

Eater 6
Sunday 17 may 2020
Caves Beach

CALL TO WORSHIP

We come to together today to encounter God
and be encountered by love.

We come with open hearts.

God's love is greater than we can imagine. It animates creation
and transforms despair into hope.

We come to be renewed.

Let us worship the one whose name is Love.

We come to worship our God.

Spirit of God,
you are ever-present,
and closer than we can imagine
for in you we live and move and have our being. Open our eyes to see and our ears to hear
that we might be transformed by love and made new by your presence. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Today is a day to give thanks
for God is good and God is love.

God does not need to be served by human hands, but delights in our service to one another.
As we show love, so we are transformed by love. Today is a day to give thanks
for God is good and God is love.

God is the great creator of all that is,
and delights in all the peoples of the world, for we are all God's offspring, made for love. Today
is a day to give thanks
for God is good and God is love.

As we offer thanks and praise to God,
Let us open our lives to God's goodness and love. May we be transformed in our living.

Loving God,
in you we find our home
and from your love we learn what it is to love.
Yet we confess that we do not always follow in your way.
Call us back that we might take our place as your people.
We struggle to love as you love.
Instead we prefer to live selfishly;
to claim that we are at the centre of the universe;
to disregard your call to care for the earth
and to ignore the pain and suffering of our neighbours.
When we move far away from love
call us back that we might take our place as your people.

We struggle to love as you love. Instead we prefer to live in fear – that we will never have enough; that we will never be secure; that we will never be complete. When we move far away from love call us back that we might take our place as your people. Amen.

READINGS

Acts 17:22-31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

²⁹ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Psalms 66:8-20

Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹ who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.
¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will pay you my vows,
¹⁴ those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats.
¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.
¹⁷ I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.
¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

²⁰ Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

1 Peter 3:13-22

¹³ Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

John 14:15-21

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

SERMON

As we move through a time of uncertainty we can often feel that we are a bit like Paul when he wandered through all those statues in Athens. We are feeling bombarded with a myriad of different and confusing messages.

- 'Keep a social distance,'
- COVID 19,
- 'lockdown' as well as that big issue
- 'when will it be safe to start living again!'

The list goes on. And we end up asking: "What happened to a normal life?"

Last week in John's Gospel we looked at a simple statement from Jesus that He is the Way and the Truth and the Life. This week we are moving on to look at our faith in a world of idols and different faith systems.

Paul is in Athens and as he wanders through the city he comes across a myriad of different idols to every possible deity. People were paying homage so as to take advantage of every possibility of getting any god's favour. Paul realised that the people of Athens were trying to be very religious. When he was eventually invited to address a gathering of a group of the respected and distinguished thinkers of the city, known at the Areopagus he spoke his truth. He had been invited to explain to them what his faith was about.

Paul's speech is an excellent look at the way we should deal with people of other faiths and belief systems. When we are asked to share about our faith we should do so with gentleness and respect. If we look at Paul's own writings in the Epistles we may not always

consider him to be a gentle debater, but in this instance it was a very gentle but profound approach. He starts out by affirming those present for the way that the city had developed with a keen interest in religion generally.

Paul then goes on to quote from two of their revered poets. Rather than trying to rubbish their beliefs he picks up on aspects of those beliefs which gelled with Christ's message. He had also found a shrine to an "unknown" god. Paul identifies this and shares the fact that he is not there to talk about something new or strange. What he is sharing with them is the knowledge of a faith that is already within them.

- Was this a piece of amazing marketing by Paul?

- Or, is he speaking with integrity about some of the deep truths about the nature of God?

I am sure that the modern advertising industry could take a few lessons from Paul's approach. He was gently getting their attention and support before getting to the core issues. We can be assured that Paul knew what he was talking about.

The quote he uses from the Greek poet Epimenides is particularly instructive. "In God we live and move and have our being." Here Paul is pointing out that regardless of what a person believes no one is completely isolated from God. God still can influence them. To be alive in our universe is to be surrounded by God and his influence is always there. We cannot be removed from this contact. Whether we are sitting, walking or praying, even talking, God is present. Just to walk from one place to another in the house we rely on oxygen just as much as we rely on God. Paul is sharing with us that God wants to be connected with us. God is ever present when we reach out to Him.

It appears that Paul is saying that all religious seekers, regardless of their faith, are making a genuine attempt to have contact with God. And it can be seen that Paul is saying that God does not decline their searching efforts. Their doctrines might be off course but this does not preclude them having contact with God. Paul points out that God can tolerate those seekers who have no alternative understanding of Jesus' message.

This is where Paul brings his message home. Once we are aware of the alternatives then we are given the choice to accept the call to us. This then links with the Gospel passage where Jesus says that the world in general cannot receive the Holy Spirit because it cannot see or know the Spirit like the disciples can and do.

