

ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



AUGUST 17, 2025

FAITH AND FIRE



'HOLY FIRE' CEREMONY, CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE, JERUSALEM

WORSHIP AT HOME

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

Set aside 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. We join with them all.

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.

❖ GREETING ❖

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
And the love of God
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all
And also with you

❖ WELCOME ❖

Good morning! It's wonderful to be with you here today.

Our gospel reading is not an easy one today. Jesus speaks of fire and division. But, if we read it right, it can be transformative. If we speak the truth in a world often hostile to its neighbours and to the love of God, we might experience that hostility ourselves. But by God's grace we are changed so we might realise the gift of the Kingdom of God.

❖ CALL TO WORSHIP ❖

Most loving God,

Help us to centre our lives on your awesome light and love, let us feel your presence and sit in wonder at your word which creates the cosmos and sustains our lives.

May we face the truth that sets us free, and offer you more than we thought possible, with a freedom of spirit which makes praise as natural as dancing for joy.

Let your spirit in this hour fill all the hours of our week. To your glory.

❖ HYMN 455 – For all the saints ❖

1 For all the saints who from their labors rest,
who to the world their Lord by faith confessed,
your name, O Jesus, be for ever blessed.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

2 You were their rock, their fortress and their might,

you were their captain in the well fought fight;
in deepest darkness still their one true light.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

3 So may your servants, faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
and win, with them, the victor's crown of gold.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

4 O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine,
all yours, all joined in unity divine.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

5 And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

6 The golden evening brightens in the west;
soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest,
the peaceful calm of paradise the blest.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

7 But see, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
the saints triumphant rise in bright array;
the King of glory calls passes on his way.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

8 From earth's wide bounds and ocean's farthest shore,
through heaven's gate the holy people pour;
the Three-in-One for ever they adore.
Hallelujah, hallelujah!

❖ PRAYER OF ADORATION AND THANKSGIVING ❖

Let us pray a prayer of thanksgiving and adoration.

We give you thanks and praise, O God,
for though our lives were a wasteland
you cherished us and gave us life again.
With a love-song, you sang the earth into existence,
and led your people from slavery through the Red Sea.
You planted them in a fertile land
and looked for a harvest of justice and righteousness.
When we returned only bloodshed and torment,
you sent your child, Jesus,
to be the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.
His preaching kindled a fire
and divided the living from the dead.
He endured the cross, disregarding its shame

and was baptised in suffering and death.
You raised him to life and seated him at your right hand,
and are now strengthening us for the race before us,
so that with the faithful witnesses of all generations
we may receive your promises and be made perfect.
Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,
we offer you thanks and praise at all times
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

❖ PRAYER OF CONFESSION ❖

Being human, we never find it easy to ask for forgiveness. But as God's children, called to live in relationship with one another, we know we must speak of how we have hurt others, so we might be forgiven and restored to new life. Please join me as we pray to God, saying,

You long for justice for all people, but it is washed away by the flood of violence in our world. You hope that righteousness will walk with us, but you hear the clear cries of those we mistreat. You ask us to speak up for those in need, but we shut our mouths and turn away.

Forgive us, Righteous God. Have mercy when we do not bear the fruit we could. Even though we have not lived our faith to the fullest, may we receive the promises of hope and grace you have given to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
has endured the cross so that our sins will be forgiven
and we will be with him for eternity.

Sisters and Brothers,
your sins are forgiven;

Thanks be to God

❖ PASSING OF THE PEACE ❖

Christ is our peace. He has reconciled us to God in one body by dying on the cross and rising to new life.

We meet in his name and share his peace.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

❖ HYMN 687 - God gives us a future ❖

1 God gives us a future,
daring us to go

into dreams and dangers
on a path unknown.
We will face tomorrow
in the Spirit's power,
we will let God change us,
for new life starts now.

2 We must leave behind us
sins of yesterday,
for God's new beginning
is a better way.
Fear and doubt and habit
must not hold us back:
God gives hope, and insight,
and the strength we lack.

3 Holy Spirit, teach us
how to read the signs,
how to meet the challenge
of our troubled times.
Love us into action,
stir us into prayer,
till we choose God's life, and
find our future there.

