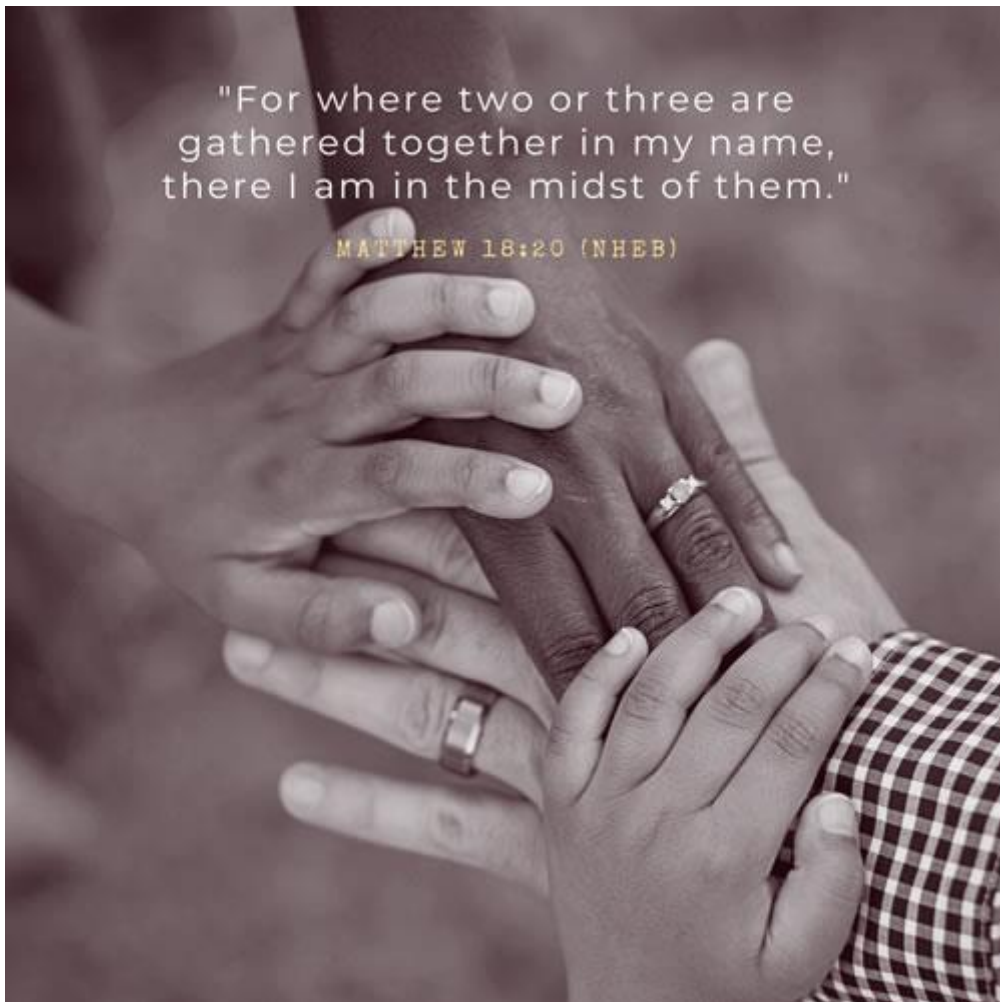


ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



5 FEBRUARY 2023

EPIPHANY 5



"For where two or three are
gathered together in my name,
there I am in the midst of them."

MATTHEW 18:20 (NHEB)

WORSHIP AT HOME

This time is an opportunity to be still, seeking to be aware of the presence of God within.

Carve out a time for this practice; prepare yourself, as you might for a usual Sunday morning and remember that there are others from the congregation gathering at the same time as you. There are also many from the church around the globe who are gathering to seek the presence of God as we are.

Prepare a space in the house; find a comfortable chair, light a candle, turn off distracting noises and close the door if that will help you to be still. This is something that does not need to be hurried.

HYMN: TIS 188, Holy where wide sky rolls down...

