

WORSHIP THEMES

JUNE – JULY

2022



st. matthew's
BAULKHAM HILLS
UNITING CHURCH 
growing together

PENTECOST – 5TH JUNE

Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

Theme: On being a people of Spirit

Throughout the gospel that bears his name Luke has frequently invoked the Spirit. More than Matthew and Mark the Spirit is at work in the public ministry of Jesus. His life ends on the cross with him committing his Spirit back into the hands of God. Now his sequel, the book of Acts, takes up the narrative of the Spirit at work in the mission of God, the life of the church, and prepares the way for an understanding of the Spirit in the personal Christian life.

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit fulfils two functions. It enables people to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is one of the functions or vocations of the Spirit in the Christian faith. The other is that allows people from different parts of the Roman Empire (and beyond) to hear the good news in their own language. There is a vital point to be made here. IN the course of the twentieth century movements arose in the church where people spoke 'in tongues'. They spoke in words that they did not understand – and seemingly others around them did not as well: in his epistle to the church at Corinth Paul will reflect on the need to understand what happens in worship and the test of that is whether the stranger in the midst will comprehend. This speaking in tongues is called glossolalia. That is not what is happening on the day of Pentecost in this reading from book of Acts. This account is much more closely related to the reversal of the story of the tower of Babel where God confused the languages of people (Genesis 11:1-9).

Some years ago I was teaching a class on cross cultural ministry and theology. One of our Korean women wrote an impressive essay which went on to win a prize for being the best in the Sydney Theological College. It was reckoned to represent new voice on the Australian scene. It sat along such writings and reflections from other Korean and Pacific Island migrants who wondered what it was like to sing the Lord's song in a strange land (echoes of Psalm 137 and Boney M's hit, "By the waters of Babylon").

Our Korean prize-winner made an important distinction between hearing the gospel, praying and singing in the language 'we get by in' (in this case English) and her 'language of the heart'.

The descent of the Spirit in the book of Acts may lead bystanders to wonder if these folk are drunk at so early an hour in the morning. It more properly represents the Spirit singing in 'the language of the heart'.



TRINITY SUNDAY – 12TH JUNE

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15

Theme: 'Let's go dancing!'

It is sometimes said that the Trinity is the Christian 'name of God'. This talk of 3 in 1 and 1 in 3 is peculiar to the Christian faith. The irony is that the word Trinity cannot be found in the Bible at all. Yes, there are occasions when we find references to the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in the same verse(s) - as is the case with Matthew 28:19) but the actual word 'Trinity' is not used. As a matter of fact it was invented by Tertullian (160-220 AD) who lived in Carthage in North Africa. The word is derived from the Latin trinitas meaning 'three-fold'.

We sometimes get into a bit of a muddle because it seems to involve a degree in 'intellectual gymnastics'. This talk of how can you speak about one God and three 'persons' invariably becomes a question that Muslims will ask us (as they shake their heads in utter bafflement). The word person here is problematic: it is not a person in our modern sense of a separate individual being. It comes instead from Greek drama where it refers to a character. You may recall seeing references to 'dramatis personae' – people in the drama – in a programme for a play.

How we understand the relationship between the Father, Son and the Spirit has consequences. So often in the past it had a feel of an hierarchical order that carried over how we related to one another – men and women, dominant cultures and other cultures, humanity and other creatures. The other option involves a metaphor of a 'dance' where you change partners, like in a Scottish reel. Some of the early Christian Fathers invented a word for this way of thinking – perichoresis. The peri- means 'around'; the choresis part comes from the Greek word for a dance and from which we get choreography.

One of the dilemmas the traditional understanding of the Trinity needs to negotiate is how it is expressed in seemingly patriarchal tones. Our reading this morning from the book of Proverbs offers a counter to that. It refers to 'wisdom' which was with God at the very beginning of creation – a bit like the Word in the prologue of John's gospel. Wisdom in the Greek language is feminine.



PENTECOST 2 – 19TH JUNE

Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Theme: Baptized into freedom

The letter Paul wrote to the church in Galatia is his most indignant. Unlike his other epistles he does not give thanks to God for their life together in faith. This is the only time this happens. Instead he will describe them as ‘foolish’ and ask ‘who has bewitched you?’.

It would be easy to read parts of this letter as if Paul was in a bad mood! But that is not really the case. Sometimes we have to dig beneath the surface and see isolated responses within a bigger picture.

Paul is writing his epistle to the Galatians because he believes they have lost the way: they are reverting back to practices (to do with circumcision and dietary laws) that are no longer essential. They have been set free from these constraints – which are the way of the law: he argues that if they have placed themselves under the law like this again, then they have not been set free in Christ. He reminds them of their baptism which reflects a much more inclusive community in which there is an equality of status in the God’s reconciling work in Christ.

