

**LENT 4**

**14/3/21**

**CAVES BEACH**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**We know it, we believe it, we proclaim it!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**Those who thirst for new life are satisfied; those who  
hunger for the living Word are filled!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**The imprisoned ones know freedom; sinners know  
pardon!**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.

**The powerful are humbled; the needy are raised up from  
their distress!**

God *is* good!

**God's steadfast love lasts forever!**

**Opening Prayer cross: carrying the God: presence of evil: presence of  
caring: for others**

You are with us as we go with Jesus towards Jerusalem, most gracious  
God, and we are thankful.

**You stay with us in the tough moments of reflection and  
confession.**

You are with us, reminding us of all that sustains us as a faith community,

**our common life of faith, our encouragement of one  
another.**

You are with us as we make clear your realm of love and justice beyond this church.

**You are our inspiration for mission; you are at the heart of our service to others.**

You are with us as we walk beside the cross-carrying Jesus.

**You remind us of the demanding call to discipleship, of our need to confront the dark, self-serving powers.**

Most gracious God,

**stay with us! Amen.**

**HYMN 647** Comfort all my people

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1x7V9N583Q>

## **PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION**

Amazing God,

how great is your love in all the earth.

Like rays of sunshine you pour out

your love upon all creation,

offering life and sustaining hope for the future.

We give thanks for the growth

in our lives as we soak up this love,

let it truly begin to work on us,

that we might truly believe

in the possibility of new life in you.

For the gifts of life and love, we give thanks!

For the gifts of growth and hope, we give thanks!

For the gifts of wisdom and understanding, we give thanks!

Gracious God,

we come before you feeling vulnerable and unsure – yet we come trusting in the promise of your love.

Sometimes we prefer the false shelter of darkness.

We believe being there in the dark we do not need to face our fears, our faults and our shortcomings.

Yet in the dark we cannot grow, we cannot change, we do not even really know ourselves.

Bring us into the fullness of your light held in your love as we begin to own who we are.

Even the light can be difficult

We do not always like things about ourselves and discovering the root of our faults can be difficult.

Journey with us as life in the Light unfolds:

help us when we stumble and fall,  
guide us when we feel lost and unsure.

In the stillness, may we open ourselves to the Light of Christ,  
whose way is Love.

*(time of silence)*

## **WORDS OF ASSURANCE**

Now hear these words of assurance:

The presence of Christ goes before us,  
behind us and beside us.

We are never alone.

God will not abandon us.

You are set free to live in the Light!

**You are set free to live in the Light!**

**Thanks be to God!**

## **READINGS**

- **Ephesians 2:1-10**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.<sup>3</sup> All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.<sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

- **John 3:14-21**

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,

so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

**HYMN 585** I heard the voice of Jesus say

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q\\_UvhmqtSGk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_UvhmqtSGk)

## **SERMON**

When all is said and done judgement is not something that God thrusts on us, rather it is simply the outcome of our individual decisions.

Saturday week ago the Moderator was visiting the area for some events over that weekend at Belmont. He invited all those in ministry in the Hunter Presbytery to join him for lunch at Belmont 16's. It was a pleasant time to catch up with some people I had not seen for some time.

When I thought back about this I was reminded of the story of a group of pastors who decided to have a catch up at a pub in Melbourne one day. One turned up on time and the next one turned up a few minutes later. As they sat there waiting for any others to arrive one commented that they were the only ones to arrive around the agreed time. The second pastor retorted: "Either that or the rapture has happened and we are the only ones left behind!"

Over time I have often been challenged by earnest people commenting that I have not preached enough about the end of the world and the coming judgement and the possibility of ending up in hell.

When reflecting on this week's Gospel reading from John I am inclined to think that the final judgement might have already happened, and at the same time be still happening minute by minute. Quite often when people talk about the '*Day of Judgement*', or eternal life, or heaven and hell, or the final resolution of God's intentions we seem to approach it in the mind-set that we are talking about a future event.

When we look at the other Gospels we can see that they express things as if, in a way, they are looking into the future. John sees things from about 100 years after Jesus and the message has had time to filter down through time and be developed by community reflections. Scholars consider this approach to be "Realised Eschatology." From this approach the vision of the future that Jesus speaks about has already begun. It is not some ethereal event which will come to pass at some time in the future.

I don't necessarily see there to be conflict with the other Gospels. They are just approaching the same issues from differing perspectives. This means that we need to fill out the approach that John has taken so we can fully understand the message that he is giving us today.

This passage is part of the longer story where Jesus is meeting with Nicodemus. There is some discussion about the 'judgement' which includes the phrase: "and this is the judgement..." In this passage the judgement is a current action not a future event. The passage points out that the judgement is so unavoidable that people actually do it to themselves. It is not that God wants anyone to suffer.

