

PENTECOST 19

8/10/23

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to remember Jesus, the faithful one.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

We come with praise for Jesus, the compassionate one.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

We come to listen to Jesus, the teacher.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

We come to follow Jesus, the crucified and risen one.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

Opening Prayer

Sustaining God, be with us!

Without you we are nothing; with you we find strength for each day.

Feeling God, be with us!

With your confidence we can break with the past, and find joy in facing new challenges.

God of the Church, be with us!

In your Spirit, fellowship becomes a reality and worship is heartfelt.

God of Jesus, the Christ, be with us!

In the Christian Scriptures, the example of Jesus leads us on, and his risen presence strengthens us. Amen.

HYMN 155 O Lord my God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USM71JqV30o>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

We worship you, O God as Creator and Liberator. You led the captives out of Egypt, delivering them from the oppression of slavery. You gave commands which enabled people to relate to you, to one another, and to the whole creation. You implored people to worship only you, knowing that whatever was put in your place would all too easily become the object of idolatry, and the priority of people's hearts. You showered us with blessings by revealing in Jesus just how precious we are to you and through him you delivered us into a new and living relationship with you and with one another - with a new commandment -a commandment of love. May we reveal the depth of our love as we praise and adore you, O God, in Jesus' name and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Over the centuries, so many legalistic requirements were added to the commandments that they became a burden weighing people down as they strove to keep them. The apostle Paul counted himself as a righteous person as he zealously carried out the law as a Pharisee. He considered himself to be blameless. Yet he counted all that as loss when he came to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. From that time on, righteousness took on a new meaning. He knew that he no longer needed to perform exemplary deeds in order to earn God's love. All he had to do was to accept God's gracious and unconditional love.

Forgive us, O God, when we believe that righteous behaviour means performing perfect deeds and that is what is required to secure your love. Yet Jesus has shown us that we can neither earn or deserve all that you have done for us - all that we need to do is to accept your love as gift.

Forgive us, O God, when we find this hard to do because yours is a love so contrary to the values of the world.

Help us therefore to surrender any worldly attitudes and values so that, like Paul, we can celebrate anew lives totally centered in Christ.

silent reflection

Paul acknowledges a desire to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ so that he can die and rise also. He urges others to do likewise.

Forgive us, O God, when we lose sight of the goal of our lives as Christians

- that of following Jesus;

even when that means sharing in the sufferings and struggles of others.

silent reflection

In his life and his agonising death Jesus demonstrated above all his desire to give true meaning to the depth of divine love so that we could fully understand his commandment that we love one another as he loved us. May that commandment be so imprinted on our lives that, like Paul we regard whatever gains we may have experienced in our lives as loss compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Our righteousness comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (Philippians 3:9) The good news therefore is this: In Jesus Christ we are accepted, we are loved, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **Exodus**

Then God spoke all these words,

2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 “Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance 19 and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” 20 Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

- **Matthew 21:33–46**

33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went away. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they treated them in the same way. 37 Then he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” 41 They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected

has become the cornerstone;

this was the Lord's doing,

and it is amazing in our eyes'?

43 "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits. 44 The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

HYMN 547 Be thou my vision

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DORM8ttY1ws>

SERMON

Once again I am going to reflect on the Old Testament passage set for this week. The Ten Commandments are perhaps one of the best-known segments in the Bible. However this does not mean that the full depth of the Commandments are very well known. I doubt that many of you have looked at this passage in detail recently.

This passage is also well known among both our Jewish and Moslem friends. All three main-stream mono-theistic religions see the Ten Commandments as being among their foundational documents. It is a document which shows the followers of those faiths what is needed to live an ethical life, following God, and how to interact with God's people. The full details of the passage are probably not all that well known. The interpretation of this passage can cause a lot of confusion and argument.

Most of us think that we can recall almost all of the commandments by heart. After all they are considered to be some of the most basic rules in our society. If people choose to disobey them then surely they should be punished. I am sure that we can all remember lines like 'do not commit murder' and 'do not steal.'

On the other hand how do we see a rule like 'remembering' the Sabbath being enforced. Then there is the person who has designs on a neighbour's property, let alone his wife. It is interesting here to note that the commandment here lists the wife second in importance, after the neighbour's house. These are things which cannot be enforced in any court of law. How would we prosecute someone for having an extra god or two

which they secretly worshipped? I doubt that even in the time of Moses that courts ruled on such issues.

