

PENTECOST 16

17/9/23

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

God's call comes clearly to us;

we will listen and respond.

God's support is there for us in times of stress and peril;

we will know a secure peace,

and return our thanks to God.

God's challenge is before us;

God will give us the courage

to meet the challenge, in the Way of Jesus Christ.

Opening Prayer

Loving God, you sustain us when our world crumbles. You are there for us when other supports fall away.

Enable us to search out the unseen glory and strength

that will keep us secure when the hard times come home to us.

Even though we feel like giving up, even though the way ahead seems without hope, you, O God, are "the rock" that will not move.

In our darkness, you are light;

in our uncertainty, you are always the same;

in our despair, you are simply hope;

in our fear, you will not give in;

and you put us back on the faithful path that Jesus pioneered.

Yes, you are there for us! Amen.

HYMN 231 At the name of Jesus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7w-tDjlpqk

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

All thanks and praise be yours, loving saviour.

In the morning, you come with fresh hope to start our day.

The dawn reminds us that we have a fresh start every day by your grace.

You sustain us and guide us in your paths of righteousness,

granting hope in the midst of despair,

joy in the midst of sadness,

love in the midst of hate.

You are pure goodness.

You are our true north.

You are our alpha and omega.

We praise you. We adore you. We give you thanks.

All glory and honour belong to you.

Forgiving God,

We are taught to forgive seventy times seven,

so great a number that surely our forgiveness

must be endless.

Yet we cling to grievances and past wrongs,

condemning our enemies and closing them out of our lives.

Forgive us, we pray.

Forgive our hardness of heart born of arrogance and pride.

Forgive our inability to see our own shortcomings, we pray,
and reshape us according to your good will and purpose.
Help us to take paths of grace in our relationships with others,
building bridges of understanding and compassion.
Have mercy on us, we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Love, forgiveness, salvation and hope
are the ways of Christ.

God is infinitely more willing to forgive than we can imagine.

So we celebrate this truth:

READINGS

- **Romans 14:1–12 B**

Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. 2 Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3 Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6 Those who observe the day, observe it for the Lord. Also those who eat, eat for the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain for the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

12 So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

- **Matthew 18:21–35**

21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, 25 and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

HYMN 675 Shine Jesus, shine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4hXJ9ax2FY>

SERMON

If you have been following the readings for the last few weeks you might have noticed that we have had a long series of passages from Paul's Epistle to the faithful in Rome. Today's reading is the last of 13 readings. In some ways this Epistle is Paul's most theological letter. These words were addressed to specific problems in that community.

This week Paul really gets to the heart of the issues challenging the community in Rome. Some commentators suggest that to fully comprehend the depth of Paul's work here we need to read it backwards starting here at the summation passage then go backwards to see how each of the previous passages culminate in this final summary about faith.

The church in Rome was in a state of flux because of historical issues. It is in fact not a debate about vegans versus carnivores. Behind the scenes there was friction between the differing views of how to deal with religious practices and their influence on something as basic as what could be eaten. Were the ancient Jewish religious laws binding on the Christians who lived in the multicultural city which had a multiplicity of deities being worshipped?

Essentially it was a conflict over whether you could be a Christian and not follow Jewish laws on food. While Paul alludes to this issue in some of his other writings this was a major issue in Rome with both Jews and Gentiles on both sides of the debate. Did ancient Hebrew dietary practices still prevail in a Christian community?

Before we get too far into this we need to understand the history behind the situation in Rome for those early Christians. Five to six years previously the Emperor Claudius decided to expel all the Jews from Rome. This meant that many Christians with a Jewish heritage would have been thrown out of town. The remaining community would have lost many of the initial members of this fledgling Christian community. Later the Emperor Nero came to power and he allowed the Jews to return.

If you think back a few years have you ever wondered what would the church here at Caves Beach been like now if some of the significant people from 10-20 years ago were suddenly taken away? Then some years later, without notice, coming back to a community which had moved on?

This is what happened in Rome. Then, just as suddenly, these significant people returned. After about five years of no Jewish heritage that church had changed. None of those remaining had any background in Jewish practices so they developed their own style with diminishing Jewish cultural influence. For those who were raised on the strict moral codes of the Jewish faith there was a massive cultural shock as they re-entered the

community. It was like the continuing community had thrown out some of their most basic moral standards and the community had compromised their practices with pagan ways.

Now let's start to talk about the meat. It has nothing to do with being a vegan or whether one way of eating is healthier than another. It was a significant religious/cultural issue. Previously there had been Jewish butchers to provide meat for their shared meals. When the Jews were banished this stopped.

