

EASTER 7

24 MAY 2020

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come and lift your voice,
sing to God, sing praises to his name;
for our God is holy and good. God gives us a home
and leads us out of our imprisonment.
Today we sing to God
lift our voices and hearts
to the one who restores and renews in whose goodness we are found.
Let us worship God!

Spirit of God,
you have made your name known here in this place;
move in our hearts and minds that we might worship in truth and give glory
to your name. We pray to you in the name of the one who lived among us. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Awesome God,
we give thanks for your presence in all the earth. You are like the rain that comes
showering down from the heavens and bringing life to the parched earth. You give the desolate a
place to live and bring release to prisoners.

You cause joy to bubble up within your people as we look to the horizon and see there a vision of
your kingdom. May all the kingdoms of the earth sing praises to your name.

In praise and thanksgiving.

Loving God, we confess that often when we consider eternal life, we ponder and wonder what this gift
might mean.

In our pondering, we are easily led to distraction, forgetting that you have called us to be present
in each moment, offering the love you have already given.

Free us from our obsession that we might experience the eternal life of your presence here and now.

Gracious God, we also confess that in our pondering we see eternal life, not as a freely given gift, but
as something that is to be earned.

This then has led us to a busyness that you do not yearn for.

Free us from our misguidance that we might experience the eternal life of your presence here and
now. In Christ we pray. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Now hear these words of assurance: We belong to God,
Christ has named us as his own and those who belong to Christ have eternal life.
In Christ we are given freedom here and now. Thanks be to God!

READINGS

Acts 1:6-14

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Psalms 68:1-10, 32-35

Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered;
let those who hate him flee before him.

2 As smoke is driven away, so drive them away;
as wax melts before the fire,
let the wicked perish before God.

3 But let the righteous be joyful;
let them exult before God;
let them be jubilant with joy.

4 Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds-
his name is the Lord-
be exultant before him.

5 Father of orphans and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.

6 God gives the desolate a home to live in;
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
but the rebellious live in a parched land.

7 O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,

8 the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain
at the presence of God, the God of Sinai,
at the presence of God, the God of Israel.

9 Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad;
you restored your heritage when it languished;

10 your flock found a dwelling in it;
in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.

32 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
sing praises to the Lord,
33 O rider in the heavens, the ancient heavens;
listen, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.
34 Ascribe power to God,
whose majesty is over Israel;
and whose power is in the skies.
35 Awesome is God in his sanctuary,
the God of Israel;
he gives power and strength to his people.

At the name of Jesus <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4d4UXSJXig>

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all people to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5 So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

Be thou my vision https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CMclLT_Hjg

SERMON

It is now almost 50 days since the celebration of Christ's resurrection at Easter. Next week we will celebrate Pentecost. It is in this context today that we reflect on the story of Christ's ascension.

In John's Gospel we have Jesus physically ascending into heaven. Ascension in this context is the movement of someone from the physical world to the heaven. The concept coming from the Old Testament was that some special prophets had not died but were with God ready for the second coming. They had not died like normal humans but they physically travelled to heaven.

If we reflect on this event from John's Gospel we are easily drawn into debate of how we balance modern scientific systems with ancient beliefs systems. This passage is based on the assumption that the people of Jesus' day had, including about the earth being flat. They had no concept of modern scientific approaches or discoveries.

Anyone who delves into this story with just a modern scientific approach can be in for a very confusing time. If we accept that Christ rose from death and ended up ascending to the Father we need to comprehend what this means. Nothing is quite what it seems. For some people the basic scientific understanding of the universe has to be taken into account and they want it to be seen as non-negotiable in comparison with ancient beliefs. Science is science!

I don't agree with this approach. I tend to go with the approach of modern Christians who see ascension as a spiritual reality and the physical descriptions given to us are important symbolic metaphors which help to describe an intangible reality.

For many people it is very important that modern scientific law not be broken or challenged. They tend to think that God cannot engage in the world in such a way that those scientific laws might be challenged. For those people it is important that the universe be explained in an orderly way and it should always be consistent. What is still unknown to them now will eventually be fully explained in a mathematical style formula or system.

This view of the universe can be very attractive to some. Over time I have come to understand Jesus' teachings more and more. Now I know that even though there are so many variables I can see God in the universe as a whole.

