

EASTER 5
28/4/24
CAVES BEACH

ANZAC SEGMENT

ANZAC Day is of special significance to the people of both Australia and New Zealand. We commemorate the day on which our combined forces first went into battle together. It was at a place called Gallipoli in Turkey during World War 1. For us this is a time, not to glorify war, but to solemnly commemorate everything that our brave armed forces have striven for ever since that fateful day in 1914. While we as a nation are not directly involved in any armed conflict far too many countries are involved in wars across the world.

Today I would like to invite all of you to join with me in a short time of commemoration.

LET US PRAY

Today, we recall those who,
In the tragedy of war gave their lives for the people of Australia and New Zealand
and those who died for the freedom of all people.
We remember those who fell on the ridges of Gallipoli;
those who rest in the cemeteries of the great wars;
those who rest in the haze of deserts and jungle;
those who rest in the depths of the seas.
We remember those who have fallen in the defence of peace,
on land, in the air and on the seas.
We remember each man, woman and child who has died
so that the light of freedom, justice and humanity may continue to shine.
Today as we remember we ask God that our praise may be worthy of their sacrifice.
Strengthen us now,
in these times of uncertainty and confusion.
Amen

THE ODE

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn;
At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.
We will remember them.

LAST POST

SILENCE

Lest we forget!
Lest we forget
We will remember them.
We will remember them.

ROUSE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus is the true vine and God is the vine grower.
We are the branches.
It is God's Word that makes the branches strong;
and the Word bears fruit.
The Word gives rise to action;
and action proves our discipleship.
God celebrates when we act faithfully;
and we give back praise and glory, to God.

Opening Prayer

Where do we see you, O God?
We see you in the most helpless baby, as creator and caregiver.
When do we know you, O God?
We know you in the laughter and play of growing children, as the spirit of carefree joy.
How do we experience you, O God?
We experience you in mature men and women, as the renewer of confidence and strength for a new day.
In whom do we know you, O God?
We know you in those of later years, as the provider of unforeseen opportunities and the eternal sign of hope. Amen.

HYMN 547 Be thou my vision

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DORM8ttY1ws>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of love,
we know that we can be honest and open with you
in a way that we cannot be with other people
and even, sometimes, with ourselves.
You know us as we are
and you love us as we are.
Today, we come together to remember
that we are loved,
all of us,
everywhere,
for all time,
in all situations.
We are loved, and this is enough.

God of love,
our scriptures say you have given us your Spirit.
You have breathed life into us.
Your Spirit is life in us!
We confess that we live so often
as if we were not filled with your breath,
as if we are not animated by your Spirit.
We so often live exhausted lives.
We could live breathing your Spirit,
but we exist choking on our fear, uncertainty, and pain.
We could live filled with your love and energy,
yet we exist, deflated and gasping.
Forgive us, God of infinite patience.
Forgive us for not breathing in and breathing out
your love and care for us and all the world.
Forgive us for holding our breath
when you want to fill us in every moment.
Forgive us.
Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Beloved, let us love one another,
because love is from God;

everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

This is love.

This is forgiveness.

This is truth.

READINGS

- **1 John 4:7–21**

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

- **Acts 8:26–40**

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and

was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

33

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

HYMN 491 Father welcomes all his children

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwbWTSsIYy0>

SERMON

Given the traditional perspective that we have about our family in society it is little wonder that our worship tends to mirror that approach in our religious life. Most societies in the last few thousand years have taken the family first approach.

It is a common thread in society where people are prepared to lay down their lives for their families long before any other motivating issue.

Observers also seem to agree that our Christian faith is always seen as pro-family.

Traditionally our sermons support this approach to society. We are encouraged to absorb family values and to defend our family from outside threats. Many churches project themselves in social media as being 'family friendly.' Pursuing a 'family ministry' program has been seen as a certain way of maintaining a congregation's growth.

However this emphasis on family values can be very confronting for those people who have not experienced an ideal family in their life. For some the experience has been one of fear and disfunction and even assaults and all too often murder. Some have made valiant efforts at creating a loving family only to have it end up in the family law court.

