

PENTECOST 18
22/9/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

The casual, thoughtful word of a good friend

can open up a way for us to encourage or to forgive.

The simple, generous act of a caring neighbor

can bring home to us the esteem in which we are held.

The carefully phrased note from a family member

can be the symbol of a love deep and profound.

And this time of worship – familiar, routine, imperfect –

can be a faithful reminder of God’s wonderful love for us.

Opening Prayer

The hug of a family member joyfully reunited

makes clear your wholehearted love for us, O God.

The singer bursting forth into glorious song

encourages us to praise and thank you without limit, O God.

The reader caught up in the pages of a great novel

inspires us to watch for your word in scripture and to find the message for us.

The researcher carefully exploring new territory

prompts us to look for fresh spiritual truth, unafraid of what might be revealed.

Jesus Christ, full of compassion; with clear intuition; honoring God’s word; fearless, forgiving:

Jesus is our pattern as we worship. Amen.

HYMN 107 Sing praise and thanksgiving

Not the same but similar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef1as5GTI5k>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of all time and space, of all wisdom and knowledge - we worship and adore you. You could have remained far beyond our understanding, yet you chose to reveal yourself in the person of Jesus, your Son, our Saviour. He widened the horizons of minds and hearts when he made your love and your wisdom known through his gentleness, compassion and humility. And you empower us with your Holy Spirit so that we can apply your wisdom to

all our words and actions, making them gentle, compassionate and humble. Gracious and wise God, accept our praise and adoration in response to all your gifts to us, especially the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Lord Jesus Christ, there are times when we all feel like victims - pawns in the power plays which seem so much a part of life these days. As usual, however, you look into our hearts and question what part we play in these power games. We know that in your eyes it is not social status, or wealth or reputation that count, and we confess how easily our lives can become enmeshed in such worldly values.

You risked personal comfort and security when you reached out to those on the edge of your society, lepers and sinners - people whom others considered unclean.

Forgive us when we fail to meet your challenge to identify with those whom society today would call worthless.

You showed us that the journey of discipleship is a journey into servanthood and powerlessness.

Forgive us for being tempted to pursue power and to favour competition over compassion.

You, Lord, saw the good in everyone and showed us exactly what it means to be the servant of all.

While too often we see others as rivals in the race for success, influence and popularity.

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

When we submit ourselves to God, we are drawn into the heart of divine love and forgiveness. Out of that deep love for us God sent Jesus into the world to save sinners - and to make all things new. And so I declare to you, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **James 3:13—4:3**

¹³ Who is wise and knowledgeable among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and lie about the truth. ¹⁵ This is not wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom

from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

¹Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it, so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it, so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

- **Mark 9:30–37**

30 They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it, 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

33 Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them, and taking it in his arms he said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

HYMN 601 O Master let me walk with thee

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXwXQnsaL3A>

SERMON

Has anyone noticed that there is an election battle going on in the USA at the moment. Each side is doing its very best to discredit and denigrate their opponents. Each one is happy to tell everyone just what wonderful people they are.

We had a small dose of this approach the other week with the local council elections. Each contestant was more than happy to tell us why they should control our garbage and road repairs for the next few years.

In the middle of this we have seen people stridently voicing their opinions as to who we should vote for. It won't be long before we have another Federal election next year and we can already hear the various party leaders saying how much better they are than their opponents.

When we come to the readings set for today it is very easy to stand here and pontificate on any number of political issues based on what Jesus says at different times in the Gospels. It is so easy for me to stand here and highlight the foibles and failings of prominent people, especially politicians.

Then we turn to today's readings which very pointedly should bring us back to earth. While our current political systems seem to thrive on one side trying to convince us how much better they are than the other mob, we are faced with Jesus' pointing out to us that this approach is not the way God approaches leadership. The reality is that Jesus taught us that none of us are in any way superior to another.

When Jesus became aware of the murmurings among His followers He simply said: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Similarly we read in the passage from James: "where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."

Here we see the duplicity of politics laid bare for us to contemplate. James goes on to say: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

It is too easy to put ourselves out as being better than those foolish politicians but then we are confronted by Jesus taking a little child and saying: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

If we take the time to seriously consider these passages we will find that we are being asked to take a hard look at ourselves and the way that we behave. Those disciples with Jesus that day just could not get out of the old games of:

- Who is in the lead!
- Who is the winner!
- I am the best!

What Jesus was teaching them was that His message was counter-cultural. Instead of trying to be constantly angling for the top spot beside Jesus they were to learn that the old ways were no longer appropriate. The race for power and influence was no longer the way forward in the new order that Jesus was establishing.

This brings out for us the theme which runs through the Gospels that whenever the disciples seem misunderstand Jesus ways, that message applies equally to us today. It can be very confronting to have to take a long, honest and hard look at ourselves in order to find out how we can improve our relationship with others.

If we reflect on Mark's use of this passage and those around it we can see that there is a fuller picture connected to this passage. Initially Jesus had spent some time alone with His disciples, steering away from the pressing crowds. This was so Jesus could pass on some important teachings. Mark tells us that Jesus said: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."

Initially those followers did not grasp the profound nature of the message. However those followers were too afraid to pursue the meaning of that message. I can sympathise with those people as they had grown used to Jesus teaching them using parables which included riddles and hidden meanings. So when Jesus starts saying quirky things like "The Son of Man will be killed and three days later will rise again," it is not surprising that they would not be expecting him to be stating the straight-forward literal truth.