Prayer for today

Inspire us God,
Inspire us towards the greater good.
Inspire us towards gritty, lofty goals that serve all humanity.
Inspire us to expand in love and good deeds.
Inspire us to give effort to growing justice for all.
Inspire us to strive and work hard for what is important.
Inspire us with hope and optimism.
Breathe all this into us, we pray,
So, that our living may be full of meaning and purpose
And that we might make a positive difference in all the ways that we can.
Through your Spirit we offer this prayer.
Amen.

Jon Humphries

Reflection on a forgiving God

Your forgiveness is total,
no notebook,
tape recorder
or post-it note
to remind you of that moment
when.....
You take our confession,
offered with hands outstretched
and gently,
like the loving
heavenly Father that you are,
put it to one side
to be forgotten.
No grudges, no itching for judgement.
No resentment or ill-will.
Not like us,

who find it easy to say sorry
but so hard to forgive,
absolutely.
Forgive us, Father,
that we are often more willing
to accept forgiveness,
than to forgive.
More willing to accept your love,
than to share it with those
who have hurt us.
Teach us to forgive,
as you forgive

Christian Prayers of confession and repentance (faithandworship.com)

Assurance Of Forgiveness

Here is Good News! God is willing to cleanse us from our pride, our blindness, our stubborn insistence on having things “our way”. Through God’s grace we are washed and forgiven.

Thanks be to God

Amen.

HYMN: TIS 647, Comfort, comfort all my people...

Scripture

From the Hebrew scriptures

Isaiah 58:1-9a

*1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?' Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 **Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and***

not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

From the New Testament

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. 6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7 But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

HYMN: TIS 164, The Great Love of God...

A Pastoral Letter:

Part of a sermon to be preached at Ormond Uniting Church on Sunday, 5th February 2022. Refer to 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 above.

The wisdom of God

What do we really know about the apostle Paul? Apostle? It's a title to which he lays claim. On what basis does he make such a claim? A vision? A conversation?

These days we would say Paul is an enigma. We don't know quite what to make of him. In his time the same would have been said of him.

Imagine the budding church in Jerusalem. They are trying to make sense of things -- as well as trying to make ends meet. They see themselves as Jews: Why wouldn't they? Jesus was a Jew after all and the people he mixed with were Jews! Amongst his disciples there was (probably) not

a single non-Jew. Nobody expected the new collection of Jesus-followers to be made up of anything but Jews.

Then, in comes Paul, bringing his reputation with him. Paul the scourge of the Christians. Imagine their expressions. The cheek of the man! Some are angry. Some are confused. Some are afraid. The fox has come into the chicken coop.

“Don't worry”, says Paul. “That was then, this is now. I've come from Damascus. I've come to help! I've had a vision there - a flash of light, so to speak. Blinding (literally)! And Jesus and I had a chat, and he told me that I am to be an apostle to -- wait for it -- the gentiles”

“No way” says James (Jesus' brother) and the Jerusalem mob. “Jesus' Way — Jesus' Message is for card-carrying Jews only”. “Well, let me have a try”, says Paul. “Let's see if a mission to the gentiles makes sense and, anyway, that's what I've been told to do by Jesus himself. Have any of you spoken to Jesus himself lately? No? Well, there you are then. I'm more of an apostle than any of you”.

So, off he goes and soon we find him in Corinth. Corinth, a major trading and cultural centre. From the town and the marketplace you can't help but look up at the hill behind the town, the Acropolis, where a plethora of Gods, both Greek and Roman are given due honour. A cosmopolitan place. A place where new ideas can be voiced, and tried -- and put aside.

In Corinth Paul sets up a congregation of (one assumes), mostly Greeks. That's about as Gentile as you can get. In modern terms, Paul “plants” a church. In our time, church-planting is a bit of an industry. Anyway that's going to be his thing, his "*schtick*" He wanders far and wide, planting here, planting there.