Scientific theories are only valid until new discoveries alter or even change them. I am not diminishing science. This doesn't make my world any easier to define but anyone who looks into the resurrection and ascension is in for some confusion. Looking at the Biblical records in the light of the resurrection we must draw on the stories like the ascension story today to build some understanding.

As I have suggested previously the way in which the first Christians viewed Jesus kept changing as time went on. For Mark's Gospel (probably the first Gospel written down) we start the story with the Baptism of Jesus by his cousin John the Baptist. Then as we move to Matthew and Luke's accounts (written a bit later) the back story of Jesus moves to include consideration of Jesus' conception and birth.

By the time that John's Gospel is being written down (about 100 years after Jesus' birth) we move to consideration of who Jesus was in terms of the whole of creation. We are told that Christ was with

God in the beginning and through him all things were created. Now in this context we have the passage from John with Jesus praying: "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed."

Over the years many people have dismissed this passage as merely esoteric speculation, something to be debated by philosophers and theologians in the refined world of academia. People thought that there was little or even no practical message in this passage for ordinary people like you and me. They thought that it had no impact on the way we live each day?

If we are serious about looking at the way that the early Christians kept changing their perceptions on where to start Jesus' story we might in fact see that this issue impacts on our life every day. For me it is the experience of the risen Christ and consequently the ways in which they then saw their world that led those first followers to rethink their whole world view all the way back to creation. Their initial perceptions of the universe were upended and they had to completely rethink it in terms of Christ's revelation.

It is therefore the experience of the risen Christ that puts a whole new perspective on the world in which we live. It is not so much about the origins of the universe as the experience of the risen Christ which refocuses us by pointing us, not so much to a point in time, rather it directs us to the transforming nature of the Christ experience.

To refine this a little bit more we need to understand that the experience of the risen Christ upends our old perceptions of who God is and how God interacts with our world and its people. By doing this we come to see that if God is the creator of everything we may well have been missing our whole understanding of God and the world that he created. Our outlook on the world flavours how we live and interact.

If we see that the world is a kindly place, full of respectful, self-controlled and honest people then we probably will never bother locking our doors when we are not at home. We would not bother if we left our wallet or purse sitting on a park bench and our latest mobile phone sitting on the front dashboard of the car. There is no need to be concerned if one of our children is badly affected by alcohol or drugs and they are out with a wild bunch of people all night!

I think that if we see the world in that way we have not fully understood the kind of world that God created.

Prior to the resurrection and ascension God was seen as the point of order and justice. There is that powerful image in the Old Testament creation story of God creating order in the midst of a chaotic universe.

* Does my point now seem a bit clearer?

A sense of order is important. When we have the image of a God of order everything is simply in its place and as long as you know your place and abide by the codes and rules then nothing bad will happen.

* Does this sound familiar?

The disciples that Jesus is praying with are struggling with this perception right up until the ascension because they are still looking to have Jesus restore the kingdom of Israel to its proper place in the world just as they believed that God had promised.

In this approach the God of order is also the God of justice who will ensure that there are consequences to be paid by those who step out of line. The universe cannot be allowed to lack order. This God keeps a list of wrongs and then implements vengeance on everyone who deserves it. This God cannot forget past failings and will not let justice go unpunished. That would, after all, go against those universal laws!

At the time the disciples may well have initially wanted to see that as Jesus was resurrected he would have then set out on a triumphant retribution for his sufferings. Once the God of order and justice acts his enemies would be really in trouble.

* That is what was expected.

We now know that the resurrection didn't produce a triumphalist messiah gloating at the humiliation of his enemies. It gave us an amazing and unexpected merciful and generous Messiah who reaches out to those who betrayed him, to those who denied him and his executioners with the scarred hands of love and forgiveness. This Christ has no interest in establishing a 'right order' or any element of 'cast iron judgement.'

Christ brings a new system of divine order which just overflows with love and grace along with mercy and an outrageous abundance which has no limits or boundaries. Just like so many before us we can be shaken by the extent of the dismantling of predictable order and righteous justice. Many people can be offended, scandalised and outraged by this.

They considered that the right order of Israel should be restored and they were offended because Jesus was just as loving and forgiving to the Gentiles as he was to the Jews. Similarly we can be offended when that person, who has made our lives hell, and seems to always make us feel a lesser person because they won't live up to our standards, still receives the same level of love and grace and compassion as we do.