This time there was no subtle hidden meaning behind the message Jesus was sharing. Just before this passage Peter had responded saying that Jesus was the Messiah when questioned by Jesus. Following that revelation His followers would have had a variety of expectations. These would have touched on the benefits of a powerful leader who would achieve forceful victories, especially over the Roman rulers. Enemies of God's people would all be vanquished under this approach.

There was no room in this perception of the Messiah for Him to suffer any defeats, let alone Him being killed. Given this conundrum there is little wonder that the disciples were jockeying for positions of grandeur.

Even in politics today there are no illusions that any leader will be popular with everyone. Even our current Prime Minister, Albanese, would be the first to recognise that many people would love to topple him for the job. How many other people in our world today hold important jobs that many people would happily challenge them for given the opportunity. This was the atmosphere that those with Jesus were experiencing.

Perhaps we are not too different today.

- There is a constant banter in our society about who we are supporting politically, environmentally or socially.
- Who do we recognise as a leader at different levels in society?
- How do we assess our prospective leaders?
- Do they win based on popularity polls or some other sorts of performance indicator?

In the passage today we have Jesus saying that He will be betrayed into human hands. This is more profound than being toppled by competing leaders. That's means that we, and the disciples, and everyone are sometimes unable to recognise Him as a viable leader worth following because we don't want a loser as our leader.

In the midst of this confusion Jesus remains undeterred. After all His bewildering and unexpected style of leadership is not about competing with others based on the usual worldly style of power games. Jesus is not aiming to out perform and out muscle His compatriots. This is why Pontius Pilate was perplexed when Jesus said that His kingship was not of this world.

For Jesus the idea of kingdom and leadership does not include competition and challenging rivals. This means that if we are presented with a political party or lobby group which comes up with the idea that they can fully represent Christian values and agendas they are in fact missing the point of the messages that Jesus left with us.

Jesus never took any interest in political activities in order to gain some advantage in impacting society. After all that promise was one of the temptations which Jesus faced in the desert prior to commencing His ministry.

However none of this can be stretched to mean that Jesus is only interested in the spiritual realm. Having said this we also need to recognise that His message dramatically shapes society and the objective that we should be pursuing. What Jesus said and did is in fact the basis on which we should shape our society.

Those messages and ideas shared all those years ago should heavily influence our approach to the political world in which we live today. This is not to support one political party or another but in actual fact it should strongly guide where our politicians are heading.

To Jesus, it seems, as soon as our political strategies become about opposing and defeating others, we have already lost our way. We have become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. When Jesus embraced the child and spoke of welcoming the child as the model for leadership, He wasn't saying that you should set out to defeat and destroy those whose policies disadvantage children. He was saying far more than that. He was also saying that such adversarial power games are part of what destroys the world that our children are going to inherit.

The answer does not lie in trying to beat one another with the quality of our child-friendly policies, but in becoming the kind of people who would much rather join hands in the playful company of children than destroy one another on our way to the top.

Are we any more ready to recognise and honour such a strange leadership than the disciples were?

For the most part, on the odd occasions when we see such playful joyous bridge-building leadership, we dismiss it with faint praise. We say that it is very lovely, but that it is rather naive and utopian, and we quickly turn back to the strong leaders, the influential movers and shakers, the winners.

Jesus won't play our power games. And He certainly won't validate our attempts to co-opt God into our power games and to claim that God is on

our side against our opponents. Jesus reveals to us the face of a God whose only true enemy is enmity itself, and who would rather allow Himself to be crushed in the grinding wheels of power than surrender to becoming such a power wielder.

Despite clearly knowing that such a radical refusal to conform to the political norms would result in the loss of public support and death at the hands of a coalition of angry opponents, Jesus also knew that death does not have the last word. He knew that real life, the life that is really worth living, is only reached by travelling a thoroughly non-conformist pathway that may result in rejection, suffering and death.

Real life in the wide-open spaces of God's non-competitive love can be found on no other path. May all of us have the grace and courage and child-like playfulness to follow Jesus through that gateway into real life and love.

HYMN 650 Brother sister, let me serve you
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQaOErUUjm8>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Receive the gifts we bring
and the offering of our lives,
that the world may know the extent of your love for all and your desire to transform it for peace and wellbeing.
We dedicate our lives to serving your mission,
to be bearers of Christ and his message
of salvation for all. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Merciful God,
who offers the gift of abundant life and
promises to be present by your Spirit,
hear the prayers for others we bring this day.

We pray for situations where people
are divided from one another by greed, selfishness and intolerance.
May your wisdom show us the way of truth.

We pray for peace in the world,
especially in places of violence, hatred and war.
May your wisdom show us the way of forgiveness.

We pray for all families, especially lifting before you people living in poverty
where children go hungry, and parents see no hope for their future.
May your wisdom show us the way of equality.

And we pray for your church and one another.
Unite us in Christ, so we may truly be his body
with a common purpose and deep love for one another.
May your wisdom show us the way of tolerance.
In all things, we ask that your will be done
and that we may be your agents of healing and mercy.

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 589 Jesus calls us!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLAkxWKQnww&t=6s>

BENEDICTION

God's wisdom calls us to live a transformed
and transforming life.
The mission of Christ is the source of peace
and prosperity for all.
The gift of the Spirit is the means of living a life
of trust in God's providential care.
May God's love hold us fast.

May Christ's Word direct our paths,
and may the Holy Spirit empower our service.
This day and forever. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzpJ0rLtufA>