But he can't be everywhere at once, and so he writes follow-up letters. Most of what we know about Paul and his congregations is found in those letters — seven of them in particular. Now there's one thing we need to remind ourselves of from time to time, and that is that most of what he knows about Jesus came to him in that visionary flash on the outskirts of Damascus. Not all of it, of course - he had also learned from others, but Paul is at pains to point out that Jesus is his source, Paul is not depending on many, if any, written sources. The Gospels had not as yet been written. He did not know about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Paul's writings are the first recorded introduction to Jesus, but they lack the narrative quality of the Gospels. They lack the immediacy of accounts of Jesus' words and deeds,

So, when Paul talks about Jesus he is claiming to have got it straight from the horse's mouth. That is an extraordinary claim, is it not? It's not surprising that the folk back in Jerusalem were sceptical. Paul brings with him not just a report of a visionary meeting, but a whole heap of learning - including about the crucifixion and the resurrection - about the resurrection he had, of course, first-hand evidence. But Paul makes up for lack of stories with a whole heap of Theology. Paul is more concerned with what Jesus means than with what we says and does.

Paul was, of course, a Jew and an educated Jew at that. He can read and write. He knows the Hebrew scriptures Back to front, inside out. He reads and writes Greek and he is a Roman citizen!

So, we might say, Paul is the right man for the job. And, while he has disciples, and acolytes and companions he is, essentially, a loner. We have no way to check on what he says - except by prayer. So when Paul gives advice to the people at Corinth we hear him as a person claiming authority.

The Corinthians, as we have come to call them, have been suffering from mixed messages. Some amongst them had laid claims to know what the faith was all about and that they had the stuff of leadership. Although no shrinking violet himself, Paul is pretty much convinced that this sort of behaviour is going to get them nowhere fast. Paul, responds, albeit from afar, that the faith is not about power and influence. The faith is about Jesus who died a miserable and unfair death on the cross, and who lives on in our hearts and in the world. The world is a better place because of this, and we are better people because of it. Because of those events new life is possible.

You might want to try to imagine what effect this bit of theology might have had on the Corinthian church. "What are you saying, Paul. We thought this church was about cosy community; about sharing and being nice and supporting each other in times of trial. It's a rough and tumble world out there, Paul, where dog is eating dog. That sort of stuff we understand, but now you tell us that it's not about us but about what God is like and what He has done for us without us asking. What sort of ridiculous message is that? Cosy community? Yes. Service? Yes. Putting others first? Of course! Jesus dying and rising and saving. Now that's not going to build a church — surely".

We are not in such a different situation now. We are living through the decline of our church; through the decline of THE church. Perhaps we are living through the decline of our civilisation. We have been seduced into thinking that chumminess and community is the answer. If we get that right they will come flocking back.

Right?
WRONG!

Will they come back to a redeemed church ready to rescue the world? Well, perhaps. It seems like it's worth a try.

I like to pose the question: What is the difference between the church and a *Probus* club? What is the difference between the church and a *Lions* or *Rotary* club. They all exist to serve. They all provide community. What's the difference? I will leave you with the question. Perhaps in looking for an answer you might look to Paul for a clue.

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

May it be so.

HYMN: TIS 675, Shine Jesus Shine...

Prayer – Prepared by Dianne Richter

In this time of epiphany, when the world is hurting and people are struggling, God, the source of healing and wisdom, guide us and heal us. Give us the time and the desire to see what is before us, to awaken the epiphany within, so we may look out.

We hold those around the world who live in unsafe homelands, whether civil or faith-based. May the perpetrators of violence and fear come to understand the meaning of peace and harmony and the wellbeing of all people and environment.

Within our own country and local community, may we never lose sight of those who are victims of injustice and violence.

For first and second nations people as we all explore and seek to understand the impacts of an indigenous Voice in parliament.

For those who suffer through unfair or unjustified incarceration.

For those who are lonely and living without family or friends to support them

For those who have lost everything, including hope following flooding and other disasters.

For refugees and asylum seekers seeking safety and permanence.

For those who are unwell, dying or grieving.