Throughout Rome there were multitudes of pagan temples. In most there was ritual animal sacrifice. Once the animal was despatched on the altar as a religious offering it was then taken out the back and taken away by the local butcher who then sold it back to the people from their butcher shop.

This is where the religious/cultural issue arose. Can you eat meat which has previously been used as a ritual sacrifice to some pagan god?

Throughout the known world larger Jewish communities had established their own butcher shops. They wanted to avoid getting any meat which had been used in an animal sacrifice to some pagan deity. In the case of Rome there had been no Jewish community for many years so the locals had reverted to using whatever meat that was available for their meals together. This meant that the returning Jews had to avoid all meat until a satisfactory system was in place to guarantee religious purity.

At this early stage of the returning Jewish community there were no established Jewish butchers.

This is where we meet Paul as he writes to the two factions who each thought that the other was wrong. One only ate vegetables and fruit so as to avoid contaminated meat. The other said that they didn't care. Once it had been collected by the butcher from the pagan temple it was simply meat.

One group thought that there was no way that the Jewish practices should be compromised and that they needed to keep clear of any contamination by those who had let standards slip during those long years.

Those who continued to abstain from meat thought that they were the 'strong ones' who had not let standards slip. Those who had let their standard slip were seen as soft and compromising of the faith.

Into this raging debate comes Paul's message.

Both sides had established clearly drawn battle lines and they were deeply entrenched in their stance. I think back over the last few years when we had strong debates over things like women in ministry, how we recognised homosexuals and whether they could take leadership roles in the church, and so on. Other debates I have come across were about the use of Aboriginal art in churches as some of them were seen as pagan. I am sure that today Paul would again be drawn into discussions about who was strong and who had allowed outsiders to influence them.

Paul was a ground breaker for the early Christian church. He openly advocated for the freedom to explore Christ's message free from Jewish rules and regulations. For Paul no-one could follow enough rules to get on the right side of God's blessings. You could not earn grace!

Paul points out regularly that the only way we could encounter God's blessings was to put your trust in those teachings that Jesus left with us and let Jesus sort the rest out for you.

Paul says that if we put our trust in Jesus you didn't have to follow a whole myriad of rules, even if they did appear in the Bible. Simply follow Jesus (loving God, loving others and offering all your efforts to God) was a sufficient response to the grace that God has shown to you. The only actions which attracted rebuke were those things which conflict with love and those things which you would not want to do openly in front of God.

Taking up the logic which Paul shows us we need to carefully reflect when we start to voice our opinions on some moral issues which we rely on old Bible passages to support. It might be referenced in the Bible and it might have been the way things were done but that doesn't make it right. Things like slavery and women in ministry seem to come to mind for me. When we do that we show a lack of trust in allowing Jesus to sort things out.

Paul said that the use of meat that had been used in pagan sacrifices is not an issue. Those who were adamant about meat used from a temple were caught up in old belief systems, rather than what might be used to honour the Lord. For Paul the fact that the meat was honouring the Lord overcame any other cultural/religious issue.

It would be easy to stop the sermon at this point and suggest that we carry on and congratulate ourselves for what we have achieved so far. The sorts of outcomes we have been able to achieve over the years are significant.

Some people have viewed those steps forward as too liberal and morally wrong. But, if we stop here we are missing the whole point of Paul's Epistle. There is a sting in the words given to us from Paul:

“Don’t put anyone down for being timid in their faith. Welcome them into the congregation, and don’t give them a hard time for being hung up about things that cause you no concern. You who are strong must not make fun of those who play it safe; for the fact is that God has extended a welcome to them too, and the Lord is quite capable of getting them to stand where they should without your help.”

Here Paul makes it clear to both the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak.’ He not only criticises those who cling to the old ways set out in the Bible as if it was some rule book that had to be meticulously followed in detail so as to avoid any chance of some unforeseen moral error. Paul equally sees the opposite approach as wrong too.

Rather than seeing the Bible as a set of rules Paul sees it as a love letter from God calling us to live out our life in the community with boldness, generosity and showing passion. This means that our acceptance of one another is shown in our being prepared to acknowledge our connection with the community rather than concentrating on who might be right or wrong in the words of scripture.

Paul calls out to them saying: “Who do you think you are?” and turns his attack on those who want to look down on others. There is no room to make fun of another person’s approach to faith as that is a slippery slope to judgement for all of us. For some of us this might be a difficult approach to our faith journey as people look down on fundamentalists and moralists. We are then tempted to make fun of their approach. What about divorced people in ministry and women in ministry?

Many of us have been caught up in some of the debates over the years and have been accused of being demonic for our approach but rather than pursuing some counter-attack as a way of defending ourselves we need to be careful that we too don’t become bitter and twisted in our approach to issues.

