

PENTECOST 19
29/9/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

You call us to worship, O God; you call us to prayer.

As we express our thanks, as we pray for the troubled, as we confess our shortcomings, you hear us.

You call us to worship, O God; you inspire us to praise.

As we sing the hymns, as we respond in the psalms, you join with us.

You call us worship, O God; you call us to hear the Word.

As we listen to the scriptures, as we are touched by the Word proclaimed, you speak to us.

You call us to worship, O God; you call us to the regular Communion table.

As we eat the bread, as we drink the wine, as we remember Jesus Christ, your love unites us.

Opening Prayer

If God is with us,

we will be able to bring our thanksgivings to church, but also our worries.

If God is with us,

we will be able to enjoy the laughter of children, but also hear the concerns of older folk.

If God is with us,

we will be able to consider the needs of this faith community, but also the needs of the oppressed far from here.

If God is with us,

the impact of Jesus' teaching will come home to us, but his cross-death will face us with new realities.

If God is with us?

God is with us! Amen.

HYMN 106 Now thank we all our God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLjJJBfixR0>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Holy and almighty one,

how can we ever fully express our gratitude
for all that you are to us.
When we were far from you,
you found a way to embrace us in communion
with your Spirit.
Though we stray, again and again,
disregarding your commands,
still, you call us back and offer us forgiveness.
We are overwhelmed by the power of your
unconditional love that never lets us go.
We praise you for all that you are,
declaring to all our love for you.
May your name be honoured throughout the world,
and may all we are bring you the glory.

Holy One,
bearer of truth and goodness,
as we come before you
acknowledging our failures and shortcomings
we confess our lack of faith.
We so often lose sight of who you are and what we can be.
We get overwhelmed by aspects of our lives,
forgetting that we are held in your eternal embrace.
When things go wrong, we stop trusting that you will
help us find the way through.
Forgive the fear and anxiety
that separates us from knowing that we are held in grace.
Help us to keep our gaze fixed on you,
trusting in your promises and providential care.

Guide us by your Spirit, we pray.
Help us to discern your will for us more clearly.
Enable us to be open in serving others, especially
when they are wavering in their faith.
May we experience the wholeness you alone can bring.
In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Grace is God's gift.
Faith keeps us firm.

Salvation is granted to all who seek God.
In seeking forgiveness, our lives are set free.
Know in your heart, our sin is forgiven.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

READINGS

- **James 5:13–20**

13 Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17 Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

- **Mark 9:38–50**

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42 "If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes

and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

49 “For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

HYMN 590 What a friend we have in Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2skxuowcaY>

SERMON

How do you think about the Bible?

Mark Twain reflected that the parts of the Bible which concerned him most were not the parts which he couldn't properly understand but those he could properly comprehend.

If we look carefully at the Bible we can see that some of those teachings which Jesus left with us are so radical that we find it hard to comprehend how to put those ideas into practice. This brings me to the reading that we just had from Mark's Gospel. At first glance we are challenged with the idea of cutting off those parts of our body that might lead us into sin.

In retrospect this is not the most radical idea. What is even more radical is often overlooked. We just choose to ignore it. Even Mark probably recognises this as he tells us that even the disciples seem to have been oblivious to it. They constantly overlooked this issue. As a result we seem to be fixated on the self-mutilation in reference to burning in hellfire. In fact we are skipping over the main message which Jesus is sharing.

If we look at the way that Mark has constructed his Gospel we need to look at what leads up to the passage we read today to fully understand what Jesus is saying. Repeatedly Mark has the disciples missing the point that He is making. This section begins and ends with Jesus helping the blind to see. In the first healing story we have Jesus seeming to fail initially as the subject can only see people 'looking like trees walking.' Once Jesus repeats the healing the man can see clearly.

It can be hard work getting people to see some concepts clearly and the stories in between in Mark's Gospel reflect this need for persistence. A couple of weeks ago we had Simon Peter identify Jesus as the coming Messiah and Jesus commends His disciple for this. Then Jesus has to

correct him as Simon Peter was trying to think that the Messiah was an earthly leader, rather than God's Son.

Following Mark's Gospel, we next join with three of the disciples as they ascend to the mountain top with Jesus for the Transfiguration. This is followed by the disciples unsuccessfully trying to cast out the demons from a boy who is possessed.

Next we come to debate where the disciples are arguing with one another over which one of them was the greatest. As we heard last week Jesus took a child and shared that the true measure of greatness is the ability to welcome those who were the smallest and most insignificant into the community.

