

PENTECOST 21

22/10/23

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

The seventh day, Sunday, is a blessing for us, O God:

a day when most can rest and relax, and forget the demands of the workplace.

The seventh day, Sunday, is a blessing for us, O God:

a day when we can focus on spiritual things, and reflect and pray.

The seventh day, Sunday, is a blessing for us, O God:

**a day when we can gather for worship,
and share in the life of the faith community.**

The seventh day, Sunday is a blessing for us, O God:

a day when we remember Jesus Christ, and glory in his rising from death.

Opening Prayer

You have promised to stay with us, O God;

when we rejoice and celebrate, you are there.

You have promised never to leave us, O God;

when we go our selfish way, you are there.

You have promised to remain faithful, O God,

and in Jesus Christ, your faithfulness is proved.

You have promised to always be with us,

and in time, and beyond time, you are there. Amen.

HYMN 132 Holy, holy, holy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzM9P_Gqw-s

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Awesome and majestic God, your creative power, your glory and holiness were experienced by your people of old as clouds and fire guiding them to freedom. They believed that no one could see your face and live. How blessed are we, for you have revealed your face to us in Jesus - the human face of your love. You also equip us for our journey through life and beyond, by breathing new and everlasting life into our very beings, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We praise and adore you, O God, for making our lives so special, by choosing to share your life with us in and through Jesus. May this time of worship and the service of our lives reveal our thanksgiving and our wonder that you should so care for us.

Merciful God, we acknowledge that the major marks of Jesus' ministry were love, compassion and mercy.

If we are to imitate Jesus, then these marks will be clearly visible in our lives.

When our lives are marked with values and attitudes which fall far short of Christ's;

Forgive us.

We confess that even with the knowledge that we have been loved so much, we have not yet learned to love as fully as Jesus did.

When we substitute ideas and words about love for its practice, and then find ourselves wondering what is missing in our lives;

Forgive us.

Jesus demonstrated how deeply his life was marked with compassion through his willingness to enter into the pain of others and share their suffering - even at cost to himself.

We confess that even with the knowledge that we have been cared for

so compassionately,
we have not yet learned to care as fully as Jesus did.

Jesus spoke mercy; lived love;

and embodied compassion.

We pray, O God, that these qualities which so marked Jesus' life will be impressed on our lives and our witness so that we do not just imitate his life, we live it. This we pray in his name. Amen

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear the good news: If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **1 Thessalonians 1:1–10**

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For they report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

- **Matthew 22:15–22**

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality."¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and

whose title?”²¹ They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

HYMN 236 Jesus’ hands were kind hands

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7oAg1wZ3Rc&t=4s>

SERMON

Imitation has been said to be the sincerest form of flattery. This seems to have been the case with the faithful in Thessalonica. Even today some churches seem to want to imitate other ‘successful’ churches in the hope that they can grow stronger. The problem here is that no two churches are exactly the same. Many of the things that big ‘successful’ churches do rely on massive resources and if the local congregation doesn’t have those mega church supports they can seem to be a bit sad and desperate by only putting forward a poor reflection or imitation.

Our tendency as people to observe and imitate in our own way seems to be hard wired into us and our culture. Therefore individually and as a community we can tend to adapt and copy things that have worked for other people. This is what seems to have happened for the fledgling church in Thessalonica and Paul brings this out with his comment: “you became imitators of us and of the Lord, ... and you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

To put this Epistle in its place, it is generally considered to be one of the earliest pieces of writing that we have in the New Testament. So it is reflective of how the earliest fledgling communities learned from one another. Paul acknowledges this and acknowledges them for their efforts.

We as a congregation are about to enter into a new phase in our development of our mission objectives so I think that we can take heart that we are going to be learning what to imitate just like that early Christian community.

Now I want to turn to the reading from Matthew’s Gospel. While at first reading it does not say much about imitation, I think that there is a link.

Once again the Pharisees are wanting to get Jesus into trouble so they ask yet another loaded question. They are seeking a simple yes or no response to a simple question.

'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not?'

If Jesus were to say that taxes should be paid to the Emperor then the ordinary Jews listening would immediately turn against Him as He would be supporting the hated military occupation of the Romans. On the other hand if Jesus said that they should not pay the Roman taxes then He would be inviting a swift response from the Roman rulers which occupied the city wanting nothing to disturb their tax income. This seemed to be the perfect trap!

Jesus simply asked for one of the coins used to pay the Roman tax. What we miss here is that they are in the Temple where no foreign money was allowed. Hold on, how can this Pharisee have a Roman coin when those coins were banned in the Temple!

