

**St. Margaret's Uniting Church
Mooroolbark**

**Sunday 13th May, 2018
7th Sunday of Easter & Mother's Day**

Welcome

All are invited to share morning tea following the service

WE GATHER TO WORSHIP GOD:

WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE WURUNDJERI PEOPLE

GREETING & INTRODUCTION

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all ... **and also with you.**

WE SING 'Christ is alive' (*TIS 387*)

CALL TO WORSHIP

OPENING PRAYER

WE LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD:

SHARING THE EARLY WORD

WE SING 'Like a tree' (*Richard Bruxvoort Colligan*)

GOSPEL READING John 17:6-19 *Jesus' farewell prayer on behalf of the disciples*

'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. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 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. 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

NEW TESTAMENT READING

1 John 5:9-13

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

For the word of the Lord ... **thanks be to God.**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

Friends, sing of this love and renewal, for in the name of Christ, you are restored again, **Thanks be to God! Amen.**

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

I've been thinking this week about tensions between what the world believes and what we hold on to as people of faith. The opening words of the 1John 5 reading speak of receiving human testimony, but that the testimony of God is greater. Not many in the secular realm would hold to that.

And this week as the church has marked the Ascension of Jesus, his return to heaven after all the resurrection appearances, I realise that I've shied away from honouring this moment of faith and story of Jesus. In that I realise there is a residual fear - that human testimony ridicules the idea of Jesus somehow disappearing from view, as though powered by jetpack, or lifted by drone, or perhaps even worse, flying with super powers or ghostly grandeur.

It's not just this kind of thing. The Ascension seems to cling to ideas of a flat earth, with a heaven just beyond reach above the skies. And science has long ruined that idea for us all.

I don't believe the earth is flat, but what has hit me this week is that if Jesus departs to return to the Father and goes up, then it almost presupposes that heaven is up above, and hell is beneath the earth. And while the molten lava and intense heat inside this ball we call earth seems hellish, I'm sure that is not what the ancients had in mind.

So if I am to embrace warmly the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, and live in a world that scorns many archaic religious views, what does this mean about our witness, or our being drawn to the testimony of God?

It is in 1 John that we hear these words, testimony, witness. It means that what is spoken of is important. It is as though a court of law has been established to argue opposing views or truths. And the outcome

from the Scriptures, is that the testimony of God far outweighs that of humans. And what is being testified comes in the verses and chapters before our reading today. Rev. Bill Loader writes that what is on trial is, 'that Jesus really did come in the flesh and really did die! Jesus was real. That is God's testimony about his Son.'

So as God is my witness, it behoves me to dig a little deeper to understand what God and Jesus are witness to.

Rev. Ravel Weinman has shared some helpful notes on the Ascension this week. He writes, 'What is forgotten by unbelievers is that this is another example of the use in the Bible of metaphor and poetic presentation of events and beliefs.'

In other words, we don't need to be on a collision path with all that our rational minds might be screaming at us. Yes, there is mystery. After all, which of us knows the depth or can even scratch the surface of reality around us? But divine mystery does not mean we need hold to ideas of flat earth, or Jesus flying upwards to heaven in ways that make mockery of all that we know.

So what is this Ascension of Jesus Christ?

Rev. Weinman suggests that it tells us that Jesus is not bound by our ideas or by what we imagine as time and space. If Jesus is in heaven, Jesus is also always with us. Even science grapples with truths of quantum physics that particles can be in two places at once. The important thing is that we cannot control or domesticate Jesus. If he is with us but elusive at the same time, we cannot enslave him into our wants or needs or images of what he must be.

Like Mary Magdalene who tried to hold tightly onto the risen Jesus, we are all inclined to make Jesus the comfort we need or want. Like a mother who still offers consolation to adult children, who provides the rock when all else seems to fail, we will all seek to make Jesus into whatever soothes us, or makes us feel better about ourselves. Like the disciples on the mountain-top during the transfiguration, we want to stay in these peak places rather than face the day to day reality of life.

But Jesus cannot be made into that which we cling to. It goes far deeper than that.

Jesus departs the human world we know by promising the disciples that he will be with them all, even to the ends of the earth. Imagine if Jesus remained as once we knew him to be – locked in a body, born of Mary, roaming in Galilee, eating with the twelve. If that were who Jesus was post resurrection, then he would be bound as we are to one place and time. He would be bound to a limited number of days like the rest of us. He would not bless us with his presence, even to the ends of the age.

And yet, as God is my witness, that is what he does, in ways that I cannot truly explain. But he does so in ways that allow me to hold onto ideas of a solar system of wondrous orbits. It allows me to hold onto ideas of an old universe and yet one of God's creation. It allows me to wonder at this intricate and finely balanced work of beauty, and marvel at a God who in my experience remains intimately involved with me, and you, and to the ends of the earth. It allows me to marvel like people dedicated to science at the wonder of quarks and particles, at a universe that appears to have knowledge beyond what can be rationally seen.

To paraphrase Immanuel Kant, we need to be overwhelmed by the beauty of creation in order to adore and see the hand of God. And I am overwhelmed by such beauty. If this testimony is on trial, and human witness is up against the witness of God, I'm happy to align myself with the wonder and majesty of God's witness, not matter how ridiculous that might seem to others.

There is something else about Jesus' Ascension that changes everything for us. If Jesus were physically among us, he would be like the great teacher, a guru, a marvel for us to follow and be besotted by. Again, think of the want to cling to him, as Mary Magdalene wanted to. But as Jesus prays to the Father on behalf of the disciples in the gospel of John, he prays that they (and we) might be prepared for his absence. It is a prayer that hands over authority. It is the passing of the mantle.

Jesus needs to be absent in that immediate sense in order for us to become the body of Christ for the sake of the world.

Yes, the early church, the apostles together became the body of Christ. And we in this gathering are the body of Christ.

As Jesus prays before he ascends, he prays these things for disciples left behind. That

- We may be protected from evil
- We may be unified
- We may fulfil Jesus' joy – be happy and blessed
- We may be distinct from the life of the world

Which is why Luke's gospel can record that when Jesus departed the disciples experience great joy. Think about the contrast to Jesus' death, and even his resurrection. Bu by the time of the Ascension, there is joy in being commissioned – to be given the mantle, the authority of Jesus, to be equipped for the journey, as God is our witness.

Returning now to the image of the tree by the water (Psalm 1). If we are like the tree and know where our life comes from, and if we drink deeply from life-giving waters, then we will live into our high calling as the body of Christ.

As the record of 1 John reaches its climax, hear these final life-giving words, words that invite us deeply into the mystery and salvation of God: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD:

WE SING 'Make me a channel of your peace' (TIS 607)

OFFERING

PRAYER

Loving God -

**who both disturbed and comforted the disciples
with glimpses of the risen Jesus:
give us an awareness of his presence with us,
that we may be sustained,
to journey through both the dark
and joyous experiences of life,
and strengthened to serve you in his name. Amen.**

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

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.**

SHARING FROM THE CHILDREN

WE SING 'Holy Spirit go before us' (TIS 420)

SENDING FORTH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD:

BLESSING and SENDING OUT

SENDING OUT SONG 'Send by the Lord am I' (ATOK 412)