

**PENTECOST 24**  
**3/11/24**  
**CAVES BEACH**

**CALL TO WORSHIP (from Psalm 146)**

Praise the Lord!

**We will praise God as long as we live.**

Happy are those whose faith is in God!

**God keeps faith forever.**

God's justice is for the oppressed!

**Food for the hungry, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind.**

The Lord watches over strangers

**and supports the orphan and the widow.**

The Lord will reign forever!

**Yes! We will praise God!**

**OPENING PRAYER**

Proclaim confidently that God reigns.

**We rejoice that God has never left us and never will leave us.**

Make clear the relevance of God's Word.

**We rejoice that the challenge of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus is for us and always will be for us.**

Be sure all are within God's care.

**The helpless baby, the active teenager, the busy young mother, the volunteering senior: none are separated from God's love.**

Bring praise and thanks to God, for all God is and all God will be.

**We sing with our voices, we respond with our mind, we return love from the depth of our hearts. Amen.**

**HYMN 154** Great is your faithfulness

**PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION**

We praise you, O God, for being not only the God of history but the God of our story. You have gathered us here today to remind us that although you are the one to whom all power belongs, yet you care for the weak and powerless. You care for us. We praise you for joining your story to ours in such a special way through Jesus, our Lord. He proved his great love for

you and for each person in the way he lived - releasing what was captive, lifting up the burdened, empowering the powerless.

God, source of loving kindness and strength, we worship you.

Jesus, foundation of our faith, we worship you.

Holy Spirit, ground of our very being, we worship you.

**Jesus** said that the first commandment was this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart all your soul, all your mind and all your strength, and the second commandment is this "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these"

We hear what you are saying to us, Lord, but it is not easy in today's society. Worshipping position and status, power and wealth seem to be the first commandments of life these days, and when we are so busy achieving these it doesn't leave much time to care for, let alone love, our neighbour.

Help us to re-order our priorities, Lord, so that they are more in tune with yours.

*A short silence to reflect on these words*

Jesus: Saviour and Lord, we confess that there are times when the pattern of our daily lives is modelled on other than worshipping God and caring for neighbour. All we seem to be creating is a feel-good, self-serving approach to life rather than your costly, self-emptying, servanthood lifestyle;

Lord, reconnect us to the desire to live out your commandments of love.

*A short silence to reflect on these words*

Jesus: Redeemer and Friend, your acts of caring and love, mercy and justice delivered people from lives dominated by injustice and corruption. We confess that when 'economic rationalism' rules the lives of people today, competition replaces compassion, ruthlessness replaces forgiveness, and wounding replaces healing. Yet, in the midst of all this you command us not only to love God wholeheartedly, and to love our neighbour likewise, you command us also to love one another as you love us.

Lord, stir us into action so that the signs of your powerful love are visible in and through us.

*A short silence to reflect on these words*

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Jesus truly demonstrated his love for all as he rescued us from lives dominated by evil and sin by his acts of mercy and justice, his suffering and death. Hear then the good news that in and through Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

## READINGS

- **Hebrews 9:11–14**

<sup>11</sup> But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), <sup>12</sup> he entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. <sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, <sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

- **Mark 12:28–34**

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’ <sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup> and ‘to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength’ and ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

**HYMN 685** Lord, I come to you

## SERMON

Jesus tells us that the most important Commandment is LOVE!

In this respect it is more important than everything else like religious offerings and sacrifices collectively. However, this can be a bit of a conundrum. To me there is something contradictory because if you are doing something like offering love then you can't claim it as love if it solely done in response to a command. How can we claim this as essentially an act of love!

It is a bit like telling a young child to say 'thank-you.' If you remind them often enough it becomes automatic. But there is no point in telling a child to be grateful if they are not old enough to understand this concept. It is only as they mature that they begin to understand the spirit of gratitude. Initially all we are doing to laying those foundations. Once people comprehend gratitude it becomes natural.

I think that love is also like this. What is the point of Jesus telling us to love! Can we be ordered to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves?

If we carefully reflect on the situation, we can see that Jesus is not giving us a command here but rather He is recounting a command from the Torah in response to the question that had been asked of Him. That question was: "Which commandment in the law is number one?" Jesus answers this by quoting two commandments relating to love. Then He goes on to say to His questioner that both of these commandments are far more important than any offering or sacrifices offered in the Temple.