❖ THE SERVICE OF THE WORD ❖

Luke 12:49-56

⁴⁹ "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after

they had been encircled for seven days. 31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is the word of God

Thanks be to God

❖ SERMON ❖

May the meditations of our hearts and our minds be always acceptable in your sight, God our strength and our redeemer.

Amen

In today's gospel reading, Jesus speaks of bringing fire. This might just be the most uncomfortable account of Jesus' words in the New Testament.

When Ji asked me to preach today, he failed to tell me it was angry Jesus in the lectionary! But as Christians we're told to forgive so I am moving on.

Jesus preaches that he has come to bring fire to the earth and division within the family. Yet we treasure the earth and our families.

Can this be the same man who preaches compassion and bringing in the outcast? Is this the incarnation of the God who is love? Is this the prince of peace?

Yes, it is, and I hope I can show you why.

After he talks about how he has come to bring division, Jesus then criticises the crowds for interpreting the weather easily enough but not being able to interpret the times they are living in. But notice how he doesn't call them stupid, he calls them hypocrites. He's pretty much saying 'Your happy to use your brains to figure out the weather but you don't

bother with what is infinitely more important – what is going on in the world around you'. It's what we call "willful ignorance". People would rather pretend that the world is other than the way it is than kick up a fuss. But why do we do this?

The American journalist and activist Gloria Steinem was a leader in what was called Second Wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. She certainly wasn't afraid to bring the fire. In fact, she has a terrific quote I want to share with you. It didn't originate with her, but she used it for the title of one of her books. It goes 'The Truth Will Set You Free' – that part was Jesus, John 8:32. But that's not Steinem's full quote. It goes 'The Truth Will Set You Free, But First It Will Piss You Off!'

It's a great quote. And it's true! The truth can wound the ego and disrupt our comfortable assumptions. And we don't like to speak those truths because we don't want to cause trouble.

Someone told me the other day that I don't like conflict. I was really annoyed but I didn't want to disagree with them, so I guess they were right.

We would much prefer a false peace to an uncomfortable truth. And that's what Jesus encounters here – a world racked by violence and poverty that would prefer not to disturb the status quo than stand up for the poor and what's right. The church today – and I mean this in the broadest sense of the church in Australia – is perceived by wider society both as "respectable" and dying. Whether this is fair or not, it's often tempting for the church to retreat to the false peace of respectability than to follow Christ as a change agent in the world.

The prophet Jeremiah writes: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." He was talking about the false prophets of his time who went around telling people everything was fine because that's what they wanted to hear. The peace Jesus brings is about transformation and often that's the last thing anyone wants. He knows that the way that he preaches is going to cause division. He doesn't delight in that fact, but it won't stop him from pursuing the truth.

So the division Jesus brings is not hostility towards the world. It is the result of exposing what is false in the world. He does not revel in this division. After all, he tells us to love our enemies. This division causes him grief.

We see this on Palm Sunday. In Luke's gospel we read "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, 'If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.'" He longs for peace, but people resist it, that's how we get division. There were those who wanted to violently overthrow the empire. Jesus was no friend of empire but he knew these wannabe revolutionaries couldn't handle the truth - that the way of violence would only end in ruin.

And maybe the hardest truth for us as Christians is that fire and division is often the fate of many of those who faithfully follow him. We heard that in the reading from Hebrews today. There we are told that many Old Testament figures received great things through faith in God but then the writer tells us about others who suffer terrible violence. '

It's difficult to read but this is what the world is like sometimes for those who stand up for what is right. And as Christians we are called to stand up for what is right, not keep a false

peace. We might be rejected or insulted but that is the way of the cross. You've got to lose your life to save it as Jesus said elsewhere.

We do not seek out conflict and our own suffering for its own sake. That would be the direct opposite of Jesus' mission and utterly self-indulgent. But there is a cost. That's just the reality of living in a fallen world. We have many stories throughout history of people calling out injustice and paying the price – some with their lives. My favourite example is Martin Luther King, an American Civil Rights activist of the 1960s - a man of great love and courage but assassinated for those very things. We admire people like him greatly but if they had kept the peace out of fear of upsetting people then they would not have changed a thing.