During this week of World Interfaith Harmony which seeks to bring together members of diverse faiths and backgrounds and recognise the impact that faith leaders can have in our world, let us remember that all religions, Atheists and Humanists call for peace, justice and tolerance. May we put aside our hidden intolerances and be truly people who work for peace, justice and tolerance.

God of justice, mercy and wisdom, keep us faithful and compassionate. Remind us that not to become so distracted with keeping our church wheels turning that we neglect to love our neighbour even as Christ Jesus has loved us. In this way, may we share the wisdom given to us through the Spirit, with others.

Amen.

Blessing

God grant to the living, grace; to the departed, rest; to the Nation, peace and concord; to us all Your servants the promise of everlasting life, light to guide us on our way, courage to support us, and Your blessing to unite us in service to You our God and this our Country. Amen.

HYMN: TIS 409 O breath of life...

Thoughts for the week to come

I have been reading a book about a dozen or so remarkable people. We might call them modern saints. They all lived during the last century, and their lives have shown us the various ways our faith might be lived out. We look at their lives in wonder. We should not try to copy them, but allow them to find our own unique ways to live out our faith at this time and in our own place. This week, and for the following two weeks, I am going to look at three of these “modern saints”. Today it will be Archbishop Oscar Romero who lived (and died) in El Salvador. Archbishop Romero was a conventional churchman who, in the last few years of his life came to the blinding realisation that The Gospel (the good news) was that God champions the cause of the poor, the destitute and the downtrodden. During those few years he championed the cause of the poor in his actions, in his preaching, in his writings and in his life. Romero called on the rich and powerful to change their attitudes and ways. It was not just a matter of redistributing wealth, it was a matter of accepting Jesus as partner in the task of creating a world that is truly liberated.

Born Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez · 15 August 1917 · Ciudad Barrios, San Miguel, El Salvador
Died 24 March 1980 (aged 62) · San Salvador, El Salvador
Buried Metropolitan Cathedral of San Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvador
Denomination Roman Catholicism

Source: Wikipedia

Here are a few of his thoughts:

Let us not forget: we are a pilgrim church, subject to misunderstanding, to persecution, but a church that walks serene because it bears the force of love.

1 MARCH 14, 1977

The Christian must work to exclude sin and establish God's reign. To struggle for this is not communism. To struggle for this is not to mix in politics. It is simply that the gospel demands of today's Christian more commitment to history.

JULY 16, 1977

Let us not tire of preaching love; it is the force that will overcome the world. Let us not tire of preaching love. Though we see that waves of violence succeed in drowning the fire of Christian love, love must win out; it is the only thing that can.

SEPTEMBER 25, 1977

How I would like to engrave this great idea on each one's heart: Christianity is not a collection of truths to be believed, of laws to be obeyed, of prohibitions. That makes it very distasteful. Christianity is a person, one who loved us so much, one who calls for our love. Christianity is Christ.

NOVEMBER 6, 1977

It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems,

starts no conflicts. What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine church, is the word that, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims and accuses: proclaims to the people God's wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God's reign, so that they may tear that sin out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws – out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and of humanity. This is the hard service of the word. But God's Spirit goes with the prophet, with the preacher, for he is Christ, who keeps on proclaiming his reign to the people of all times.

17 DECEMBER 10, 1977

Oscar Romero was gunned down in his cathedral while saying mass. The Catholic Church has made him a Saint and surely if anyone deserved that title it is Romero. We are no of high status. We don't have a platform from which to proclaim The Gospel. Most of us live quiet and responsible lives. We do our best. Romero would support us in that but he would also tell us that no matter what our lives have turned out to be they will be vastly better by walking with Jesus and adopting his ways.

Sources:

Epperly, Bruce G., 2020, *Mystics in Action: Twelve Saints for Today*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books.

Oscar Romero (Compiled and translated by James R. Brockman, S. J., 1988, Maryknoll, Orbis Books.

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Postlude

You can find a copy of today's sermon along with other congregational information on the church website.

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Music: Peter Hurley

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