Sometimes, despite their ongoing efforts, people have not ended up with a life partner. Some weren't able to conceive. The pressure of society is such that many of these people have ended up being considered as failures when there is no actual fault. These people are not misfits but normal people in different situations.

In the reading from Acts today we come across a person who might find themselves ostracised when there is an unreasonable emphasis on the perfect family. This man was a very high ranking official who obviously was very important in his home country due to the scale of his entourage.

At the same time he was a person searching for a fulfilling relationship with God. He would have had to travel a long way to make his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. While nothing is said about his experience in the Temple we can deduce that it would have not been very fulfilling.

As he was from Ethiopia he would have been an African man and so he was seen as a gentile by the Jewish Temple authorities. Gentiles were restricted to the outer court of the Temple. His skin colour would have been a barrier to his being accepted by devout Jews in the community.

On top of this we are told that he was a eunuch, probably castrated as a child so that he was not distracted from his duty by family considerations. Eunuchs were commonly preferred in many places as their inability to have a family which they might cause conflicts of interest between their role

and family ties. This was especially so when there was a female monarch as there could be no untoward inferences about relationships being built on sexual favours.

The eunuch that Phillip encountered was in fact a favoured court official of Queen Candace of Ethiopia. However his social standing had no influence on how he would have been received in Jewish circles in Jerusalem.

Producing offspring was a social necessity in Jewish society. That demand remains right up until today. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures producing a large family was a most treasured possession, or even obsession. It was seen as sign of God's blessing. In this context a eunuch was not just pitied but despised as he had failed to fulfill social expectations.

Deuteronomy 23:1 says: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD."

This then raises a serious question for me.

- Why was this powerful man making such a pilgrimage?

He should have known that he would be barred from the inner sanctums of the Temple.

This was obviously a person with a strong desire to find some spiritual connection. This would include seeking a place of belonging where he was not excluded on racial and sexual grounds. Perhaps in his spiritual journey he had come across the God of Israel? This could well be the case as he was reading the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah when we meet with him. This book of the Old Testament included the following promise:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
"The LORD will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."

For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

Here we are drawn to the play on words about not being cut off. This promise of welcome is a breakthrough promise for some one who has been 'cut off' from normal society. The promise is everlasting. Perhaps this might have been the reason why that man went to Jerusalem? He was searching for a God who could include someone like him.

Now Philip comes across the travelling caravan as the man was looking at the passage which says:

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

This traveller was *cut off*. The traveller wonders about his idea and is contemplating who he can connect with. He has been rejected in Jerusalem and the Temple. Who is the one who will help his connect with the life-giving connection to God?

Then, here come Philip. Building on the scriptures in Isaiah, Philip shares the good news of God's love revealed in Christ Jesus. Very little else is included about this discussion. Then the eunuch seeks baptism in a water hole that they are passing by.

This is where we have a repeat of the encounter of some disciples at the end of Luke. Once the miracle has occurred the person who led them disappears. In Luke it was two disciples who were dejectedly returning home to Emmaus until they broke bread with their traveling companion. Here it is the eunuch who is baptised. In both cases the recipients are left celebrating. Their travelling companion simply disappears.

The eunuch has become so used to being blocked that he was surprised when Philip offers an open invitation. The man is welcomed into the family of God without reservation or restrictions. Here we can start to recognise the pattern of linking the post ascension events to the Easter miracle. People who had been previously excluded for whatever reasons were now

accepted as part of God's family. There were no pre-conditions on the baptism.

While Luke can sometimes use the language of repentance he chooses not to use it when dealing with those who are different in some way. This new family being revealed to us in Acts is not hampered by harking back to old ideas of conformity to some social rules. Even today this can be a challenge to people like most of us who have never had to face the barrier of something like racial profiling.

Luke in this passage is making it abundantly clear that the new family of God coming out of the presence of the Holy Spirit is no longer a mirror of the old approach of favoured family blood lines and boundaries or any other barrier to being full inheritors of the Kingdom.

