

Order of service
Date: Sunday May 17th, 2020
Easter 6A

We acknowledge that we are worshipping on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung people, of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elders past and present.

DON'T FORGET YOU CAN LOG INTO THE CHURCH WEBSITE AND SEE MUCH OF THIS BY VIDEO ON THE FRONT PAGE!!!!

INTROIT – Christ be our light (vss. 1,5)

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Refrain:

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

5. Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

Refrain:

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Come, let us gather in praise of the one who shows us the way:

All: The way of Christ is love.

One: Let us gather in thanksgiving for the one who teaches the truth:

All: That we were all made in God's image and called good.

One: Let us gather in worship of the one who gives us life.

All: Blessed be our God, source of all creation.

One: Let us worship God.

Sing – TIS 143

1

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, your great name we praise.

2

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, but ruling in might;
your justice like mountains high soaring above,
your clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

3

You give life to all, Lord, to both great and small,
in all life now living, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on a tree,
then wither: but ever unchanged you will be.

4

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
your angels adore you, all veiling their sight;
of all your rich graces this grace, Lord, impart -
take the veil from our faces, the veil from our heart.

5

All praise we would render: reveal to our sight
what hides you is only the splendour of light;
and so let your glory, Almighty, impart,
through Christ in the story, your Christ to the heart.

WELCOME

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all!

And also with you!

Opening prayer

Have a gathering of beautiful objects at the front of the worship space; for example, plants, stones, a small fountain, a silver pitcher, a large cross. You might project or

display pictures of beautiful or awe-inspiring places. Touch or show each one in turn; repeat the first two lines of the prayer as often as needed to move through your objects/images.

One: This (*name object*) is not God.

All: Our God is within and beyond.

when all objects/pictures have been noted

One: We are not God.

All: Our God is within and beyond.

God of all Creation, out of your being all things were made, yet in all things your being is uncontained. Help us to see you within all things, within all people. Help us to know that you are beyond our understanding, beyond our imagining, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.

Prayer of confession

God of all, whom we have learned to see in the person of Jesus the Christ, open our eyes to your presence around us.

Open our hearts, that we might see your incarnation continuing in the living and growing of your Creation.

For we confess that we see you more easily in those who look like us, think like us, act like us. We confess that we can struggle to see you in those who are different – in the diversity of Creation; we confess that we do not always see that you are more significant than we are, more diverse than we are, more inclusive than we are.

We confess that in refusing to see you in all our neighbours, we have refused to love you as you have loved us.

Forgive us, we pray.

Help us to see beyond ourselves. Help us to keep your commandments. Help us to feel confident enough in your love for us that we can acknowledge your love for others without fear. Amen.

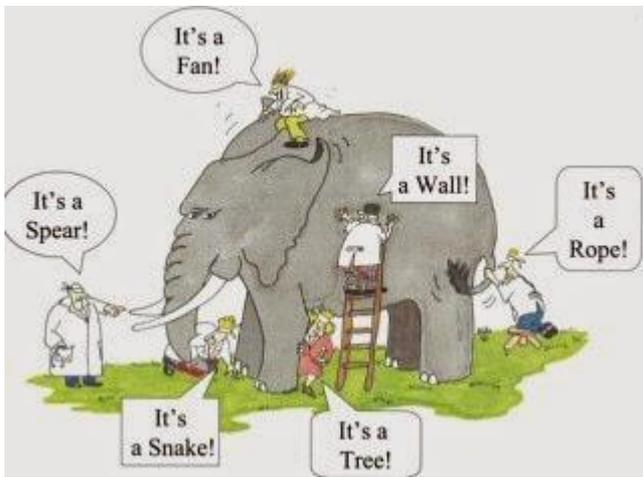
Words of affirmation

God of grace, you invite us to love one another as you have loved us. And so we remember your abiding love. We remember that you did not wait until we were ready but sent Jesus the Christ to guide us in your way. For your grace is poured out upon us before we even ask, calling us always back to you.

By your mercy, we are beloved. By your grace, we are forgiven.

ALL: Thanks be to God! Amen.

EARLY WORD – I used to think...!



There is a story of three blind men who each have to describe an elephant or define it by the bit they can feel.

The picture here to the left offers six people, presumably blind who are figuring out what this thing is by the bit they are touching.

So one thinks it's a fan, another a snake, the next a tree, then another a wall, one more a wall and the last a rope.

Now we know looking at it that it is an elephant, but we can understand that if you

can only ever see or touch one small piece, then that is what you think the thing is. Imagine if someone took each of the people and walked them all around and on top of the elephant and let them touch it, and described to them what they could see as they walked them around, then I would imagine that each of the blind people would end up saying something like – I used to think this was a rope, but now I think it is a large animal, very large with lots of different parts. I am told it is grey but I don't understand what that means as I have never seen grey, but I can feel that this grey skin is very rough and wrinkly in parts.