Let's hear it again. "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order to save it." And this will to save the world is born out of God's great love for the world.

If we look further to this week's readings we have Paul setting this out in his own words in Ephesians: "even though we were dead in our sins, God, who is rich in mercy, loved us with a great love"... Paul goes on to talk of God showing the "immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

The agony behind the statement in John perhaps could be understood in some ways by people who have had to suffer the pain of seeing their children go off to war. I think that it might be easier to understand the sacrifice if it is expressed by a person in love with another. It seems almost unbelievable when it is for the whole world.

We can find it hard enough to give to overseas communities who are suffering from natural and human caused disasters. After all they all too quickly become a series of statistics. However there would be little that we would not do for family member or close relatives. It does not take too much reflection to see God making big sacrifices for his Son. But the whole idea of God sacrificing His only Son is a big jump.

Here is where the 'rubber hits the road' in John's Gospel. Keeping in mind the enormity of God's gift we need to now look at the timing.

If we see this graceful act as something in the future then we can look for the progression. God gives the gift, we respond and then at the time of judgement we are assessed on our response.

John is telling us that it is really up to each of us to make the judgement. With unlimited love God has shared the gift to which we are invited to respond. It is up to us how we respond. It is how we respond to God's gift that passes judgement on us. At the time of us encountering the love of God in Christ we make the free willed decision to turn our backs and walk away or to stay and engage with God's love and grace.

No other judgement is needed as everything else arises out of that engagement. How we decide to respond to the love of God in Jesus creates the reality in which we live. God respects this decision and honours us no matter how much pain our decision might cause God.

As we move through the passage we come to the images of light and dark in verses 19-21. We can't be in both spaces at the same time. We either choose to dwell in the darkness and avoid the light or we leave the darkness behind. As the light of God shines into the world judgement comes to the fore as people can't help but respond. We can't choose not to choose. Even to choose not to make a commitment is actually making a very clear statement.

Let me clarify this. When a train comes into the platform at Central Station we have a choice. You can get onto the train or choose not to. Once the doors close and the train leaves the station there is no longer any point in trying to make a decision about whether to catch the train as that choice has now passed. The outcome is the same as choosing not to get that train.

So we can now start to see the idea of 'realised eschatology' as we can no longer put off making our decision to some unknown time in the future. This gift of love and grace from God is a present reality, the time to decide is simply now. The final chapter of the world's story is written when the world encounters the gift of God's love in the crucified Christ and either accepts or rejects the gift.

The final chapter of your story is written when you encounter the gift of God's love in the crucified Christ and either accept or reject that gift.

The image of God's unlimited and amazingly generous love keeps calling us to engage with it personally. It is not some draconian unfeeling and remote idea. It is simply there for us to choose.

Thinking back I am sure that most of us would have experienced the anguish of feeling that you wanted to offer your love to someone through eternity but we were afraid to hear the response when you asked the

question. If you know that feeling then you know that there is no such thing as not choosing.

You know there is no difference between having them spit in your face and having them say, "Thanks very much but I think I'd like to keep my options open a bit longer and if nothing better comes up I'll get back to you."

Thinking about this brings us back to God. We might start to get some understanding of the shattered heart of the crucified Christ. God is not waiting to pass judgement on us. The waiting is all from God in anticipation of us making a decision without condemnation coming from Him. God does not force anything onto us. We either enter into a world where love, mercy and life is rejected .... That is Hell!

Or we embrace the world that God is offering where love abounds, mercy flows freely and we can celebrate no matter how undeserving we feel that we are.

God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son that we might have eternal life... embrace it!

**HYMN 209** And can it be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu2uA6U4Fvg>

## **PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING**

Generous God,  
may our lives and these gifts  
be acceptable to you  
that we might go out and love  
in your name.

Amen.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Glorious God,  
your light shines throughout the earth.  
May we too be lights of your love,

offering hope and community.

We pray for our world:

where there is violence, may peace be born;

where there is fear, may love abound;

where there is division, may understanding unfold.

We pray for our communities:

where there is loneliness, may connections grow;

where there is sickness, may healing be found;

where there is grief, may compassion take hold.

We pray for ourselves:

Where there is timidity, may courage increase;

Where there is doubt, may faith expand;

Where there is anxiety, may trust rise up.

In all things, O God,

May your light and love be found.

Amen.

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 147** To God be the glory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15v9iworAU>

## **BENEDICTION**

People of faith,

we are sent out into the world

to be light and love;

to be workers in God's Reign

transformed by Christ.

Go in peace.

And may the grace of Jesus Christ,

the love of God

and the communion of the Holy Spirit,

be with you now and always.

Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MEOAQy-d5I>