While we might not all have faced the issue of racial discrimination or gender barriers many of us can relate to the feeling of being 'cut off.' There may have been dysfunctional families, broken marriages and just no suitable opportunities in life. Combined with this many would also have been exposed to church communities which could not express the boundless acceptance of God, preferring to set up rigid and isolating rules which separated anyone who didn't match some perfect model in their lives. Many would have felt that they were being kept at arm's length, never being fully accepted.

In Luke's writing in both his gospel and the passages in Acts we come across there is a message of wonderful hope. Even if some of communities are less than gracious God is more that willing to accept all believers with open arms as followers of the living Christ.

It can be strange to recognise that the message shared by Jesus is actually quite unimpressed with the importance of traditional families. Jesus speaks quite dismissively of family ties, and in the culture of his day, that was even more radical than it would be now.

The early church was frequently criticised as being a threat to the family in family-centred Roman society. Jesus does not give much credence to the idea that blood is thicker than water. But he does speak of a new type of family where all who follow the will of God are his brothers and sisters.

And the way into this new family, open even to those who have always before been cut off, is through putting our trust in Jesus the Messiah and being adopted through the waters of baptism.

This news may be a stumbling block if you've done well in the happy family's game, but to all who have known what it is to be cut off, this is the most extraordinary good news. Much to our surprise and against all conventional wisdom, in the new family of Jesus the Messiah, the water of baptism turns out to be thicker than blood!

HYMN 629 When I needed a neighbour
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fExR7eOhJ00>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

We participate in the love and generosity of God here, now and in every part of our lives.

Let us be givers.

God of all giving,

the gifts you give us,

we want to share with our sisters and brothers,

here,

in the community around us,

and around the world.

We pray in hope and love.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Lest we forget!

Let us pray:

God of love and liberty, we bring our thanks for the peace, freedom and security we enjoy,

which was won for us through the courage and devotion of those who gave their lives in time of war.

We pray that their labour, bravery, selflessness and sacrifice may not be in vain, but that their spirit may live on, in us and in generations to come.

Lord, in your mercy: We will remember them!

This week's Hunter Presbytery Prayer is for the Cessnock- Bellbird Uniting Church Congregation.

Cessnock Bellbird Congregation meets every Sunday at 9.30am followed by fellowship over morning tea.

They have two worship centres (Cessnock and Bellbird) although services are held only at the Cessnock building.

Reach up ... Reach out ... Reach in ... is their catch phrase. Their innovations team meets to think up, plan and then carry out (with the help of congregation members) a whole bunch of energetic, innovative outreach ideas! (E.g. Christmas tree festival, Carols in the Bush, Seniors Showcase).

They have linked with Hunter Food Relief, Cessnock Rotary and Cessnock Lions clubs to offer meals and help to homeless and vulnerable members of the local community. Our congregation numbers are about 40 people, mainly over 70 years old. We are a happy and welcoming group, with very encouraging new members.

They have asked to pray for their new minister as she leads them into the future; for their innovations team and all congregation members as they venture more into the community' and for the groups working from their church hall to help the vulnerable and the needy of the area.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayers.

Lord, we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been caught in the crossfire in both Israel and Gaza. O Lord, please preserve life and shelter for those who own and proclaim your name in those lands. We pray that the peoples of Israel and the Middle East will find everlasting hope in you. And in the land of your Son's redeeming death and resurrection, turn hearts to look to the Saviour and live.

Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayers.

Lord, we pray for all who are suffering in war torn countries, domestic violence, persecution and injustice. All who are in fear of their lives. Lord, comfort them when they are in pain. Give them your peace when they are experiencing anxiety or fear. And give them your strength in their time of weakness. Lord, guide them to safer places. Lord, help them know you are with them always. That you never give up on any of us.

Lord, Please empower all the world leaders to be people of justice, integrity, compassion and goodness.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayers.

In the precious name of your beloved son, our amazing Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Amen.

Please join me in the Lord 's Prayer.

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 152 Joyful, joyful, we adore you
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMY3ivdNzwE>

BENEDICTION

May the love of God that is wider, deeper, and stronger than you can ever know guide and guard you this day.

May the love of Christ, companion with us on the road, travel with you.

May the love of the Spirit of God so infuse every part of your life that you know the presence of God with you always.

Go in peace. Go in hope. Go in love.

Amen.

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