As their experience of the elephant got bigger their thoughts and belief about the thing they were experiencing, changed.

In one of our bible readings today the man Paul, remember him, a follower of Jesus after Jesus had gone back to be with God, as visiting the city of Athens in Greece. He notices that they have lots of sculptures of their gods, then saw one kind of plaque that read – “to an unknown god”. They had some experience of these other gods but felt there was one more who was a mystery to them. Paul talks to them about his God and suggests that this God is their unknown god, who is bigger than anything we can imagine or carve or paint.

That's how many of us think about God. There are things we know about God, and lots of things we don't know about God.

This is where we use the “I used to think, but now...” idea.

Many of us adults who have been around a bit might say things like – I used to think that God was a very wise old man, but now I think that God is not a man or a woman, but maybe both and even more than both.

Children might want to talk with an adult about what the adult used to think about God and what do they think now. And you children might want to share your thoughts about what you reckon God is right.

And it is important to respect each other's thoughts and ideas, because we can't say mine is right, only that it is different to yours, and that we probably need all our ideas of God put together to even come close to what God is like.

Let's say a prayer.

God, you are a mystery. Sometimes we just don't get you. But that is ok. You love us all the same...all of us. Amen.

SHARING OUR STORIES

READINGS:**Acts 17:22-31**

22Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 23For 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. 24The 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, 25nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. 26From 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, 27so 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. 28For ‘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.’ 29Since 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. 30While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31because 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.”

1 Peter 3:13-22

13Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

16yet 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. 17For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

18For 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, 19in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20who 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.

21And 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, 22who 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. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17This 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. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They 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.”

PREACHING – How then shall I live? - Living alongside (with gentleness and reverence)

(Text supplied below.)

I’m going to show you three pictures, one at a time. When you know what they are depicting, simply raise your hand, don’t say anything yet, and we’ll see how many know by the end of the third one. A clue – the answer is a movie.

(Show first three pictures. See below also)



Now all together what is it?

(Wait for all to call out the response, then show fourth image)



Yes, ET the extra-terrestrial. It's almost 32 years since the release of ET, back in June 1982. Since then of course there have been numerous film forays into what it might be like if humans met aliens, and I admit I have seen my fair share of them. In ET the film suggested that it was a good thing that ET met the children rather than the scientists. It seems ET was able to learn more about being human from the kids than the scientists, who were focussed on, at the very least, studying ET, and at worst, well I think you know what. So it was from the children he got the help that was actually needed to get back home.

As I mentioned other films have explored similar themes of the events and outcomes of a meeting between humans and extra terrestrials. One film I especially like called "Contact", explored this with a somewhat more philosophical and theological flavour. It was an interesting exploration into the existential and theological implications of meeting with those not of earth.

Regardless of whether you think it all a flight of fancy, or whether you believe they are out there somewhere, I Invite you to do some imagining for a moment. Imagine you meet an extra-terrestrial, an alien, and it is all rather friendly and polite. Imagine also that for some inexplicable reason, you have to convey your belief system to that alien about Jesus and God and all that. In other words, you are an evangelist to the alien telling them the "good news" as it were. What would you tell them, and how might you do it, keeping in mind you may not be able to speak with this being.

I invite you to chat about that with a person near you. Now bear with me, I am going somewhere with this, so indulge my weird sci-fi obsessions if you will.

It's important to keep in mind that we might need to be careful what we offer in this act of evangelism. I read many years ago a science fiction novel where humans had settled on Mars, and had made meaningful contact with the indigenous population. There was a Christian chaplain as part of the mission. His task was to care for the settlers and evangelise the local population.

After telling them the story of Jesus, the local Martians didn't quite understand, so decided to crucify the chaplain to see if what he said was true and he too late realised his mistake.

When the apostle Paul was in Athens as described in the passage from Acts we heard earlier, it was a little like talking with an alien. He arrived in this place, and

much to his concern saw a city full of idols. Despite his passion for Jesus Christ he still held firmly to much that was of Judaism, and idols appalled him. So he began to speak to the people here, there and everywhere about Jesus. He got the attention of some Athenians who took him to the Areopagus, a sort of place of listening and judgement. It was here that he had to figure out, "How on earth can I talk with these people? How can I communicate to them what I want them to hear and know?" So he begins, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." This text from Acts is often cited as an example of how one might evangelise to people of other religious persuasions.

It is an important text to reflect on in that regard.

