

PENTECOST 16
8/9/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

This is a place of thanksgiving.

We rejoice that we are here.

This is a time to bring praise and prayer to God.

We rejoice in the opportunity for worship.

These are the friends who have become our church family.

We rejoice that they are persons to trust and support.

This is the Christ who goes ahead to challenge us.

We rejoice that Christ's inspiration has been there for us and always will be.

Let us worship God!

Opening Prayer

Creator God, we praise you!

The beauty of the sunset, the colors of hill and harvest leave us breathless with praise.

Holy God, we adore you!

The wonder, mystery, and peace of your presence leave us in awe.

God, Our Friend, we worship you!

You are known to us in times of deepest joy and in times of hard testing.

Just and loving God, we listen to you!

We will work your purpose out when evil threatens and fear looms large.

God revealed in Jesus, we pledge our discipleship!

We will bring the peace of Christ to those who suffer and the compassion of Christ to those who need support. Amen.

HYMN 210 O for a thousand tongues to sing

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

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Not one of us is worthy to approach you, O God, Creator of the universe, holy and all-powerful. Yet you have approached us and have shown us the

human face of your love in Jesus, your Son, our Saviour. He revealed your love and mercy by living as he did - serving others and accepting them as people made in your image and likeness. Jesus pointed us towards a world in which we each know that we are a precious child of yours. He even gifted us with the Holy Spirit so that the very fabric of our existence is woven with the thread of his life. May this time of worship be a true reflection of our thanksgiving, wonder and praise over such blessings.

Lord Jesus Christ, you swept away centuries of prejudice and legalism when you reached out and accepted people as they were - accepted them as loved fellow human beings.

We confess that we often fail to be as inclusive as you.
Forgive us if people feel excluded from our fellowship because of their appearance, their poverty, their lack of power or low self-image.

Pause for reflection on these words

Forgive us if people feel excluded from our fellowship because of their sexuality, their addiction, their lack of a job.

Pause here and invite people to think carefully and honestly about their local situation and who in the local community may feel excluded from coming to church and attending a worship service such as this.... then invite people to finish the next statement:

Forgive us if people feel excluded from our fellowship because of

Strengthen us, Lord, where we are weak, and make us strong to withstand the seduction of a society which seems obsessed with the acquisition of wealth and power. We know in our hearts that discipleship demands an utterly new way of seeing people as you did, and being with them unconditionally, as you were, but the journey from heart to eyes and hands and feet can be long and difficult . We pray your forgiveness Lord when we fail, and as people who have received your mercy over and over, may we be as merciful and compassionate in all we say and do in your name.
Amen

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

We rejoice in the good news that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, (John 3:17,18) but forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **James 2:1–13, 14–17**

My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality. 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, 3 and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here in a good place, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit by my footstool," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonoured the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," you do well. 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

- **Mark 7:24–37**

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 28 But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you

may go—the demon has left your daughter.” 30 And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went by way of Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. 36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one, but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

HYMN 215 You servants of God

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptLLr_WjCz8

SERMON

In a few weeks we are going to have a baptism after church. During the traditional liturgy there is a phrase something like: “May the Lord open your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his praise.” This comes just before the actual water being poured on the child.

The second part of the Gospel reading today brings this phrase up for me. A man who is deaf and has a speaking impediment is brought to Jesus. Jesus touches the man’s ears, spat and touched the man’s tongue and says: “Ephphatha,” which normally translated as ‘be opened.’ We can see here the ideas which are present in the baptism service, however there may be some hesitancy about my hygiene if I was to spit during the baptism.

This image is used in the baptismal rite because images of opening the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf and the mouths of the mute are used frequently in the Gospels as images of conversion, as images of the change that the Gospel is seeking to do in us. These physical images are used by the Gospel writers to emphasise that the healings are more than just a physical event.

In another passage, after such a healing, the religious people say to Jesus, "You're not suggesting that we are blind are you?" and Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you'd have an excuse, but since you are so sure that you see correctly, you stand condemned."

To me this suggests that God is constantly working to open our eyes to see what the Holy Spirit is doing among us and also trying to open our ears to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying as well as helping us to open our mouths to spread the good news of the Gospel. This is not a one-off event for us as Christians.

There can be so much happening in our world that we can be blind, deaf and speechless to what is happening around us. We have to remember that the Holy Spirit is not restricted to our traditional wisdom and thought processes.

There is an interesting conundrum that often arises in churches as they seek to spread God's word. This comes as we consider where to direct our limited resources. The debate can ponder whether it is better to send money to some project overseas which might be very worthwhile. At the same time there is the pressing need to get behind projects here in Australia, even in our own community.

With projects closer to home there is often more transparent accounting for expenditure. It can be something that we can easily relate to from our personal experience and knowledge. Also, there is the old saying that 'charity begins at home!'

It is just this truism that Jesus was confronted with in the first part of the passage we heard today. At the beginning of the passage Jesus was moving through hostile territory when He was confronted by a desperate mother. I wonder if He had come to this region to get away from the pressing crowds which were constantly asking for His healing and wisdom.

This Syrophenician woman recognises Jesus and falls at His feet begging for an answer to her daughter's suffering. While this sort of request is understandable, Jesus knows that He needs a break sometimes and that He was primarily aiming His ministry to His fellow Jews. Just talking to the woman, let alone while in hostile territory, is a big risk.

Initially Jesus refuses the woman's desperate pleas. Basically Jesus is saying that her needs don't fit in with the bigger picture of His ministry. Jesus gives us that classic phrase: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Let the children be fed first." This a harsh response to a desperate mother.

