

Hymn we stand

Where mountains rise to open skies
your name, O God, is echoed far,
from island beach to kauri's reach,
in water's light, in lake and star.

Your people's heart, your people's part
be in our caring for this land,
for faith to flower, for aroha
to let each other's mana stand.

From broken word, from conflict stirred,
from lack of vision, set us free
to see the line of your design,
to feel creation's energy.

Your love be known, compassion shown,
that every child have equal scope:
in justice done, in trust begun
shall be our heritage and hope.

Where mountains rise to open skies
your way of peace distil the air,
your spirit bind all humankind,
one covenant of life to share!

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A Prayer for Waitangi

For those whose dreams of freedom and equality inspired our nation: we give thanks, O God.
For those whose sacrifice and courage preserved this country in times of danger and indifference: for all who quietly yet firmly resisted wrong without bitterness or vengeance: we give thanks O God.
For leaders who have placed righteousness and justice before concern for prestige and popularity: For the multitude of citizens whose hope and deeds of mercy are known only to you: We give thanks, O God.

From good intentions gone astray in this country and across the earth: O God, deliver us.
From the irresponsible use of natural resources, of economic and political power: from a narrow patriotism which ignores the needs and welfare of all people: from discrimination, prejudice, and racism that hurts, wounds and ruins lives: O God, deliver us.
From a preoccupation with the past and a refusal to confront the future with faith and vision: from false pride and blindness to our nation's frailty, from complacency and timidity in speaking the truth: O God, deliver us.

That our government and courts may govern and rule courageously, justly and wisely: May God's spirit be known.

That the people of this land, in all their rich diversity, may live together in unity without fear: that we who pray might hear again your call of grace that is ever good news for the poor, liberty for the oppressed, sight for the blind, and healing for the broken-hearted: May God's spirit be known.

That we may journey towards that day when your kingdom will be revealed in all its glory as your will is accomplished on earth as in heaven, and all your people live together in justice, freedom and peace: May God's spirit be known and our ears and hearts be open to new ways of love. In Jesus name.

We pray together the prayer Jesus taught:

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.

Bible Readings

First Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

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. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 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’—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 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. 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.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church

People: **Thanks be to God**

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 5:13-16 The Message (MSG) Salt and Light

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the rubbish.

“Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Reader: This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ

People: **Praise to Christ the Word**

A Reflection

We pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our rock and our sustainer. Amen

Do you ever wonder why we might say this prayer (from Ps 19) before the sermon, one that asks God to be in both the preachers' ability to speak and our ability to listen with discerning minds and hearts to the word of God? Is it one of those unfathomable things that are just 'done' in a service? Actually no. For the preacher, it is a reminder that this is God's word, not theirs, being explored. It is also a reassurance that God's wisdom is guiding both preacher and listener in hearing what the Spirit is saying to us as the church and to our individual hearts.

The Apostle Paul says it well when he speaks of his preaching: 'it is not my words but the work of the Holy Spirit in this time to write God's truth upon our hearts and bring us to faith.' It doesn't mean that any preacher is to do less than their best, this is not an apology for a dreadful sermon, but it does say whether the thoughts are muddled or flow well, the words tentative or passionate, the interpretations connecting or missing the mark, we will all still be fed by the word of God if we listen with an open heart and mind.

The prayer reminds us all that the word, when anchored and held in God's wisdom, will take us on a journey of life and hope, of new things and clear purpose. The wisdom of the world, where God is absent, can only bring heartache and a turning away from the truth of Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians is strong on this point – as he responds to the unlooked-for adulation being given him as preacher, as he comments on the unhealthy way he and Peter and Apollo are pitted against each other by some of the community who seem to equate worthiness/godliness with impressiveness as preachers. Paul almost gleefully highlights his frailty and unimpressiveness. He himself, he says, brought people into relationship with God despite this weakness of speech and proclamation. He says that, through the Spirit, the wisdom he spoke from was the wisdom of the cross, a wisdom not of this world but of God, a wisdom older than memory and full of mystery. This is the wisdom we are to follow.

Because Paul, in this letter to the people of Corinth, is seeing a situation where human wisdom seems to be prevailing – or at least causing dissension. So he is out to debunk the myth that it is human wisdom and clever rhetoric that brings people to Christ Jesus, to faith. He says instead that it is God's wisdom, not his own, that flows through him when he speaks, it is God's wisdom that takes us on the path of truth and hope and reconciliation, that shakes us up and guides our life.