The Pharisee messed up here, badly. That is why they had money changers at the front door. Roman money was banned in the Temple as it had the image of Caesar on it and many of the Emperors considered themselves to be gods. Temple money only had religious symbols.

Therefore to any zealous Jew, like a Pharisee, the Emperor's image would be a blasphemous graven image. And here is Jesus throwing the challenge right back at that Pharisee. The poor challenger was already caught up in his own trap. When questioned by Jesus he would have probably mumbled without the bravado he had when making his challenge. By admitting to having the image of Caesar in his possession he was open to ridicule. Jesus then turns the whole debate on its head.

Jesus simply responds to the challenge by saying that with the coin carrying the blasphemous image of Caesar you should take it and give it to Caesar. Now turning the screws a bit tighter Jesus looks at a Temple coin and says that the things which belong to God should be given to God. This was as good an escape from sudden oblivion as can be imagined.

The escape act is in fact what I don't want to focus on today. Put another way the statement could be put this way: "If this thing bears the image of Caesar, you take it and give it to Caesar. But whatever bears the image of God, that you must give to God."

What is it that bears the image of God?

You do!

I do!

In the creation story we heard: “Let us create humankind in our own image,” said God, “in our own likeness. ... And so in the image of God they were created. Male and female they were created.”

Consequently anything which carries the image of Caesar belongs to Caesar and whatever carries the image of God belongs to God. So we need to make sure that we don't short change God. So let us consider the relationship between an image and an imitation as I think that one can enhance our practice of the other.

If we follow the Biblical teaching that we are all made in the image of God then we need to work to more completely and fully reflect the image of God in our life. In doing this we can more fully develop our own potential and draw closer to being the person that we were created to be.

There is an intrinsic desire to find and develop our destiny regardless of what stage of life we are in so that we can achieve what God plans for us and achieve our true potential. And if we were truly created in the image of God, then it is all bound up with the image of God, and so surely the only meaningful pathway towards it is bound up with imitating God and the ways of God.

If we ignore the violence and political dramas, some of the stories shown on the news can be very interesting. A few years ago there was a young man from the Philippines who was obsessed with making himself look like Superman. He undertook many plastic surgery operations and procedures to develop himself into what he thought that Superman looked like.

If we think about it the way that any average person looks is not like the on-screen character. With the need to drastically change his skin colour he risked looking more like a poor copy of Michael Jackson than his idol. The final result was more a tribute to those who had worked on him than what most people considered that Superman looks like.

Fortunately for us imitating God is not about making some radical physical alterations. There is always the risk of this approach with people trying to imitate Jesus but given that Jesus was Aramaic by birth He would have had a very dark complexion unlike most of us.

While Jesus is one way of thinking about God we need to look at more of how Jesus acted and interacted with others than looking for a physical imitation. We need to seek to live in the image of God and making cosmetic physical changes does little to make this change.

While Jesus is our main role model in seeking to be like God we also need to recognise that Jesus became fully human, just like each of us. We need to allow ourselves to follow in those profound footsteps that Jesus set out for us. This means that we can imitate Christ without being over-awed by His divine power.

A few weeks ago in the lectionary we heard that early hymn from Philippians where it celebrates the fact that Jesus did not consider Himself as being equal with God. What Jesus sought to do was to empty Himself of all those divine things when He was born as a human. Jesus forsook anything which would stop Him being fully human. In one of his hymns Wesley says Jesus: 'emptied Himself of all but love.'

What Jesus achieved was not because of any Godly power but all of it was so much more extraordinary because without divine power He set us a simple standard and we are still striving to follow in His footsteps. When we do see images of the divine in fellow human beings it can seem to be miraculous, even unimaginable, or just weird when seen out of context.

When we do start to discover our human potential we can startle people, even ourselves. The fullness of our human potential is simply the fullness of our image of God. If we are to keep growing in our faith we can do no better than to imitate Jesus. This is simply a metaphor for 'following Jesus.' We can follow His way of relating to others, responding to others and reacting to others. In this we can find the unshakable love and grace found in God. It is not an impossible ask.

When the Pharisee confronted Jesus in the Temple he was full of bitterness, hostility and seeking vengeance. In the Epistle reading the faithful too were facing threats to kill them and throw them out of town. While we might not be facing such dire threats in our daily lives we can still encounter explicit sorts of persecution when we question the rights of Caesar to keep people in never-ending off shore detention or the loss of so many innocent lives in foreign wars and not just in the middle-east.

