

CADBURY PASTORATE

2 May 2021

Welcome

Welcome to worship on the 5th Sunday of the Easter season. While worshipping in our homes, but together in spirit and prayer, let us welcome the presence of God, who commanded faithful people throughout the ages to love God, love neighbour and love ourselves. Let us welcome the presence of Jesus, our teacher and brother, who reminded us again that the whole of God's law can be summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." And let us welcome the presence of the Spirit, which moves us to love our neighbour through the hearing and understanding of their diverse voices and languages.

Let us thank God for the gift of love.....

Let us praise God for the rich diversity and beauty of the earth.....

Hymn

For the beauty of the earth

Prayers

Gracious and loving God, you have given us minds to know you, hearts to love you, and voices to sing your praise. Fill us with your spirit that we may celebrate your glory and truly worship you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.....

God of All, we confess that we *say* that we love our sisters and brothers, but we do not always show that love. Our words speak of the love we have for our neighbours, but our actions may tell a very different story. Forgive us. Rid us of our pride, release us from our fears. Teach us to love as *you* love, so that we may more faithfully demonstrate our love for you through our love for all. Amen.

Scripture Readings

1 John 4: 7-21

Acts 8: 26-40

Hymn

Come thou fount of every blessing

Reflection

In our reading from the Book of Acts this morning we have the wonderful story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from

Jerusalem to Gaza. The eunuch from Ethiopia is a court official who is in charge of the treasury of a queen, so he has a great responsibility, he is probably quite wealthy himself (he rides in a large chariot) and he is a sexual minority - a eunuch – which means that he is someone who would probably never be accepted as a full member of a Jewish worshipping community, according to purity laws. But whatever his acceptance may or may not have been, this eunuch has performed his religious duty to worship in Jerusalem and is now on his way back to the court of Ethiopia. Philip, a faithful Jew and follower of Jesus, is prompted by the Spirit (an angel) to have an encounter with this man. And when Philip first sees him the Ethiopian is sitting in his chariot reading from the Book of Isaiah. He is reading about the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) and is wondering what it means...who the Suffering Servant refers to.

You can imagine that Philip almost faces a dilemma. The Spirit tells him to join the eunuch and talk with him. But what about Scripture as Philip has been taught? According to Deuteronomy eunuchs were excluded from membership in the community; according to scriptural authority a eunuch is an outcast. Yet, the angel or the Spirit keeps whispering in Philip's ear. And so we know that this story is more about inclusion and exclusion rather than about conversion. Philip is faced with a dilemma. Does he feel restrained by the purity law in Deuteronomy or does he instead embrace what he has heard of the most important message of Jesus which is the love command, the message about loving neighbour as yourself?

There is almost certainly a debate going on inside Philip's head. But he decides to go with the message of Jesus. And so he joins the Ethiopian in his chariot and starts to preach and teach. And after hearing what Philip has to say about Jesus and about the Good News of love and inclusion, the Ethiopian sees a river and has a bright idea. And so he asks Philip: "Look, here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

In other words, the man is asking Philip: Am I worthy only to hear about the Good News of Jesus or am I worthy to share in it? Am I worthy only to hear about the love of Jesus or am I worthy to be included in it? The eunuch is challenging Philip: Are you just talking or do you really believe what you are preaching? And once again Philip has to decide, really decide, if this man is *in* or if he is *out*. Philip has to decide if the Ethiopian can be included in the body of Christ; he has to decide if he really believes that God's love can be expanded that wide that it can include this foreigner, this outsider, this outcast.....or is he too different?

Today there are so many stories of people pondering the same issue. Am I excluded or included? Am I accepted, however different I may be, or am I considered and to be treated like an outsider?

Philip, in that moment, sitting face-to-face with this Ethiopian eunuch, decides to follow the principal message of love that Jesus shared with all those he encountered, and so he baptizes this man and immediately after is taken away. The eunuch hardly notices because he is rejoicing. He who has been an outsider, marginalized in his community, now is fully included in the new community of the body of Christ.

How do we answer the question the eunuch was asking, the question that so many are still asking today: “What is to prevent me from being included in the Good News?” “What is to prevent me from living as if I am fully a child of God?” “What is to prevent me from being accepted as I am...” Unfortunately, there are still many today who can come up with a whole list of unhelpful responses to the question the eunuch asks, and draw up a multitude of roadblocks to inclusion, identifying all kinds of reasons that prevent someone full inclusion in God’s love.

We, like Philip, are called to proclaim and embody the community of the body of Christ, which is radically inclusive in its nature. No one is denied acceptance for “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” and “If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” May it be so. Amen.

Prayers & Lord’s Prayer

Holy God, during this Easter season we have been witnesses to the power of resurrection; slow motion explosions of green soundlessly changing our landscape, blossoms blossoming pink and white, tulips opening their brilliant colours to the warmth of the sun. We find ourselves opening up too, opening our doors and windows, turning our faces upward, breathing deeply the fresh spring air. The fragrance of spring permeates our world, and we give you thanks for the blessing of life renewed.

We pray for our government, local and national, as they debate issues, and make decisions, that they may do so with honesty and integrity, and always seeking the common good, and particularly keeping in mind those who are vulnerable and voiceless.

As we face a choice in the local elections this coming week be with us as we consider the options and weigh the arguments of the political candidates. Prompt us to listen to the voices on the margins in our communities and to be aware of their needs as well as hear the cries of the

earth which demand local policies to protect the environment. God, we pray that you would stimulate our minds, stir our hearts and sanctify our choosing.

We are mindful this week, as the vaccine rollout is continuing to be amazingly successful and numbers of Covid infections have greatly reduced in our country, in other countries the infections are still rising, bringing widespread suffering and grief and overwhelming healthcare systems. We think of India, the Philippines, Brazil among other countries. We pray, comfort the bereaved, give strength to the healthcare workers and relief to the sick. Open the hearts of the world to provide assistance. Sustain international relief organizations as they deal with this health crisis while also continuing to deliver their regular programs of support. We lift up those we know with health issues among our families and friends_____

We pray for our churches, that we may be a blessing in our communities. That we may join with your work to bring hope and to realize your promise of peace and justice for all. And we pray together.....OUR FATHER

Offering

Generous God, we offer you our time, talents and resources in gratitude of all that we have been given. Loving God, we give you thanks for all that we have and ask a special blessing on our gifts to help meet the needs of your beloved community. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Hymn

Be thou my vision

Blessing

Be the church, be united in love for one another, abiding in Christ, guided by God's word, renewed by the power of the Spirit, loving in word and deed.....Amen.