These statements are referred to in the Bible as 'Commandments.' This means that the Ten Commandments were not laid out as some legal document. It equally does not set out the full details of how to live a respectable life which is immune from some pedantic divine judge. All of it should never be considered as the basis of a legal code enforced by some court.

When we take the time to fully consider the purpose of the Ten Commandments we are actually being introduced to the way God looks at us as His people. It is a document which draws an image of a God who wants us to have freedom, live life to the fullest and allows our hearts and minds to be transformed into God's image. Through the Commandments we are drawn into stories about God's people and the ongoing conversation showing God's passion for His people and how it is expressed in a confusing world.

I am not even going to attempt to fully unpack the whole of the Ten Commandments in one sermon, that could take hours! What I do want to do is explore some of the Commandments in context looking at the meanings and intentions of two Commandments.

If we simply treat each passage as a set of universal principals then we have a fairly bland set of ideas which amount to little more than 'motherhood' style statements. What is there to argue against if we simply have a series of statements which argue against killing, lying and stealing?

Why do the three major religions who express connection to the Ten Commandments seem to be more concerned with bombing one another's neighbourhoods than the cheap clothes made by underpaid or slave labour?

This approach seems to be acceptable while the Commandments have clear guidance against stealing and calling for the release of slaves?

Why is it that tax minimisation is seen as a necessary business practice, along with stealing and bearing false witness in today's world?

We need to see the Ten Commandments as general principals which invite us to live a life open to consider the way in which we live and treat one another which in turn brings us into a closer relationship with God's grace.

How often have we heard the full Biblical words replaced by some liturgical summations such as that in liturgical works like the Anglican Book of Common Prayer? These simplified statements can be seen in many older churches on ornamental plaques and the like.

The liturgical version of the first Commandment simply says: "You shall have no other God but me." That sounds good but we miss out of the fullness of what Exodus gives us: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

There is much more depth and context here. We find a God who has a strong background of granting freedom and liberation to slaves. The reason why there are no other gods is clearly stated. 'I am the one who did this for you, otherwise you would still be bound up in slavery.'

We might start to see now that the emphasis of the first Commandment is on who God is and how we can relate to God, not just something that we shouldn't do. We are connected to the life story of a particular tribe who followed God and then we can learn that this God is just as connected with us still today. Rather than shaving bits off the narrative we need to recognise the importance of how the fullness of these passages reveal that God continues to act time and again, even in our lives.

This is the God who has rescued not only the Israelites from slavery but He continues to reach out to us today to remove us from the addiction to empty icons, like money. When we reduce this passage to legalistic and moralistic rules we end up with a God who is a fearful punisher waiting for us to make a mistake.

Jesus' teaching showed us how wrong this approach was. Jesus showed us a God who is compassionate and merciful, wanting us to be freed from slavery and helping us to be released into the inviting spaces of love and the fullness on life in God's family.

Now let's look at the fourth Commandment. This is the one about remembering the Sabbath.

In some versions it can also be listed as the third Commandment as well. While we routinely call them the Ten Commandments the way that they are written means that we could equally say the Eleven Commandments as there are some experts who debate whether the first two Commandments should be listed as one, or the last two separately. Whatever the experts say we are concentrating on the Commandment about keeping the Sabbath.

This Commandment had very deep meaning for the Hebrew people who escaped from slavery in Egypt. If we simply recite the liturgical version then we miss out on much of the meaning which goes with this passage. The liturgical version reduces 89 words to just 8! 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.'

The full wording missed says: "But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it."

As we know this Commandment also appears in Deuteronomy and says almost the same but adds 'so that the male and female slave may rest as well as you.' Also in Deuteronomy it goes into a different explanation of the Sabbath by saying: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

While the Exodus version invokes the reference to the creation story, the Deuteronomy version harks back to their rescue from slavery. The observance in Deuteronomy expands the Commandment about the Sabbath to put more emphasis on everyone who works for them, not just the Hebrews. This inclusion means that everyone is treated equally in God's eyes not just the Hebrews.

Now everyone is set free by being allowed a day a week to rest and be relieved from work. This stands in stark contrast with the current culture of people being expected to be working and available 24/7 expected by some employers. God stands in stark contrast with that workaholic culture which so readily disrupts any concepts of the need for recuperation and family time.

