

PENTECOST 13

27/8/23

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

The cloud-capped hills are silent evidence of God's power.

The color and variety of trees and flowers, bear witness to the Holy One.

The smile on a baby's face speaks of God's renewing miracle in humankind.

The knowing glance of an older person mirrors the wise, accepting God.

Praise and glory, honour and blessing, be to the God who has created us,
the God who has formed us as a community of faith,
the God whose love goes beyond the boundaries of time and space.

Let us worship God!

Opening Prayer

O God, you rejoice with us in the warmth and relaxation of summer, meet with us in worship this morning;

give us the peaceful space, which will allow us to reflect on your many gifts to us.

Meet with us in this our summer worship;

give us the openness, which will enable us to hear the appropriate word.

Meet with us as a fellowship of friends;

give us the courage to walk the hard road of Christian discipleship together.

Meet with us as members of the worldwide Christian family;

give us the willingness to share from our plenty with our needy brothers and sisters of other towns, cities, and nations. Amen

HYMN 440 Christ from whom all blessings flow

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

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Blessed be our Creator who made it all.

Everything we can see, and everything we can't!

We join in thanks and praise for the God who always has our back!

When enemies surround us on every side,

when the waters threaten to swallow us whole or sweep us away,

you are always on our side, God! You never leave or abandon us!

You free us from the jaws of the predators,

you smash open the snares of hunters.

We're free like birds soaring with freedom.

Your strong name, O God, is our help, our liberation.

God who gathers the outcast and hears the cry of the oppressed,

many of us know what it is to benefit from the way things are,

and we know enough to know that there is an underside to our political and economic systems that we are a part of.

Many of us are insulated by privilege, wealth, and power, while others –

the poor and powerless.

The plants and animals

and the earth itself

feel the hard edge of 'business as usual'.

We confess, compassionate God, that we quietly shake hands with unjust systems and structures.

Forgive us for the ways we see suffering but struggle to act with compassion for justice.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Our God never gives up on us.

God's steadfast love endures forever.

God finishes what God starts in us.

Grace is the only way forward for all of us.

So, trust in God's love,

which gives us both the courage to act and the freedom to fail.

You are forgiven, cherished, and restored.

Thanks be to God.

READINGS

- **Romans 12:1–8**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

- **Matthew 16:13–20**

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

HYMN 454 O Worship the King

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAyKmYD2Zg8>

SERMON

I am sure that after me preaching here for a few years now that I can tend to challenge some simplistic approaches to Christian thinking. Some people can tend to think that the death of Jesus was a sacrifice for our sins which in fact is a blasphemy that actually makes God out to be a blood thirsty monster. This is in fact a complete denial of Jesus' teaching. Jesus constantly quotes from the Old Testament prophets telling us that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

In the Epistle reading we have Paul asking us to make our bodies a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God. Paul tells us that this is the correct way is the right way to worship God.

If God in fact desires mercy, what is Paul talking about?

In our Communion prayers we often say: "we offer and present to you ourselves, our bodies, minds and spirits, to be a holy sacrifice to you." Has our liturgy got is all wrong?

Where does this leave us if Jesus is talking about the fact that God desires mercy, not sacrifice?

On top of all this we have some people running around this world talking about holy sacrifices as the indiscriminately inflict terror and bloodshed on others.

At the same time we have nations like ours talking about the sacrifices made by our military forces who take on these extremists.

So how do we make some sense out of all this talk about sacrifice?

If we look back to the Bible and draw on our Christian thought over the centuries we can discern several very different types of sacrifice. It is only when we lump them all together that we tend to get confused.

Starting back with the Biblical laws about Temple sacrifices there were a multitude of different sacrifices to meet a whole range of varying situation.

Some did involve the shedding of blood, others didn't.

Some sought to have forgiveness for sins.

Some were expressing gratitude.

Other situations were for making vows and dedications.

The ancient practice of slaughtering and burning an animal on an altar was perhaps the most spectacular and dramatic sacrifice. This drama can blind us to the fact that this was only one among many rituals.

Today is not the time to list all of the sacrifices in scripture. Rather I want us to concentrate on three broad categories of sacrifice to where we are today.

Firstly we can look at what is called 'penal sacrifice.' This is about dealing with sin. In this respect sin is seen as any offence against God, or gods, and there are subsequent penalties which must be suffered before a person can resume a normal life. Without this penalty being paid then there is a chance that the gods might seek other ways to punish the perpetrator.

This approach resounds in things we might hear any day. It seems to reflect our penal system. Once the offence has been committed then there is a debt that is owed to society and this must be reckoned with. Repentance is still not sufficient to avoid the penalty.