In the Gospel espoused by Paul and Christ there is a demand that we make a choice. It is not a matter of adding a bit here or there from different faith systems and then relaxing into our old ways. True Christianity has never been domesticated to suit the ways of the world. Christ's message stands alone and is a guiding light.

The passage from Acts has Paul mixing his affirmation of the general faith held by his audience and the challenge to move beyond it to find the full picture.

So, where do we stand with other faiths?

These passages don't offer a conclusive statement. What they do, however, is bring a critical eye on how we treat followers of other faiths. We are confronted with the knowledge that we don't have any monopoly on insights into God and the experience of God.

We can understand from Paul that there are people who have no knowledge of Christ's message who are reaching out to find the true God. Implied in this passage is the idea that we cannot 'take' them to find Christ as Christ is already present. This should not be any surprise to us as we know that it is God who makes the initial moves. It is those among us who are so set in our ways and unwilling to experience the changes who can feel isolated.

We know that the God who became flesh among us is the one who can be found in places where he is not yet openly welcomed. God is present in the things of ordinary everyday life like bread and wine and water. God is reaching out and asking us to in turn offer ourselves wherever we are.

Consequently it is not surprising that God is present among people of other faiths in the environment that they live in. In meeting with those people we can do no better than Paul. We should simply connect with them listening and discerning what Christ has already done among them.

Those who know the presence of Christ – and even those who don't – can come closer to a fuller understanding of the truth of what God is seeking us to hear, if we listen to one another and from this allow those stories of God's grace to be revealed. This approach challenges us to offer ourselves more completely into God's loving hands. We have much to learn and even far more to offer.

Picking up from Paul we can see that we can encounter the risen Christ simply in the Word, the Bread broken for us, and the Wine poured out for us, and the Water of renewed life. This equally applies to learning to see God in seemingly strange and foreign places.

Henri Nouwen said that "when we have met our Lord in the silent intimacy of our prayer, then we will also meet him in the camp, in the market, and in the town square. But when we have not met him in the centre of our own hearts, we cannot expect to meet him in the busyness of our daily lives."

As we move through an everchanging life let us experience and acknowledge and celebrate God's Holy Spirit wherever and whenever we encounter it. The Holy Spirit that we are told about in the passage from John's Gospel is ever present and ever seeking. It is the gift Christ left for all believers. It calls us to offer ourselves even more fully into the arms of our loving God.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (From Lieza Steele)

Father God, as we come to you now, may we do so with thanks for your great love comes to us in Jesus Christ. Thank you, that it is because of His death on the cross that you are now bending down to listen to us. Thank you for the assurance from your Word that we can depend on you with confidence and bring all our prayers before your Throne of Grace. Amen.

Lord God, thank you for the freedom we have to proclaim the gospel and ask for forgiveness for those times, we have not appreciated this great privilege. We pray that as God's people we will always seek to walk in the light and truth of God's Word. We pray we will never compromise our faith in order to make life easier, but will persevere in Gods' strength, even in difficult situations.

Lord God, we pray for those personally affected by the recent and current events: for God's strength to keep us going, for healing, peace and hope during the recovery process; We give thanks for our fire fighters and all the frontline workers, those who have volunteered in lots of different ways, those who have given their time so generously. We thank you for soaking rains for the drought stricken areas. We pray and thank you for the recovery of wildlife and regeneration of their habitats. Lord God, we pray for the people of our whole nation in this current unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic. Where we have had to social distance ourselves from our loved ones and friends. Whereby our economy, jobs, our physical and mental health are at stake. Lord, if anyone of us need you? We certainly need you now!

We pray

Lord God, we pray for our congregational members who are going through illnesses and who are burdened with the self isolation and social distancing we all need to do because of the global situation we are all experiencing. Whereby we can't congregate together in fellowship in church each Sunday. Lord God, we thank you for giving us your unfailing love which endures forever, your comfort, your strength, your healing and your peace. Amen.

Lord God, We know your purpose is unfolding and we cannot hinder it, your plan is incredible and we will not comprehend it, your reproof is reliable and we dare not ignore it, your way is best and we must not resist it.

From Psalm. 116: 1 - 2: I love the Lord for he heard my voice, he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me I will call on him as long as live. From Psalm. 121: 7 - 8: The Lord will keep you from all harm, he will watch over your life, the Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore. We thank you in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour, your beloved Son, Jesus Christ. 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.

BENEDICTION

Go out to live in love
to share life with all you meet
to be bearers of God's care for the whole creation.

Go in peace,
in the name of our Creator, the Sustainer
and our Redeemer. Amen.