Today we hear the next stage where John tells Jesus about a person casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

"But don't worry" says John "we stopped him because he was not one of us."

Once again Jesus admonishes those same disciples who could not help the little boy. Jesus pointed out that the un-named person successfully casting out demons should not be stopped.

"Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

Then Jesus goes on with those confronting words about amputation being a better choice than eternal hellfire. If we read on a few verses we have Jesus chastising His disciples for trying to stop people from bringing their children to see Him. This is followed by the passage about the rich young man finding it impossible to follow Jesus at the cost of his wealth.

This is followed by James and John asking to sit on the right and left hand of Jesus in glory. Once again we have disciples pushing outsiders away and trying to get the best positions for themselves. It seems that they just cannot grasp the message that Jesus keeps repeatedly sharing with them.

Now we come back to another story about Jesus healing a blind man. In this passage Mark has Jesus hint that, unlike His disciples, the blind man grasps the full depth of the message which Jesus has been sharing.

Mark seems to be trying to help us understand how difficult it is, even for the closest of His followers, to fully grasp the importance of what Jesus is saying. This comes from the way that the Gospel stories are constructed with frames for each point.

There are two stories about opening the eyes of a blind man. These are interspersed with two stories of the disciples trying to jockey among themselves to become the greatest. In the same section we also have two stories pointing out that openly welcoming children is that way that the Kingdom operates.

While we tune into the stories that Mark is sharing we are also being allowed to see more context when we compare those stories with the surrounding framing passages.

So we can gather that Mark not only wants us to really connect with these stories but he also wants us to reflect on them in the context that he sets them out. Normally the passage we heard today would focus on verse 42:
“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

That verse then goes on to the idea that it is better to amputate parts of our body rather than being burning in hellfire. This approach has been used over the centuries to try to stop people from sprouting any new ideas such as women in ministry and divorce. However this type of restrictive interpretation of the passage is not sustainable when we look at it in the fullness of Mark's Gospel message.

In Mark's own special way he uses the concept of sandwiching as he interrupts one story with another. The passage about John trying to stop the unknown exorcist is sandwiched into those comments about children being welcome.

This is important here. The story about John trying to stop an unauthorised exorcist from healing demonised people in Jesus' name because he wasn't

one of their group is sandwiched into Jesus' comments about the little children. Listen to how naturally it flows if you take it back out.

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

It makes perfect sense like that and makes it clearer that the ones we better not cause to stumble are the people Jesus is welcoming. But when Mark inserts the story of the unauthorised exorcist into it, the two are supposed to be interpreted in relation to each other. They each shed light on the other. So what are they saying to each other here?

The story of stopping the unauthorised exorcist, being framed by the comments about welcoming children and by the incidents of the disciples jockeying for recognition as the greatest, begins to be clearly about a failure to welcome an outsider the way Jesus would wish the outsider to be welcomed.

That failure is seen as a consequence of the desire to protect and promote our own position and status as the most privileged of “insiders”. And, in light of that story, the image of putting a stumbling block before the little ones begins to be seen not so much as causing them to sin but putting obstacles in their path when they seek to approach Jesus and gain the sort of access to Jesus that insiders have. So why do I say this is so radical?

Have you ever been to a major event when you were more than just one of the crowd? Perhaps you were an invited guest and received special privileges? This treatment, perhaps enhanced by a badge making you stand out more means that you start to get a different perspective on the event than an ordinary person. To the insiders there you are one of the significant people and not just another member of the public, even if they don't know you personally.

This can be a very seductive feeling. I am sure that most of us like to feel that we are accepted and special. One of the automatic responses we might have is to try and protect that special status. After all if everyone was

treated equally then there would be no special thrill in being treated like one of the 'more' special people. This can encourage us to define and protect those boundaries.

Jesus could see that His disciples were starting to stop people bringing children because they saw having access to Jesus was a restricted and special privilege. Children were, especially in those days, not that important. At the same time those same disciples wanted to stop the 'unauthorised' exorcist helping people in the name of Jesus. You needed to be one of the chosen people to be able to use the name of Jesus! This is ironic given their abject failures with the young boy earlier. On top of this the disciples were bickering about who was more important and closest to Jesus.

This style of defining boundaries and protecting privileges has gone on ever since. Churches have lists of things by which some people can be excluded, especially if that includes some form of leadership. Most churches have people who are concerned about who is included in the membership records. They feel that somehow this status can only be maintained if outsiders are excluded before somehow proving themselves.