I was thinking about this when news came through about the tropical storm which devastated LA this week. I am sure that there will be some angry preachers there who will say that the storm and its consequences is the result of people not facing up to the consequences of their sins so that we all suffer. Only when the price is paid for that sin will the devastation be avoided.

The problem with this model of sacrifice is that it puts our God on the same basis as pagan gods; angry and violent and vengeful. The consequence can only be avoided with some sort of blood sacrifice. Jesus challenged this approach in the Temple sacrificial system when He quoted the prophets telling the people that God wants mercy, not sacrifice. For Jesus God is generous and doesn't need to be bought off by some blood sacrifice.

Still today some theologies tries to push Jesus message into the old Temple system by suggesting that Jesus suffered a blood sacrifice to appease the anger and hostility of His Father.

The next style of sacrifice come out of the old Hebrew system of religious sacrifice which might more closely match our approach today. This could be called a 'purging sacrifice' where sin and evil is dealt with by identifying its source and removing it from our community. If we are honest with ourselves then we could well come up with numerous concepts from Hebrew scriptures about expelling or executing those who have bought sin into the community. The blood sacrifice here seems to overlap with that of the previous section.

We can see this concept in the old Hebrew idea of a 'scapegoat.' This was a centrepiece of the Day of Atonement in the Jewish calendar when the priests would ritually put all the responsibility onto that poor goat which would then be pushed out into the wilderness, never to return. In this action all the evil of the community would be atoned for leaving the people with restored purity and thus once again acceptable in God's eyes.

When we start to work with the idea of purging evil from a community we inevitably then move on to blaming that sin on a particular person or section of the community. The Hebrew people linked this with the expectation of the messiah coming and wielding that much feared sword to drive out the evil people in society.

When Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah it would have been likely that those around them were asked to keep it quiet as Jesus was not going to be the vengeful crusader who would banish those Roman troops occupying the Holy Land. Jesus wanted His followers to have time to reimagine that concept until His message was fully revealed.

The idea of purifying the community of evil can so readily be seen even in our community when people are perceived to be a threat to our comfortable way of life.

I can recall groups like the One Nation Party and United Patriots calling out racial and religious differences as examples of the threats to our community that need to be purged. These people want to put up barriers to build walls and turn back people who wear burkas and act in ways which we might not fully understand. Their idea is that only by rejecting these people will our society be a safe haven for the true believers.

At the same time this approach only serves to build a reactionary resentment among those people which then further divides our tolerant community here in Australia. Hate speech and actions should be silenced by the rest of our community as it can literally kill people who are in some way different to our expectations. Purging sacrifices might seek to create peace but all too often end up creating a deeply divided community which can take years to heal. Just think of the 'troubles' in Ireland not so long ago. They are still in the process of healing from this deep divide in their communities.

This is why Paul goes on to tell us that we need to recognise that all the different members of the body all have different and important functions in the body as a whole. Peace can only be found when we can honour one another's differences not by dividing our body into separate parts.

So far we have all seen that 'penal sacrifice' and 'purging sacrifices' don't meet the standards set by Jesus. So what is Paul talking about when he calls us to be followers of Jesus who offer their bodies as living sacrifices acceptable to God?

The third sacrifice, the one that Paul is calling us to enter onto, is to offer ourselves. It is not about another person who should be attacked as the culprit for our troubles. This is simply 'self-sacrifice.' This is when we put aside our personal desires so that we can seek to do good for others and society as a whole.

Often the best thing to do for a relationship is to leave our personal preferences aside so that it remains a mutually positive friendship. This is not just relevant for basic one-on-one friendships but equally applies across our whole interactions with the wider community. Paul is reminding us to take up the cross to follow Jesus throughout our lives.

This can be as simple as stopping ourselves from doing something selfish that wasn't so important anyway. At other times it can mean that we have to be prepared to pay the cost of our commitment to Jesus. Jesus took it to the point of giving up His life for others. It can include losing the love and respect of some people around us because we will not join in crusades to purge the world of people they want to attack.

This pattern of self-sacrifice seeks peace but not at the expense of the 'other.' It supports the growth of space where others may enjoy grace and love and hospitality. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies we were not given permission to be mean-spirited and hurtful to others.

While we are talking about self-sacrifice we must be careful that we don't allow it to develop into something dangerous and ungodly. This can be seen in some religious extremists who blow themselves up along with the people around them. There is no hint of this sort of behaviour in Paul's message.

On reflection it seems clear to me that the religious and political leaders who executed Jesus saw this as some sort of purging sacrifice. There was a tradition of purging and dangerous threat from inside the community, especially at heightened times like the Passover.

Ever since then a lot of Christian theology has tried to link Jesus' death with some form of penal sacrifice. For these theologians that crucifixion was seen as buying forgiveness for us by paying some penalty to an offended and angry God.

