come. What follows is a collection of stories that has as their main theme Jesus' authority. Amongst them is the one which teaches that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. You'll remember that that is the one where the paralysed man is lowered down through the roof by his friends. Jesus asks, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the paralytic - "I say to you, stand up, take up your mat and go to your home."

It is this quality of our Lord, this very definite authority, that we seldom tend to look for. But you can see, that our Lord's authority is stamped clearly in the very first healing that Jesus does, and in those that follow on too. Seeing Jesus act with an authority which is immediately recognisable by those around him helps us also, to understand the subsequent order of events in the gospels - it has all sorts of implications. For instance, it was this that drew men and women about him who were ready to die for him. A pleasant demeanour, a capacity for telling stories, a caring disposition, even a certain gift for healing, might have won for our Lord the attention of the curious and some degree of public affection. But these attributes alone would never have exploded into the deadly cocktail of hatred and political manoeuvring that eventually brought him to the cross. All this is the journey our Lord embarks on to bring in the Good News of the Kingdom of God. It is all about enabling people to be liberated - which is exactly what happens in this first healing - that possessed man was liberated to be how God made him to be. Jesus is ready too, to liberate us from whatever is holding us back, to enable each one of us to be how God made us to be. Think about that.....

Now I want to just tidy up a thought about Epiphany. What could we term as an Epiphany as we've looked at the gospel today? Could we acknowledge that here we have a glimpse of the immense natural authority that was clearly present in both Jesus' words, and in his actions. The Epiphany, the revelation, we find here, is the authority of Christ - His authority is what is manifested here.

Finally, let me go back to some comments I made at the beginning. You'll remember that I mentioned an interview that I heard, and the gentleman said that we need right now, a Nelson Mandela or a Martin Luther King. I think those two men are good examples of leadership as our Lord modelled for us. Is leadership about power? Yes, but not power by force - which is how we are seeing the world governed today. That is an anathema to our Lord's teachings. Jesus inaugurates a different way. His is servant leadership. Indeed, he is our Servant King, so let us follow him. Amen

And so now we'll sing that beautiful hymn, From heaven you came - that one who is our God, the Servant King. (TiS 256)

**HYMN** TiS 256 From Heaven You Came

[https://youtu.be/A0FSZ\\_iSYO8](https://youtu.be/A0FSZ_iSYO8)

### **PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING**

Justice-loving, generous God, bless and receive the gifts we offer.  
O how you bless us, God. Accept now the offering of our gifts.  
May they spread the joy and the faithfulness of our God. Amen

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

I want to apologise that I omitted mention of Australia Day last Sunday, so a little belatedly I wish to include our remembrance in our prayers this morning. Just a couple of things to mention before we pray: we are all aware of the difference of opinion regarding the date and how the day should be celebrated. So I did a little digging into the pre-colonial history of this area. I read that there were archaeological deposits found at Swansea Heads that carbon dated back 8,000 years; and that the archaeologists could deduce too, that there was intense aboriginal occupation in this area 2,700 years ago. From what I gather the depletion took place once Europeans came into this area during the early 1800's. Some aboriginal people evidently moved away, and then in 1836 there was the ravage of European disease - a particularly bad measles epidemic decimated the population to between just 100 and 200 aboriginal people surviving here. Some of these people stayed in the area and later worked for little or no pay in the coal mines that began around 1840. (And by the way, I recall that we had a chicken-pox epidemic in a PNG High School where I was teaching in the 1960's, and in a similar way, those kids became so terribly sick due to no inbuilt immunity from European diseases - fortunately with the medical help we had, none died.)

And now I'll move on to our prayers, beginning with a prayer from the Uniting Church Assembly. Let us pray:

O Lord, give us the courage to accept the realities of our history so that we may build a better future for our nation. Teach us to respect all cultures. Teach us to care for our land and waters.

Help us to share justly the resources of this land. Help us to bring about spiritual and social change to improve the quality of life for all peoples in our communities, especially the disadvantaged. Help all young people to find true dignity and self-esteem by your Spirit.

May your power and love be the foundations on which we walk together as First and Second Peoples, and build our families, our communities and our nation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

*And now we look beyond our own country:*

Loving God, we pray for brothers and sisters across the globe who are caught in war zones at the present time. We pray for a rethink for national leaders and all in positions of power, that negotiation may take the place of force, that love may take the place of hatred, that good will take the place of evil. We pray that this needless suffering will cease.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

*We pray for the care of the earth, and all who are affected by natural disasters for others:*

Creator God, speak to our conscience so that we will realise our responsibility to care for creation. May we heed what science tells us, and use resources wisely. We pray for those affected by the cyclone in Queensland, and those still recovering from floods. Thank you for those who give of themselves to help others in need. We pray for SES workers, for life savers on our beaches, for fire-fighters and we pray personal safety upon them and all who serve in similar ways.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

*We pray for those known to us personally:*

God of compassion, 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. *(A time of quietness now to bring our loved ones to the Lord who are on our minds today.)* Lord, give to

those who care for these our loved ones, your wisdom, patience and gentleness and, to us all, your peace.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We thank you O God that we can come with these our prayers and leave our concerns in your hands. We ask this in Jesus' wonderful name - who taught us the prayer we shall now sing together:

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 672 (ii) Lord of Earth and All Creation

[https://youtu.be/ZUM8i\\_uuj3Q](https://youtu.be/ZUM8i_uuj3Q)

## **BENEDICTION**

Love and transformation are the order of the day!

Jesus goes before us, and the forces that harm and weigh us down only know to flee from his presence.

Carry that holy awe with you;  
lean into God's newness and wisdom.

And trust that Divine Love will meet you and hold you in the places of struggle  
and conflict you bump into along the way.

And may the blessing of God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.