The issue of identity and ownership of faith is an ongoing issue. Those first disciples were competitive with one another. Mark's approach to this part of his Gospel makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is showing us another way to interact with one another and outsiders. Jesus names it as putting a stumbling block before these little ones. This means that we need to constantly ensure that we are not creating those obstructions in our community.

While we might see ourselves as supporting the ideals of holiness and commitment, Jesus might be looking back at us thinking that we are looking for excuses to restrict the access to some. Jesus takes this so seriously, that he resorts to the use of wildly apocalyptic language, that he doesn't usually use, to describe his horror at such boundary policing being done in his name.

You'd be better off with a millstone tied round your neck and thrown into the sea. You'd be better off with your hands and feet cut off and your eyes cut out. Suddenly the only image of hellfire that Jesus uses is not for sinners outside the church at all, but those inside the church who try to keep other

people out by putting obstacles in their path. In one of the most extreme things he ever says, Jesus basically says “Open the doors to all comers, or burn.”

Jesus is clearly challenging us to keep an open mind to our approach to outsiders. We need to be like innocent people in some ways who can freely start to play and interact with other children in the playground.

HYMN 491 Father welcomes all His children

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6WSdTo8n1I>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

May the gifts we bring be a means of healing
and hope for our troubled world.

May we share in God’s transforming mission.

May we build up the Body of Christ,

to keep us firm in faith,

strong in obeying Christ’s call,

and willing to embrace all people in loving kindness. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Good morning my brothers and sisters in Christ!

I will start with a quote from Teresa of Avila who was a nun who lived in the 15th century which will make us think about the Holy Spirit who dwells within us believers!

Christ has no body now, but yours.

No hands, no feet on this earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all of the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,

yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth, but yours.

Thank you, Lord, for these thoughts. Amen.

Let us pray, Loving God, Thank you for all the blessings and joys we have in our lives.

And thank you for this time when we can bring to you the burdens on our hearts.

Lord, we pray for everyone going through hard times.
For people grieving the loss of loved ones or broken relationships.
For those who're in a time of transition and find the uncertainty is
challenging.
For those who long for meaning in their lives and for a sense of
connectedness.
May your grace and light shine on us all. Lord, in your mercy, hear our
prayers.
Lord, in your eyes, there is nothing so broken that it isn't fixable or
redeemable.
And even in the darkest times and places, your love and light will always
prevail.
Eternal God, we pray for all Christians and for people of faith around the
world.
May our love of you God unite us in our love for our world and guide our
actions and messages.
We pray for our government and leaders around the world for wisdom and
compassion to illuminate their policies.
We pray in particular for those in conflict zones, for the people suffering in
Ukraine and Gaza.
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

This week's congregation and church from the Hunter Presbytery Prayer
Diary is Scone Uniting Church.

The Scone Congregation includes the rural worship centres of Scone,
Rouchel and Bunnan.

The Scone Uniting Church meets each Sunday at 9.30am with
approximately 25-35 people attending.

Rouchel has an average attendance of 2-8 people who meet for a monthly
service.

Bunnan has just begun to meet after a 3 year hiatus.

The Scone congregation is an aging congregation but welcomes a number
of locally employed Asian and Pacific Islander worshippers. On a weekly
basis, there is a Monday Bible Study group, a Tuesday Open Door Coffee
morning, and a Saturday English Language Conversation class.

The Pacific Islander attendees also hold regular services mostly on
Saturday evenings in conjunction with a Brazilian church.

Lord God, we pray for all the members of the Scone Worship centres and
their families.

May the centres of worship be places of welcome and hospitality in all their communities.

We pray for God's guidance for all who lead them and may they be faithful to God and to His Word.

We also pray that they will be open to God's leading in this changing world, and that they will be sensitive to opportunities in the path forward regarding Mission and Ministry and use of their properties and other resources.

Lord, in your mercy, hear their prayers.

With grateful hearts and minds and In the name of your beloved son, Our Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Please join me in 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 569 Guide me, O thou great redeemer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j48TLIRb4Q>

BENEDICTION

We are called to be a community of compassion.
We are called to work for the common good.
We leave this place of worship to be servants of Christ
wherever we might be.
So let us go, knowing that God goes with us.
Let us go in the fullness of the Spirit.
And may the love of God be in us,

the goodness of Christ be in all we do,
with the gifting of the Holy Spirit to empower us. Amen.

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