Paul gives us very clear guidance of how to engage in these discussions as justification of our faith does not rely on rules but being accepted by God. So, if God accepts people on both sides of the debate we also need to sit with where God leads us, not relying on some ancient cultural rules.

When we greet one another in church we can’t hide behind some outmoded belief that they are in some way ‘in league with the devil.’

Paul is simply saying:

“Well you just make sure that you are not doing anything that is contributing to the breach, and that if one day they do turn up, they won’t feel a cold shoulder or a sarcastic smile, but that you’d be ready to welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ and give thanks to God with them and for them.”

When we gather as a community we gather as members of the Lord’s family. Jesus offers us all of himself in the sacrament of communion and He takes no note of scripture and ethics which we might try to put on top of that love.

We gather in union with all God’s people and in order that we may be drawn more deeply into communion with all God’s people, even with those who we don’t agree with and who may be hostile to our understanding of Christian living and ethics. But if we allow their attitude to us to become an excuse for making them feel unwelcome at this community, then we are failing to discern and honour the unity of the body of Christ and we are making a mockery of our own prayers.

In extravagant generosity, Christ gives himself to us and releases us from an unimaginable debt, and in this community we not only pour out our gratitude for that freedom, but we commit ourselves to treating all others with the same reckless generosity and mercy.

HYMN 459 In Christ there is no east or west

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpITJOShix0>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

May our giving be a sign of hope in a troubled world.

In our discipleship may we be the means of reconciling love.

Gracious God, you give without measure and love without restraint.

Let these, our gifts and the gift of our lives be signs of salvation and a source of true justice. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We come to our prayers this morning with our minds fresh from the passages of scripture that we have heard read, and from the insights that Mark has shared with us. We are a community of faith that endeavours to advance the kingdom of God and so reflect the teachings of Christ regarding forgiveness, hope and justice. It is about relationship that

nourishes, strengthens, comforts and heals. And so we pray for the world, our nation, our community, our families and ourselves. Let us pray:

Firstly for the world in which we live:

God our Creator, the world is beautiful and wonderful, and yet at times horrendous with both natural and man-made disasters. We pray for all who struggle to survive in devastating circumstances of earthquake, volcanic eruption, fire and flood. Give strength to both those who survive and those who aid in all forms of relief. We pray that government leaders will make wise decisions for people under their care. We pray too, for the victims of war and conflict. Give us all Christ-like hearts of compassion for those facing tragedy and loss.

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

And a prayer for our own country:

God our Creator, we bless you for this land, for its contrasts of landscapes and climate, for its abundance of wealth and opportunity. You know our history, with all its struggles and hurts in adversity, its courage and hope. Especially during these few weeks now ahead before the Voice referendum, give us in our diversity, tolerance and respect for each other and a passionate commitment to justice for all. Guide and help us in our understanding and hold us together as one across culture and race. We thank you that you have made us all in your likeness, that you give us new life in baptism, that we are healed and forgiven in the name of Jesus your Son. May we in all our deliberations and decision making, have that same generosity of heart toward each other across our nation, as you have so graciously given us.

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

A prayer for our community:

Loving God, we are so thankful that we live in this place where there is peace and security, that we have shelter and food, and all things needful for life. We thank you for those whose work enables us to live happily and without fear. In all this goodness we enjoy, we want to help others realise that the source of all that is good is you O God. By your Holy Spirit help us to change and to grow in love and care for one another, and so draw others towards realising that Jesus is the only one who provides real peace, purpose and satisfaction in our lives. May we be willing to be alongside others and give time, even just a listening ear, to those who are in trouble, or sorrow, or have any other need.

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

And we pray for our friends, families and ourselves:

Loving God, we give you thanks as we look back over the years of our life and thank you for those who have journeyed with us, our friends and family members. Some who we know are at present in need of your love and extra strength to face issues in their lives because some are in sorrow due to bereavement, some are in hospital due to accident or ill-health, some have anxiety due to difficult relationships, or uncertain times ahead. We'll take a time of quiet now, for personal prayer for those we know who need the Lord to hold their hand today And Heavenly Father, we place ourselves in your hands too, praying that you would continue to graciously lead us every day, deepening within us knowledge of your love, forgiveness and peace.

God of grace, grant these our prayers in Jesus' 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 693 Come as you are

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0cbQS55RTM>

BENEDICTION

Christ invites us to a new way of living,
the way of forgiveness,
the way of compassion,
the way of restored relationships
and the way of new life for all.

Go, restored and renewed in forgiveness.
Go to walk the path Christ sets before you.
Go in the freedom and the power of the Spirit.

And may the love of God sustain us;
the grace of Christ enfold us;
and the power of the Spirit sustain and guide us.

Amen.

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