If we're honest, it's hard to live up to these heroes of faith. In fact, there are many ways, even as Christians, that we try to avoid what is truly being asked of us.

Recently I read a quote by the famous 19th century Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard from his journals and papers which speaks to this. Kierkegaard was a genius, a rabble-rouser but self-aware enough to know he was just as guilty of the things he criticised other Christians for. In this quote he brings the fire so hold on to your hats:

The matter is quite simple. The New Testament is very easy to understand. But we human beings are really a bunch of scheming swindlers; we pretend to be unable to understand it because we understand very well that the minute we understand we are obliged to act accordingly at once. But in order to make it up to the New Testament a little, lest it become angry with us and find us altogether wrong, we flatter it, tell it that it is so tremendously profound, so wonderfully beautiful, so unfathomably sublime, and all that, somewhat as a little child pretends it cannot understand what has been commanded and then is cunning enough to flatter Papa. Therefore we humans pretend to be unable to understand the N[ew].T[estament].; we do not want to understand it. Here Christian scholarship has its place. Christian scholarship is the human race's prodigious invention to defend itself against the N[ew].T[estament]., to ensure that one can continue to be a Christian without letting the N[ew].T[estament]. come too close.... I open the N[ew].T[estament]. and read: "If you want to be perfect, then sell all your goods and give to the poor and come and follow me." Good God, all the capitalists, the officeholders, and the pensioners, the whole race no less, would be almost beggars: we would be sunk if it were not for ... scholarship!

Now as the facilitator of the Ormond Learning Hub ... I should say I'm most certainly not anti-scholarship. But his point is we are so clever as human beings that we can spend millions of words showing how the bible is the most beautiful book in the world and it's all in the service of never having to do what it actually says.

But so we don't think that Christianity is just some contest to see how much suffering we can endure, in the letter to the Hebrews we learn that what drives those who suffered for God is faith – faith in things unseen.

It's interesting to ponder how most people think about faith these days. Nathan Nettleton makes the point that we tend to think of faith as a possession – “my faith” “your faith” “Do I have enough faith?”. This tracks with the kind of consumer society we live in. “MY faith is important to ME”. Now I don't want to denigrate the power of personal devotion for transforming one's own life. But faith as Jesus and the author of the letter to the

Hebrews understood it is not something to do in private and let the world carry on as it is. Our faith is meant to shape who we are in the world – how we treat others, the kinds of communities we believe we ought to live in and the ways that we can help the outcast and less fortunate.

Remember earlier that I said that standing up for the truth in the face of rejection and insult is the way of the cross? Well, in today's reading when Jesus says that he has a baptism with which to be baptized, he is talking about his crucifixion on the cross. He knows that confronting the sin of the world will bring division and lead him to the cross. Yet he describes this as a **baptism**.

In Luke's gospel, just before Jesus is baptized, we read "John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." So, we're starting to get a richer understanding of New Testament fire. It's a divine presence like the burning bush in Exodus. It's a refiner's fire like in the book of Malachi. It burns away sin, not people. It is a purifying fire burning away what is false about the world. And ultimately it is a baptism of fire. For Jesus and for us, the way of the cross is the way to new life.

In Romans 6 Paul shows us this directly when he writes:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Jesus Christ our saviour has no interest in our destruction. On the contrary, he has come to give us new life. But there is a world of difference between living and self-preservation. To truly live we must be willing to die. If this sounds dramatic let me put it to you this way: Jesus calls us to love without fear. It takes courage but with God anything is possible. The trials and tribulations that come from living for Christ are the very thing which open us up to his give and receive hid life-giving love. Ultimately, *Jesus brings fire, not to destroy us, but to set us free.*

Amen.

❖ PRAYER ❖

It would be much easier, Jesus,
to ignore the hard truths around us:
the widening gap
between rich and poor,
the consistency with which the powerful
get their way,
the bending of rules and the self-enrichment
of the connected and influential,
e lack of adequate care, protection and resources
for the most vulnerable among us;
we would rather not see these signs.