Anyone who insists that the world should be fair and just and always predictable can be scandalised because grace and mercy is always unfair.

* It was not fair that the prodigal son was loved just as much as his hard working brother.

* It was not fair that the workers who only arrived at the vineyard at 5pm were paid as generously as those who had laboured all though the day.

* It is not 'fair' that God would be just as interested in saving Caiaphas or Pilate or Judas or Peter or Mary Magdalene or James or you or me!

It is just such a disordered and unfair world that was revealed to us by Christ. He seeks no vengeance and no vindication, rather he grants forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus effectively turned the thought of a stable and ordered world on its head.

Everything that we thought that we knew about God and the structure of the universe turns out to be wrong. If it is wrong now that means that it has always been wrong. There is no need to go into endless bits of detail but what we need to understand is that Jesus was not revealing a 'new' God or any change in God. He was revealing that he had been there before creation and in fact this is the truth about what kind of world God created.

This is where the difference comes in our world. Jesus is not just putting God's demands for justice and retribution on hold temporarily. If that was the case we could just wait for the apocalypse when divine fury would be unleashed and everything would be violently made 'right' again.

* In this approach we can't keep tolerating our enemy instead of loving our enemy.

You might as well get used to the world not being fair and get over expecting that you will be vindicated and the truly evil people will get what's coming to them. Jesus has reached out his scarred hands to embrace them too.

And that's pretty bad news if you were the one righteous person who was waiting for your 'crown of vindication' on judgement day when the divine order will be restored.

But if you are like the rest of us, and know that you've never managed to measure up or be consistently loving and righteous, then this is outrageously good news. The Christ who shared God's glory before the world existed, has finished the work of revealing the merciful God, and is being totally unfair in welcoming you to share his glory in the kingdom of heaven.

And as confusing and disorienting as it is, the news can't get much better than that!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (Bob Willoughby)

Dear Lord God,

We do not feel worthy to approach you because you are so powerful and great and majestic but you have called us to pray without ceasing and that you are more eager to listen to us than we are to speak to you. And so according to your word we humbly ask you to hear our prayer. We are amazed, I am amazed that you would hear my prayer but here I am firstly wanting to praise you for your love and provision for me and my family. How wonderful you are. I also want to thank you for rejoicing with me and all of us as we worship you this day. We cannot understand how you would be with us in our praising and also with us in our pain but you are and so we thank you.

Lord God, so many people are in need at this time so we would think of them in our prayers. The sad people who have lost loved ones because of the coronavirus. The number of people who have been affected by this pandemic in Australia is massive, let alone the people in the rest of the world. How can we have compassion for these people. We in Australia have had so much to contend with since the start of 2020, the bushfires and then the economic restraints on the economy and then the Corona virus pandemic. The amazing thing is that you, have felt the pain and sadness and frustration with each one of us and for that we are grateful. We remember those of our own church who have been unwell and are struggling with health issues continue to bless them Lord God.

We are frustrated because of the temporary closing of worship services but we do thank you for the services we have provided for us each Sunday by our minister and ask that you will sustain him and us in our faith and commitment until the time we can again join together for worship in our church building.

When we are able to open again we would ask that you will stir us to share the joy of knowing Jesus with others and use even us, our attitudes and our efforts as a means of drawing more people to your side. Holy Spirit we need the power, the wisdom and the courage to live for you and the Father with the Son, Jesus our Saviour and in his name we pray.

Please join together 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.

Comfort, comfort all my people
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJJfPodMeRQ>

BENEDICTION

To know God is to know eternal life. May God gather us up to be a people of love who walk this life
as a people who have already entered eternal life - for we have.

Go in the knowledge and the peace of God's love. In the name of the three-in-one who is life itself.
Amen.

*I was looking through some ideas on the internet the other day and came
across the following manifesto from John Wesley:*

- * Reduce the gap between rich and poor people.
- * Help everyone to have a job.
- * Help the poorest, including introducing a living wage.
- * Offer the best possible education.
- * Help everyone to feel they can make a difference.
- * Promote tolerance.
- * Promote equal treatment for women.
- * Create a society based on values and not profits and consumerism.
- * End all forms of slavery.
- * Avoid getting into wars.
- * Share the love of God with everyone.
- * Care for the environment.

In a time of change and disruption these are some wise words to reflect on!