In the face of such conflict we can still face hostility as we seek to follow the way of Jesus. It can be so easy to take on one side of a conflict without fully comprehending all the factors leading to the situation before us.

Evan as we start to face up to that perfect trick question Jesus doesn't resort to reciprocal hatred. His profound words are unflinchingly honest but rather than condemning His attackers to hell He calls on them to recognise the image of God in whose image they were created and He seeks to lead them on the pathway to being part of the solution, which is radical. This is

because it takes us along a pathway of love and mercy and generous acceptance of the others caught up in the conflagration we call wars.

The simple fact is that Jesus is calling on us to imitate Him by refusing to join with the paths which lead to death and destruction. We are invited to love everything in our life, even in the face of suffering, pain and despair.

We, as a simple congregation here at Caves Beach, also have this vision in our life. We know that there is pain in our world both globally and locally. We are invited not to flee from suffering and pain but rather to seek to be present with God at this time seeking peace and reconciliation.

I know that together we are discovering, ever more fully, that it is not the might of Caesar that will bring liberty and life, but the ways of suffering love, of sacrificially absorbing hostility and pain, and trusting that even the fires of hell will leave a seedbed from which resurrection life and love will grow for all the world.

HYMN 607 Make me a channel of your peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2svZhZT6Pro>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

We give to you our hearts, our beings. We give our money, to reach into the needs of the world with hope.

Receive what we offer with joy,

we pray, and may the gifts

of money, time, action, presence,

we give bring hope and peace

into a world of need. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

I think that most of you will know this verse from the prophet Micah: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) This is basic to our understanding of God, it speaks of His character, of God's personhood. We see these characteristics in Jesus, who is God. By His Holy Spirit, we are also to live in this way. So as we express our desires and thoughts in prayer this morning, we will

keep that verse in mind - that the Lord requires all of us, His people, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Let us pray:

First of all we will pray for peace in the world.

God of justice, this past week the world has added another war to its history. We see the horror of the killing and suffering on our TV screens and in the newspapers. We come before you with heavy hearts praying that negotiation might replace revenge; that hate might be replaced with brotherhood. We pray that historical hurts and injustice might be acknowledged so that a way will be found to bring an end to this conflict. We pray that collective punishment will be replaced by sanctity of life. That leaders of nations everywhere, will place the common good of their people and their neighbours above their own pride and glorification so that sustainable peace may prevail.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of compassion, we pray for all medical personnel in Gaza, and especially the staff at the hospitals coming under the management of the Middle East Council of Churches. As they tend to wounded people with little or no equipment, we pray that you will give them the skills and wisdom they need. We pray for them as they help others even though they are in fear of their own lives. We also pray for the safety of those trying to provide humanitarian aid to the innocent who are trapped in the conflict.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of love, teach us to walk humbly with you ourselves. We look to our own country, our Australian history of suffering, and our unwillingness to acknowledge that others lived on this land before us. Help us to understand that truthfulness and honesty is foundational to justice. Help us to realise that we do not have all the answers to issues that others find difficult to overcome, and so take from us our pride so that we might be willing to listen to advice. We pray for a way ahead for first nations people who have been hurt by the outcome of our referendum, that they might yet find ways to be acknowledged, and also that the gap of inequality might be lessened amongst us.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of wisdom, you yearn to bring us into your Heavenly Kingdom, where wounds are healed, fractures are mended, and power is demonstrated by tenderness. Thank you for Jesus' teaching that we have heard this morning, and help us to be as discerning as he was, and to realise that we,

through birth and baptism, are made in God's image. Help and guide us so that our lives might reflect not the love of power, but the power of love.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of love, we bring before you those we personally know who are in need of your special care at this time: members of our congregation, our relatives, and all who are our neighbours. We'll take some quiet time now for personal prayer..... Lord grant our loved ones courage and comfort, those who care for them wisdom, patience and gentleness, and to us all, your peace.

As we place these prayers in your hands Lord Jesus, so too, we sing the prayer that you have 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 599 Take my life, and let it be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf11rReeWIs>

BENEDICTION

You have worshipped God

on the holy mountain;
return now to the everyday
still giving in each moment
yourself, your all, to God.

And may Holy One see you,
hear you, and draw near to you,
wherever you may go.

Where people cry out, reach out,
clinging to life –
Holy One, hear our prayers for the world,
and respond through us.

Draw us into the world, now,
Holy One, changed by our encounter
with you, to become the change.

Amen

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