It would be much easier if we could just pretend everything was alright,
if we could prophesy goodness and light,
and ignore the darkness and evil;
if we didn't have to offend the status quo,
or challenge the comfortable;
if we could convince ourselves that the cross,
was just a one time thing –
your calling, not ours.

But, we can't do this, Jesus, because we know too much;
your Gospel has captured us and opened our eyes,
and we have become slaves to love,
the love that must speak for the voiceless,
the love that must challenge injustice,
the love that draws lines of division
between truth and denial,
between compassion and expediency.
Give us the courage to acknowledge what we see,
to name the signs of the times,
to disrupt the 'way things are'
in the name of what should be,
to divide in order to heal and restore,
and to be crucified for the sake of love.

Amen.

❖ HYMN 572a - O thou who camest from above ❖

1 O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart.

2 There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return,
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

3 Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me,

4 ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

❖ PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ❖

Lord we pray
Hear our prayer today

As we pray for others
And for ourselves

This is our prayer for new beginnings in our new church.

As we stand at the threshold of a new chapter in our life, we seek guidance, strength, and hope for the journey ahead. Life is full of transitions and fresh starts and in those moments our prayers for new beginnings can provide solace, clarity and renewed faith.

Lord

As we stand on the threshold of this new beginning we come before you with a heart filled with gratitude. Thank you for the gift of fresh starts and the chance to begin anew. In this moment we ask for your guidance and wisdom as we step into uncharted territory with new ideas for the future.

May your light shine upon our path and lead us towards the purpose you have set for us.

Grant us the strength to let go of the past and embrace the future with hope and enthusiasm. Let this new chapter be a canvas where your blessings and grace are painted in vibrant colours, creating a beautiful masterpiece of our lives.

In the season of transition, we humbly seek your presence and guidance. Grant us renewed purpose and a clear vision as we embrace this new beginning. Help us to see the opportunities that may be hidden within the challenges we face. Let your light illuminate our path, showing us the way forward.

May we move forward with unwavering determination knowing that you have a plan for our lives.

Strengthen our faith so that we can follow your divine blueprint with courage and trust in our hearts.

In this new chapter may we find the fulfilment of the purpose you have ordained for us.

Just as by faith the Israelite people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had received the Israelite spies in peace.

And what more should we say? We don't have the time to tell of Gideon whose faith in the Lord was tested, Samson whose strength was mighty, of David the flawed king of Israel and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, escaped the edge of the sword and were made strong out of weakness.

We acknowledge our fears and doubts but surrender them to you knowing that you are by our side, guarding and protecting us.

With your loving embrace we will find the courage to face the unknown with resilience and determination. We believe that this new beginning holds endless possibilities under your divine care.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer – please pray this in whatever version you are most at home with.

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

❖ OFFERING ❖

Loving God, through the resurrection of Christ Jesus, you have given immeasurable grace to us. May our offerings be the image of the grace we have received, and a taste of what it means to live lives for you and for our neighbour.

Amen

❖ HYMN 685 – Lord I come to You ❖

1 Lord I come to You
Let my heart be changed, renewed
Flowing from the grace
That I've found in You.
Lord I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of Your love.

Refrain

Hold me close
Let Your love surround me
Bring me near
Draw me to Your side.
And as I wait
I'll rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love.

2 Lord unveil my eyes
Let me see You face to face
The knowledge of Your love
As You live in me.
Lord renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life
In living every day
By the power of Your love.

Refrain

Hold me close
Let Your love surround me
Bring me near
Draw me to Your side.
And as I wait
I'll rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love.

❖ **WORD OF MISSION** ❖

God of love and light,
Give us the courage to speak truth in love,
Knowing nothing can separate us from your love.
And may we shine your light into the world like a blazing fire.

❖ **BLESSING** ❖

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.

❖ **DISMISSAL** ❖

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:
In the name of Christ.
Amen.

❖ POSTLUDE ❖

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

Music and Words reproduced with permission under CCLI licenses

Presider: Brad Denniston

Music: Peter Hurley

Church Office

Tuesdays, 9.30am-1.30pm

Fridays, 9.30am-2.30pm

Phone: 0411 958 127

office@ormond.unitingchurch.org.au

Website: www.ormondunitingchurch.org

NEWS & NOTICES