He also says that the Spirit of God leads us into what the world call the foolishness of the cross and exposes the wisdom of the world for what it is: destructive of life and loves. He chooses to follow the cross, some people in the church at Corinth were choosing to follow the way of worldly adulation, a path to destruction as it leads them away from the cross.

An example might be useful at this point – I don't know if any of you have seen the movie, 'The Railway Man' – it's based on the true story of an Englishman who was tortured and abused, along with many others, by the Japanese whilst building the Burma railway. In the book (from which the screen play was taken), when the man returned to Burma to confront his nemesis, the one who tortured him, now a tour guide of the area, he brought forgiveness with him without knowing if this man was sorry for his actions. However, in the movie he went with a heart full of revenge and hatred, only to find when he met him that he couldn't carry this out and found he could forgive. The Japanese man was full of contrition and sorrow and one got the impression from the movie that the forgiveness was earned, rather than given freely, unconditionally as in the book. The wisdom of the world deemed better for the box office than what we know as the wisdom of the cross.

And this is our tension isn't it as we seek to live in Christ's way. For we are constantly pulled between the two, drawn into the subtle redefining of God's extravagant wisdom into the safer, more comfortable contained wisdom of humankind. The earning of forgiveness is much more sensible, we might say, than the much more difficult unconditional approach of Jesus. The impressive orator is deemed to hold more truth, more persuasiveness, than the less articulate speaker such as Paul.

In other words, some in the church see the Spirit of God made known in terms of miracle and power; Paul challenges them to know the Holy Spirit as the Christ of the beatitudes, the Christ of the cross.

And our Gospel reading for today tells us what living in the spirit of the cross means for us. Involvement, struggle, bearing love to others even when things turn ugly. It tells us to beware power struggles, elitism, detachment and jump in boots and all to be the salt that brings flavour, the light that shines in every corner of the world.

Jesus tells us to take scripture seriously, to remember that we are all a vessel of the spirit, speaker and listener alike, seeking to hear the truth, the wisdom of God through the Spirit of God. We are all participants in the work of making Jesus known, not a Jesus that we have curtailed to our wisdom but a Jesus that we are prepared to follow on the most foolish of paths – to the cross and to new life.

We are all called to be the salt that brings flavour to the world, the flavour of God spread across nations, over time and in every season. The analogies he uses of salt and light – very ordinary things of the world that make an enormous difference – are intentionally used to show the importance of our participation in the spreading of the love of God into every corner and every encounter. Without we and the world are a poorer people. Whether it is a stumbling articulation of our faith across a table in a café, or a struggling to forgive someone who seems not to be suitably penitent, we are being true to the wisdom of our faith, to the Spirit of Christ present in our midst.

How do we see this working in our church today? How can we be a community that is not tempted as the people of Corinth were to following a wisdom contrary to the calling of the cross?

We might begin to answer this by pondering how we understand church community? Is it a bit like a club where only particular people can feel comfortable, where outsiders must conform or love and forgiveness is a carefully measured offering? Is it, in other words, the way of the world, or is it a place where all people are welcome, where love for God and each other transcends all difference, values all people, offers all gifts unconditionally - the wisdom of the cross.

Dorothy MacRae McMahan defines faith community as costly, one that asks much of us: she suggests that these are the qualities of those who live in the way of the cross:

Vulnerability, the laying down of prayer, trust, commitment to others, accountability, faithfulness, giving and receiving of forgiveness, openness, acceptance of diversity, kindness, the risking of ourselves
None of these easy, some of them very hard for some of us.

It has been rather interesting to see the ongoing development of the movement called ‘Sunday Assembly’ developed in the UK (by a couple of comedians apparently) – but it had grown throughout the world. It is where people gather on Sunday mornings to share inspirational stories, gather round to sing, reflect and go out to do good things. A good and very caring approach to right living.

The difference is: this is all without God. Whilst our track record as a church is not brilliant at being inclusive, I wonder what habits of behaviour might occur in this gathering without the wisdom of the cross at its centre:

I wonder if they will simply dispense charity or realise that people, all people, have something to give each other, I wonder if they will continue to offer help when there seems no returns, no rewards, if they will understand the amazing power of love to change lives and the intrinsic value of each and every human being as they are! Maybe they will and maybe there they will find God.

We who choose the wisdom of the cross, we who look to Jesus to show us the way of foolish love, unconditional mercy and amazing grace – we who are called to be the light that shines that the darkness cannot put out, the salt to the earth in desperate need of goodness, we pray for our words to be acceptable in God’s sight and our hearts and minds to be opened to God’s guidance and call, to live in the wisdom that flavours the earth with godliness and shines the generous light of love to all the world.