However if we actually look at the words and messages given to us by Jesus He consistently teaches us about a God who loves each of us and is only too ready to forgive us and welcome us into His arms. Jesus Himself suggests that His death as an inevitable self-sacrifice because He stood up for the people who were victimised by our powerful and self-centred social system which was trying to alienate them from the love of God.

Paul flows through on Jesus' teaching with his call that doesn't follow accepted wisdom. Simply put we have the option to fall into the narrow ways in which social systems see things in terms of rejection and the sacrificial suffering of others, or we can do what Paul calls being transformed by renewing our perceptions in the ways which Jesus taught us.

It does not take long to see how the world is constantly tearing itself apart around us. This just amplifies the sacrificial way which Jesus left us with which shows that His way is not some utopian dream. In fact the message which Jesus left us with which shows a way forward which avoids the world's tendency to want to sacrifice itself to death.

When we talk about offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to God we are allowing that transformative message to stand up to the madness of ritualistic sacrifice of other people. We are transformed by the renewal of

our minds so that we simply follow the will of God living out what is good and acceptable in God's eyes.

HYMN 607 Make me a channel of your peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EikRxx5-8NE>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

We are loved and cared for by a generous God. Let us bring our offerings with a spirit of gratitude and hope.

Life-bringing God, we offer these tithes, grateful for the opportunity to share in your heart for the world, giving thanks and seeking your blessing. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We come to our prayer time this morning, as we've heard in the passage from Romans - we come desiring to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are at one with God's will. And we are thankful that through Christ our prayers are acceptable to God, knowing that the Holy Spirit guides and directs our thinking. So as we still our minds aware now that we are in the presence of God, let us pray:

Creator God, we pray for all things living on this earth - on and under the land, in the sea, in the air - realising that everything - all plants, all creatures big and small - are interconnected and important in the scheme of sustaining life on this planet. Help us understand that we humans are just part of that amazing whole, and that we are entwined and dependant on the survival of all. Transform our thinking about environmental issues from "she'll be right mate," to one of care and concern with gratitude to you, Lord God, for all things needful for life.

God our Creator, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of peace, we pray for those living in fear: in their own homes where there is psychological control or physical violence; in places where there are environmental struggles of flood, fire, famine or other disasters whether man-made or natural; and in areas where there is war and conflict causing intolerable pain and suffering. Transform our thinking from desiring retribution and punishment, to yearning for positive solutions for peaceful negotiation. Help our leaders to be thoughtful and brave, and may each one of us too, be willing to advocate for fairness and truth and to not be afraid when confronted with difficulties ourselves.

God our Prince of Peace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we pray for the future planning of our congregation and its emphasis on Faith, Community and Connection. Sometimes we feel uncertain about our future as a community of faith, but we know that when we step out with you that the impossible has possibilities. Strengthen us in our belief that just as the loaves and the fishes were sufficient to feed many, so you too are able to transform our uncertainties, our weaknesses, into gifts that are sufficient to enable us to thrive. Thank you for bringing us to the point of having a Mission Plan, and now we pray that those printed words conveying our thinking, may be turned, transformed, into action.

God who is Lord of all, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God whose Son declares himself to be the Son of Man, we pray that we too might be like Peter, who became confident in knowing who Jesus is: the Christ, the Son of the living God. Thank you for your patience with us as we come to understand you, and thank you for giving us the scriptures to learn from, and the Holy Spirit to interpret them. Help us realise that you sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to show us a different way of love and forgiveness. Holy Spirit of God, may our own personal acknowledgement of who Jesus is, transform our actions towards justice, compassion and peace.

God who is Trinity, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Compassionate God, we pray for all who are in personal need of healing, encouragement, extra strength and support. Life's journey is often complicated and difficult and sometimes problems can become overwhelming - it is to you we come for sustenance and hope. We pray for those on our prayer list: Val, George, Jack and Myra, Pat, Keith, Marie, Pam and Jan; we also keep in our prayers Mark and Judy. And we will take some time now for silent prayer for those we know in our own personal circles of family and friends..... We place all those for whom we have prayed in your hands Lord and give thanks to you for your gifts of mercy and wholeness.

God who is our healer, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we pray that this coming week, you will transform and renew us by your Spirit so that we live each day in love for you and for one another. Grant these our prayers in Jesus' name, in whose name we also 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 215 Ye servants of God

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZ9j3e8_yQc

BENEDICTION

We go into the world as a people who stand firmly on the side of life.

We are called to see, to hear and to feel the struggles of others.

We are invited to act compassionately and join with the God who transforms dead ground into Eden once more.

So may you know the affection of the God who is for you,

the solidarity of the Son who is with you, and the resolve of the Holy Spirit who is in you.

Go in peace!

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