However it raises for me a very important issue about the whole task of evangelism. Like our conversation with the alien, Paul, it seems at first, assumes they have nothing to offer us about the matter of God.

And as much as I have difficulty with Paul at times, I will give him his due on this occasion. He didn't assume God wasn't already there, but he did help the people to identify his God in this "unknown God".

Whilst evangelism is something churches are called to do, there is no doubt it is a vexed area of ministry, and one whose face has changed over the centuries.

And whilst it is something I myself have mixed views about, in my experience in ministry over 27 years, the Uniting Church has struggled somewhat in pursuing an authentic form of evangelism that suits our ethos. There is no doubt this has contributed to our declining numbers, among other things.

In preparing for this sermon this morning, I was unsure where to go with it in the first place. And in reading work by various scholars and ministers, it is clear there are also mixed views on the matter universally.

I believe there has been a huge shift in mindset, by and large, worldwide in terms of evangelism and missionary zeal.

The attitude of taking God to the heathen by missionary practice and theology early last century and before, is diminishing greatly. In my view this is a good thing. For instance, what shape do you think our country might be in today if the first settlers regarded Aboriginal Australians as first and foremost people, but people with a deep spirituality and connection to the sacred? Hmm, I wonder?

As we read of Paul's preaching to the folk of Athens, regardless of their academic status, we read of a man who, to a degree acknowledges their religious inclinations, but at the end of the day wants them to take on board his teaching above all else.

I struggle with that I have to admit. I struggle with it because of my natural inclinations, but also because of my understandings about scripture and theology. So when I place beside Paul's activity in Athens the passage from 1 Peter, which suggests in defence of your beliefs to others, do so "with gentleness and reverence", I come to a different position.

Reverence implies respect, and an honouring of what others believe.

Missionary activity by and large, over the centuries has not respected the belief systems of those who were being evangelised.

What does it mean to respect in this case?

I believe it is to offer your own beliefs with gentleness and yet passion, but offer, not attempt to impose. At the same time listen so that you may be open to hearing something important from the other point of view.

My beef with many forms of evangelism, of which I, like you, have been the target of at the front door, is that they attempt to impose rather than engage in dialogue that is mutually beneficial. And in fact they can be downright hostile. And also from experience, often they have their own self-interest at heart and not mine.

I believe that evangelism is about mutuality and not about one giving and the other receiving.

I heard a scholar once, a former Baptist minister, who changed to Uniting and worked for the Synod as the Social Justice person for a while. He said at something I was at, that we all, that is, all religions, hold some portion of the truth, and our aim is to entice others with our bit of the truth.

I tend to agree with that, but would go further and suggest that we should attempt, rather than to entice, but to offer to learn from each others truth, and share that with our people, so that everyone can have access to the greatest chance of becoming whole human beings.

In my mind, our being followers of Jesus Christ is not about simply doing what we are told because we are told. But following Jesus so that we might become whole and healed in the following, and in our service in Jesus name offer the same to other people.

One of our dilemmas in being church in our post-modern 21st century Western culture is not that people are devoid of and opposed to spirituality. Far from it. What they are opposed to, or perhaps more accurately, suspicious of, is organised religion. Especially the organised religion of the Christian church. Especially in the aftermath of the Royal Commission.

This has happened for all sorts of reasons, but in many people's mind the Church no longer reflects the Christ of the scriptures that it presumes to preach.

That is why some people will claim I can have a relationship with Jesus Christ without going to church.

So what do we do with all that?

And I mean we, you and me? What do we do with that?

On one level I am unsure, and have no answers.

On another level I would want to say, first and foremost attend to your own spirituality first. That is, your relationship with God, yourself, other people and the created world around you.

What if we took Paul's advice to look for the God who is not far away, but actually close by?

What if our inward looking led us to see the places in our souls where God has already been at work, stirring in us the desire for meaning?

What if our outward searching led us to see the places where God has already been at work in the world?

What if our searching could lead us to recognize meaning, happiness, peace, belonging, and all those other things we need, that aren't that far away at all?

At the same time, I would want to say be aware of the different spiritualities around you, be they other Christian spiritualities, other mainline world religions or even more esoteric new age religions. Be aware of them.

And when you have dealings with people of different spiritualities than yours, work hard at doing so with gentleness and reverence.

However, let me say this also. Gentleness and reverence must not be allowed to simply become anything goes.

Some belief systems will cause oppression and abuse to occur. This is true even within our own tradition. When this happens we must challenge boldly those beliefs, because we see that they do not honour the human person in any way, and in reality go against the teaching of all the worlds' major religions. This is a task that must be done as a church, but also as individuals.

This of course takes a little courage, and confidence in what you yourself believe.