However in this case the woman was not going to be sidelined. She won't accept NO for an answer. She breaks open that age old divide between religious groups and men and women. "Dogs don't have to wait," she says. "There are plenty of crumbs that fall from the table when the children are being fed, and that's all I'm asking for, a crumb."

This is an important theological point. In this case Mark is using her to show us the full breadth of the ministry that Jesus is undertaking. It can be simply put this way. 'Your mission might be primarily focussed among the people of Israel, but God's love and grace is for everyone, the whole world is going to benefit from what Jesus is doing.'

Just last week the passage we considered had Jesus at odds with the Pharisees over the simple detail of the disciples ritually washing their hands. We looked at who is included, what was ritually impure and the insiders and outsiders.

Possibly just a few days later we have the full breadth of the ministry field perceived by Jesus' followers being blown open. Charity might begin at home but it is not confined to just our home or even our nation. Those closest to home do not matter more than those far away. God doesn't care where we draw arbitrary lines on some map. Those on the other side of the road, state, country, continent or world are equally part of God's family. None are less deserving of our care.

As God opens our eyes to the full extent of ministry we can seek to hear and see the Holy Spirit at work in the world as a whole, not just a chosen few. No doubt it is normal for God to speak the word of challenge through Jesus, but we need to realise that sometimes God is speaking through the most unlikely stranger, and even speaking that word of challenge to Jesus himself. Be open! Through the unnamed woman, God opens our eyes. Through Jesus, God opens the deaf man's ears and voice. And God's call to us, is to 'Be open.'

Let us allow ourselves to see and hear about what the Holy Spirit is doing. Let us equally be part of God's ministry in the whole world. Be open 'Ephphatha.'

HYMN 640 Kneels at the feet of His friends

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvQz513JI8M>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

The offering we bring is a means of loving our neighbour.
It is a token of our love for God
as we share in the transformation of our world.
God of grace,
as we bring the offering of our lives today,
may it be a means of peace,
that all people may dwell in harmony and equality,
for we know that is your calling to us. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

It might be that sometimes we think that our constant prayers are not making a difference - maybe we ask ourselves, should we be praying differently? But when you hear of constant praying for seven years and then those prayers are answered it gives one confidence. So I'm wondering if any of you watched Foreign Correspondent last week when 88 year old Dr Ken Elliott was interviewed? He's from Perth - he and his wife had started a hospital 44 years ago, in 1972, in West Africa. In 2016 he was kidnapped by Al Qaeda in the Sahara Desert and held captive there for seven years. This was his first interview following his release. People had been praying for his release consistently over all those years - over and over again. So this is just a thought: if you are wondering about the power of prayer, I'm suggesting you catch the programme on ABC iview.

Now, today from the Hunter Presbytery Prayer diary we are joining in prayer for the Singleton - Branxton Uniting congregation. They meet at Singleton for a 9.00am Sunday Service, and then at Branxton at 5.30pm. They have recently adopted a Mission Plan to enable their congregations to better connect with each other and those in their community who may be searching for a 'spiritual home'. Let us pray:

Loving God, we come together in prayer this morning for the Singleton - Branxton Uniting people as they have requested us to, praying with them that they might continue to walk in love and grace, fulfilling the two great commandments, to "Love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our mind and all our strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves." We ask that we too, here at Caves Beach, will likewise be obedient in service to you in all that we do, think and say.

Loving God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, as we hear the gospel story today of a deaf man healed, we pray that you will open our ears too, to the cry of those suffering across the world. It is so easy for us to be deaf to their cries because our lifestyle, with all its comforts, is so very different. Release us from our deafness and our blindness, and fill our hearts with compassion for all people. Help us to recognise our own prejudices and let go of them, so we can thereby be released to become witnesses to your love not only at Caves Beach, but through our mission agencies and other charitable foundations, across the wider world.

Healing God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we hear today too, how very ordinary things can be used to change people's lives for the better. Lord Jesus, as you used touch and even used spittle to heal the deaf man, we pray that your Holy Spirit will be at work in us, so that we too, may realise that our ordinariness, our very ordinary lives, can be a healing blessing for others. Help us to listen to others' pain and hurts, as well as their joys and happiness; help us to reflect your compassion, love and mercy to those we encounter day by day.

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

God of peace, whose Son is the Prince of Peace, we pray for the cessation of war in the Ukraine-Russian conflict, in the Middle East conflict, in the Sudan conflict, and other places where fighting is endemic. We pray for those seeking solutions, grant them wisdom as they endeavour to find a way through walls of injustice, that power may be used to build up instead of tearing down, that hate can be replaced with compassion, that the cries of the suffering innocent ones will be heard, and please God, that the noise of weapons will cease.

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

We pray O God, for the light and truth of your gospel to be known everywhere, so that all may know and love you. We place into your hands all known to us personally this morning who are in any special need because of health issues, sorrow due to bereavement, or any other trouble. *A time now for personal prayer.....* As we pray for our loved ones, we pray too, for all those in the medical profession, for all who help others to live healthy and happier lives - grant them wisdom, patience and gentleness, and may we all know your peace.

God of new and abundant life, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

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 690 Beauty for brokenness

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5_TVy2gHRg

BENEDICTION

We are a blessed people.
Wherever we go, we go in the purposes of Christ,
empowered by the Holy Spirit,
strengthened by God's presence

to be a light to the nations and true servants of the gospel.
May we be a source of reconciliation and hope.
And may the eternal love of God dwell in our hearts,
the presence of Christ direct our paths,
and the power of the Holy Spirit keep us strong. Amen.

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