We can now see that Jesus is not saying that love is a commandment but rather He is emphasising what God wants from each of us. It is not obsessive obedience to some religious laws but rather a foundation to build a life shaped in love.

Looking more carefully at this we can also see that it doesn't put the word 'love' as a command but rather it advises us saying: "You will love." This is more of a prediction than a command. In fact, those with skills in the Koinonia Greek tell us that this is set in the 'future' form with the 'love' being implied. This somewhat softens the directness of the commandment.

If we look back the full command reads: “Hear O Israel – the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.” Now we can see that the actual command is to ‘hear.’

The words: ‘You shall love the Lord your God..’ is part of a commandment to ‘hear.’ For me this looks a lot like we are being encouraged to ‘love’ rather than it being a command in itself. Another way of putting this is: ‘All of you are commanded to love.’ And then ‘Listen to this as it is good news.’ The invitation to love is about inclusion more than being a blind order from above.

Love is something that always has room for us to improve. The fullness of love is like a hunger that we can never fully satisfy. I would like to think that there is probably not a person in the world who does not at least have some love in them. At the same time there is probably no-one who can come even close to the love we saw in Jesus.

After all we all have some measure of love in each of us, and I am sure that we all aspire to grow that love, then we can respond to a request to love couched as it is in a gentle command.

This commandment might also be one of those things which helps us move towards that goal. This is where the commandment tells us that the struggle is not in vain. Every step we take is progress towards loving God and one another even more. The promise tells us that every time we push ourselves a little further down the path of love we are putting one more nail in the coffin of the callous indifference and hard-hearted greed that has reigned destructively over our world for far too long. Every move of love forces open the gate a little wider for the full reign of love to come marching in and gather up all things into the glorious communion of love that is the heart of God.

Sometimes our efforts at being loving will not be much more sophisticated than a small child saying thank you because he’s told to. And at times the way of love will be regarded by everyone around us as the way of losers – so much so that we’ll want to forget it and succumb to the greed and cultured indifference of the “winners”. And, if love was only a command, then perhaps we might as well just go with the others.

But love is also a promise. It is a promise that supports every step of love we take. It provides the strength for love and it provides the meaning for love. When we stand on tip toes and peer over the horizon of the future and we catch sight of the all-embracing reign of love coming dancing towards us, then love makes sense. Eventually even our most faltering efforts at love have the effect of filling others with hope because every act of love becomes a prophetic protest against cynicism and despair and a courageous declaration of the good news about the coming reign of love.

Jesus accepted the idea that our attempts at living out this vision of love is far more important than our religious rituals, even our acts of offering and sacrifice. But it is not because they are opposites and opposed to each other.

Love is more important than religious ritual in the same way that love is more important than a bunch of flowers. The reality of love is more important than the mode of its expression. When we gather around the table to offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving we are doing so as an expression of whole-hearted love for God, and to whatever extent that love has become real, the offering is a worthy one.

So hear this, people of God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Thanks be to God.

**HYMN 675** Shine, Jesus, shine

### **PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING**

God of every heart, soul, and mind,  
we bring all we have and are to you.  
May the money here, the minds here,  
and the hearts and souls here  
be for your work in our community  
and in our world.  
In the name of the one who is all in all.  
Amen.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Today, God of all, we pray for those among us  
who have learnt a bitter lesson – to hold ourselves back,  
to not give ourselves to life in heart, soul, and mind.  
We pray for those of us who hide our true selves away from others  
because of the hurt we have experienced  
from those who should have loved us  
and welcomed us unconditionally.  
We pray for those of us who hold ourselves back  
from sharing the depths of our hearts  
and so live alone and isolated in the midst of community.  
We pray for those of us who hide even from ourselves;  
those of us who are frightened of discovering the bright light and the deep  
darkness  
that we know is deep in our souls.  
We pray for the day when none of us will have to hide  
our true selves from each other or ourselves,  
for the day when we can experience  
the true depths of our own hearts, souls, and minds  
and then truly know what it means to be  
the children of the God who made the universe. 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 533** I come with joy

**BENEDICTION**

Love the Lord your God,  
for you are loved beyond all your wildest hopes.  
Love your neighbour as you love yourself,  
for you are loved in the heart of community.  
Love with everything you are,  
for you are loved with all that God is and has.  
Love as you are loved, and live in peace.  
Amen.