That is where the self-work of spiritual formation is so important.

As I talk on this today I am mindful that many people are anxious and fearful about what all this means in regard to the future of the church, and this church in particular.

But you know what? We don't need to be fearful... or at least not too much. If we honour the words Jesus has left with us, we can have a sense of peace for Jesus has promised that we will not be left bereft in all this. John reminds us that Jesus promised that God would send another – the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth - to guide, support and comfort us.

This Spirit continues the work of Jesus in our midst, and as this happens, the love that develops and grows between God, Jesus and we his disciples, will become a dwelling place for the divine presence.

Which brings me to a final matter before I close.

I have been wondering about this theme today – Living alongside.

First, how ironic to be considering this theme when we can't live alongside one another, although not quite as extreme now that we can do a bit of visiting.

And then I was thinking, maybe, we can learn how better to live alongside others, when we can't.

Maybe we become more aware of our own needs and then realise that these are the needs of those we usually live alongside, as well.

Maybe isolation has had a way of helping us better understand one another. Maybe isolation is necessary to better live alongside one another.

The sub-sub theme for this week from 1 Peter - ...yet do it with gentleness and reverence – has a special role here too.

Maybe that is the key.

How then shall I live? By living alongside others.

But how then shall I do that? With gentleness and reverence.

There is a story about a monastery on the edge of a forest. In the forest lived a Rabbi in seclusion. He was friends with the Abbot. It came a time when the Rabbi had to leave, and he gave the Abbot a gift to take back to the monastery with him. The gift was some simple words which he spoke to the Abbot – “the Messiah is among you.”

The Abbott took this back to the monastery and shared it with the brothers. They reflected on what this meant. Could it mean that the Messiah was in their midst? Then they began to ask that maybe it was one of them? And they began to consider each one. And knowing each other so well, they considered each brother and thought surely not them because they are impatient, or too gruff, or absent minded. But then they thought – but why not them? He is impatient but he is also caring of the other brothers; he is gruff but he is very wise; he is absent minded but he works hard tending the crops and getting food to those in need.

So, they wondered, and wondered who it could be. Then the brothers began to think – I wonder if it could be me?

As they considered all this, an amazing thing happened. The brothers began to treat each other, and themselves with great gentleness and reverence in a manner they thought befitting the Messiah.

And then a second amazing thing happened.

The word passed around about the atmosphere of this monastery, and people began to come and visit, and picnic in the grounds, and join the worship, and the monastery became a thriving place of community and fellowship, all because of the rabbi's gift.

In the end it is about sharing a message of love for the world and that also entails being first and foremost, a community of love.

And won't it be wonderful, as the old song says; “they'll know we are Christians by our love”.

Won't it be great that instead of the news having stories of church people and leaders in disgrace for their carelessness or stupidity, that there are stories of church people who care for the community around them, and who love those who no one else will? Imagine those news stories.

It might seem a pipe dream, but that is my great hope for us.

I end as I began with an image. This time it is a Leunig cartoon and poem for us to ponder for a moment.

(Show image from The Prayer Tree, “let us live...”)



“Let us live in such a way
That when we die
Our love will survive
And continue to grow.
Amen.”

Sing – How then shall I live? (verses 1)

1.
Took a walk outside of my walking. Stepped inside another’s shoes.
Walked the dusty borders between us. Paths I’d never chosen to choose.

*How then shall I live? How then shall I live?
How then shall I live, O God? How then shall I live?*

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE – read by Faye Green.

All these words we bring in the name of the Risen Christ who taught us to pray together, saying:

**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 forever. Amen**

Sing – Being (To TIS 650)

1 As we live and have our being,
we will dwell in sacredness;
we will dare to seek for meaning;
we will share life's joyfulness.

2 As we grow and seek for wisdom,
we will look with inner sight;
when all life is seen as beauty,
we will live with deep delight.

3 As we move and act for justice,
we will walk compassion's way,
speak with clarity and courage,
living out the words we say.

4 We will live and move and offer
all this life our dreams have caught,
sharing visions of a future,
far beyond the reach of thought.

5 We will ponder life's rich meaning,
finding bliss within us still;
as we hold our hearts in rapture,
life with wonderment we fill.

6 We are moved and called to being
by a love that knows no bounds;
we discover in our sharing
life and love and joy profound.

Words: Helen Wiltshire. © Pilgrim Publishing 2011

BLESSING –

Let us go from this time of worship with our eyes, ears and hearts
wide open to the movement of the Holy swirling around us.

Let us go from this time prepared to see our God, even in the
most unexpected times and places.

Let us remember that God will not leave us, even though we might leave this space.
May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit abide
with you now, and in all your days. Amen.