Just by briefly looking at the way that we see the Ten Commandments we can now consider that they are not about 'thou shall not...' but rather the lifting of unreasonable burden on us. Having a Sabbath can become an oppressive weight, giving us some joyless times to worry about accidentally doing something wrong, or it can become a time to reflect and enjoy the wonderful gifts that God brings to us. We simply need to understand the full context of how God cares for us.

If you have been feeling trapped in the endless cycles of the wage-slave culture, or trapped in trying to raise a family and maintain a household with

little or no support and an endless backlog of chores, then this Commandment is an invitation to an unimagined freedom.

This is a promise that God is not a workaholic. God was quite able to enjoy what had been accomplished in six days and sit back and rest without feeling the need to keep giving orders, exercising control, and producing more. And this restful and non-anxious God invites us into the same freedom and the same restfulness.

No wonder we are called to worship no other God than the God who sets us free, free from incessant overwork, from anxiety and from fear, and who leads us into the wide open spaces of love and freedom and rest. Jesus too said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

I hope you can see from these examples that the better way to approach the Ten Commandments is not by stripping them of their original context to make them somehow more universal. Rather our approach should be to identify the ways that in the original context there are parallels to the situations that we find ourselves in today, so that we can identify how God's Commands for us to follow in that context that allows us to draw from it still today. This way the Ten Commandments become, not ten more burdens to labour under, but ten invitations into the gracious culture of God and ten vital signs of life in all its fullness.

HYMN 598 Dear Father, Lord of humankind

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1MN3chW1Hk>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

From the assurance of life with a generous, caring God, we give to nurture life with God.

We trust the money we give with joy to the work of love, of peace, in the world, Holy One.

We thank you for inviting us

to partner with you. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Let us pray:

Loving God, thank you for our lives and all that you provide us with for our well-being. Thank you for the guidance that we have for living in the words of the Ten Commandments handed down through the ages. Unlike the people of long ago, we pray that we might listen to your guidance directly, so that our modern world can function justly for all people. We pray for organisations which strive for the common good, for leaders of nations and all in positions of great responsibility so that weapons of war will be turned into ploughshares, so that food and shelter and peace may prevail for all.

God of grace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of justice, we pray for our own country Australia. Over the past weeks we have seen the best and the worst and we have become more aware of the foundations of our society here with its conflict and pain, with the wounds continuing to be felt through the generations particularly for indigenous peoples. There are underlying tensions, questions, and a feeling of uncertainty. We do not like change, but are aware that for improvement to occur for all peoples, that change is sometimes necessary for us to grow with understanding and compassion for one another. Grant us a heart for one another's well-being as we go to vote this week, and may we be forever thankful for the new commandment your Son gave to us: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

God of justice, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we pray especially today too, for teachers in our schools who begin another term with their students tomorrow. We pray for children here in our community and give thanks for the opportunities for them to learn and grow. We pray for students who will soon be sitting their HSC exams, that they will have steadiness of mind for good recall. We pray for the little ones and their teachers at our pre-school next door and ask your blessing upon them. We give thanks for their invitation for connection to our Wednesday group women and for the joy and mutual benefits that comes from those relationships.

God of love, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Creator God, we hear in Jesus' parable today a challenge to us to be good stewards and care for the earth. We have been unworthy as stewards and have polluted the land with our greed; we have failed to be accountable for the sacred trust you gave us to care for the vineyard, this world in which we live. Help us to take seriously every day to be aware that we can do better so that we leave a lighter footprint; and may we see all creation not as something to be exploited, but as gift to be treasured.

God of all creation, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of compassion and healing, we thank you above all else for sending your Son Jesus, who upon dying for us, took upon himself our sin thus making us inheritors of your kingdom. Grant us love in our hearts and peace in our minds, not only for ourselves, but for all those whom we love. (We'll have a time for silent prayer now, to bring before God those who are especially on our hearts at this time.....) May your healing presence be with all who are in trouble or distress, may the bereaved be comforted, the suffering find release, and those in despair find hope.

God of compassion, grant these our prayers in Jesus' wonderful name, who taught us to pray:

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 380 Yours be the glory

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8b4tG_btLmU

BENEDICTION

The dream of Holy One revives life,

the wisdom of Holy One nurtures life,
the way of Holy One leads to life:
so align yourselves with the dream,
with wisdom, with the way of life
and live! So as to bear witness to God,
Holy One, source of life.

May you know yourselves held
in peace, embraced by love,
enlivened by holy breath. Amen.

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