I finish with some profound yet simple words of faith from C S Lewis: “I believe in Christianity [in Christ] as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else”. Amen

Hymn

WOV 669 I am the light of the world
I am the light of the world

*You people come and follow me
If you follow and love, you'll learn the mystery
of what you were meant to do and be*

when the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and the shepherds have found their way home,
the work of Christmas is begun

I am the light of the world

to find the lonely and the lost,
to heal their broken souls with love,
to feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
to feel the earth below, the sky above;

I am the light of the world

to free the prisoners from their chains,
to make the powerful care,
to re-build the nations with strength of goodwill,
to be at one with people everywhere;

I am the light of the world

to bring hope to every task you do,
to dance at a baby's new birth,
to make music in an old person's heart,
and sing to the colours of the earth.

I am the light of the world

Words and music © Jim Strathdee

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gracious and loving God, we give thanks for all the ways that your Word had entered our hearts and minds this day – through prayer, music, through word and response, through your Spirit and to your purpose. We give thanks for all who have contributed to our worship, all who are part of the community of faith, all who cannot be with us today.

We pray for the church as we struggle to find our way in this time of uncertainty, for those who lead, those who discern, those who encourage and those who ask the hard questions of us. May we be open to the Spirit in all that we do and say. May we recognise the times when we choose the wisdom of the world and seek to find instead the way of Christ.

We pray for the lost, the struggling, those who despair and those who know little hope in life. May we open our hands and hearts to all who have need, not just in our community of faith but also in the wider community. We give thanks for all those who work with those who feel battered by the world, who hear only criticism and face only distrust. May all continue to be strengthened by the shining light of your love we pray.

We pray for the displaced – for refugees, for broken families, for those who are excluded by violence, by creed, by difference, by lack of power. May we shout out for justice for the displaced, may we be part of the solution so that all people can be valued and loved.

We pray for Aotearoa New Zealand: for those who have been affected by the weather events, for those who are providing immediate care and help, for those whose livelihoods have been affected, for those who have to make hard decisions for the future. We pray for the political leaders of our country, locally and nationally that they may be compassionate in their choices, generous in their understandings and open to hearing the voice of the people in need.

We pray for the lessening of hatred and fear in our communities – for those who see a solution in violence, for those who delight in falsehood, for those who intimidate and indoctrinate carelessly and widely.

In a time of silence we bring out concerns before you O God – of people and situations that are on our hearts at this time.

Hear our prayers, guide us in your footsteps as we seek to be the salt of godliness, the light of love to all that we meet, in Jesus name. Amen.

Offering

We pray – Generous and abundant God, you have blessed us in many ways. You ask us to be that same blessing to the world, bringing hope and peace to a troubled world. Accept these our gifts, not just of money and food but of ourselves that we might bring our gifts, our skills, our abundance to those in desperate need. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Hymn Words by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette tune Leoni 6.6.8.4 ("The God of Abraham Praise")

A little bit of salt will quickly show its worth;
A little bit of faithfulness will change the earth.
God, make us worth our salt — a church that's glad to be
The change that you desire in each community.

A lamp that's in a house gives safety, warmth and light;
It's set upon a table where it shines so bright.
God, make your church a light that bravely takes a stand
To bring your love and justice into all the land.

A garden is a place where so much beauty grows,
Where flowers bloom and food is raised and water flows.
When worship leads us out to care for the oppressed,
O God, you say we're like a garden at its best.

When worship leads us out to love and serve the poor,
To welcome in the refugee at our own door,
O God, then we'll be called "repairers of the breach,"
And we your church will be "restorers of the streets."

It's tempting to remain well-hidden, quiet, bland —
Yet, God, you make us salt and light to change this land.
You send us out to love, to build and to repair,
Till peace and justice flourish here and everywhere.

Blessing and Benediction

Blessing from Joy Cowley:¹

As you go from here today:

May the deep peace of our Lord Jesus Christ abide deep within you.

May you know you are exactly who you are meant to be.

May you be content with yourself knowing you are God's unique creation
and can never be separate from God.

May you not forget the great potential born of faith, that is in you and others.

May you use the gifts you receive, and pass on the love that is given to you.

May your soul always find freedom to dance in abundant gratitude

And may God continue to bless you and other through you. Amen.

¹ *Blessing* from *Veil over the Light: selected spiritual writings* by Joy Cowley p.154