The gospel reading reflects a very different kind of imprisonment. It represents a type of exorcism where the Gerasene demoniac is set free from the ‘demons’ and ‘unclean spirit’ within him. What is rather striking about this reading is how the healing of the demoniac creates ‘great fear’ within the people ‘in the city and in the country’. What we see here is a failure to discern good news – and, in a way, that is the reason why Paul is writing to the Galatians. Rather than explore what freedom in Christ might mean, they opt for what they may have been familiar within the past as a consequence of the preaching of those who would have liked to maintain some Jewish practices.



PENTECOST 3 – 26TH JUNE

Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Theme: Uniting Church Anniversary

The Uniting Church came into being in 1977. Its existence is a fruit of the ecumenical spirit. Its formation was reckoned to be a sign of hope and joy. It was imagined at the time that the Uniting Church would become a 'movement' rather than just another denomination. Its very name 'uniting' rather than 'united' captured that hope. It was recognized in its Basis of Union that, through time, the church must respond to fresh challenges; the Uniting Church professed its belief that 'in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews [the disciples] as his Church'.

Sometimes the church – the whole church – goes through a season of setback. The Basis actually refers to how we can run the risk of 'losing the way'. Our reading from the gospel of Luke reminds us that the journey of faith is an adventure that can cut across our default modes of security and certainty: the we are called to follow did not have an election manifesto of promises and tax cuts. He reminds those who seek to follow that 'foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head'. There is an open-endedness about a future that is breaking in upon those who set out.

In the midst of the current difficulties facing the Uniting Church we can recall that Christ has set us free; that we are called to love our neighbour as oneself. In demanding times the fruits of the Spirit that Paul speaks of in his epistle to the Galatians are priceless. What might it mean for a church to embody and witness to its neighbours a life in the Spirit that is marked by 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'.



**uniting
church**

**in Australia,
Synod of NSW & ACT**

PENECOST 4 – 3RD JULY

Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

Theme: For the good of all

For some time now activists representing the Uniting Church have gone to certain events wearing a black tee-shirt upon which are inscribed the words 'Uniting for the Common Good'. This talk of the common good is taken from an area of understanding of the Christian faith called a public theology. Its primary focus is not on the church itself. It is more concerned with the nature of the society, the neighbourhoods in which the church finds itself. Sometimes the passion can flow for a cause without much awareness of the biblical or theological foundations for what is being done in the name of faith. It is here that the idea of a set of organizing texts becomes important. An organizing text is a piece of Scripture that somehow gathers together an area of concern, provides a focus and allows us to build around in a mosaic or montage of biblical texts or theological themes.

One of the verses that has served this function for the sake of the common good is to be found towards the end of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. It is a tough letter. Paul is very critical of these churches but in a way in which he wishes them to recover the good news of what it means to exercise freedom in Christ. In this the final chapter he refers to doing good to all.

The theme of the 'good' is often underplayed in the life of the church: we tend to prefer faith, hope and love – and yet references to the good are very common word in both Testaments. Imagine Paul writing an epistle to the church at Baulkham Hills and encouraging us 'to good to all'. What might that mean in practice? How might be built up a set of biblical references that capture something of how we wish to bear witness to good news and 'do good' in our neighbourhood.

We can see from the reading taken from Luke that it is not a foregone conclusion that 'doing what is right' will be well received. Jesus is deeply realistic: he likens it to 'lambs [being sent] into the midst of wolves'. It may well be that your best ventures are not welcome: it might be time 'to wipe the dust of your feet'. This text is rather well-positioned in the telling of this gospel. It comes immediately after the warning that the one who takes their hand off the plough is not fit for the kingdom; it is followed by the challenging parable of the good Samaritan.



PENTECOST 5 – 10TH JULY

Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Theme: 'Who is my neighbour'

Imagine if there had been no parable of the good Samaritan in the Christian tradition. It is hard to comprehend such a possibility because this parable is probably the best known and most appealing of all the parables Jesus tells. It exists and its effect are to be found well and truly outside the church through organizations like the Samaritans and the commendation 'you are a good Samaritan'.

This parable is only found in Luke. In its original setting its power lay in the suspicion and conflict between Jew and Samaritan. They were, of course, neighbours. On his way from Galilee to Jerusalem Jesus would either have to pass through Samaria or go around its territory. And they were more than neighbours. The Samaritans were descendants of Ephraim and Mannaseh, two of the sons of Joseph. In other words, they belong to the original twelve tribes of Israel and the name Samaritan is derived from a Hebrew word meaning 'guardians or keepers of the Torah / the Law). In terms of the geopolitics of the Hebrew Bible / the Old Testament they belonged to the northern tribes of Israel: when the Assyrians destroyed the Kingdom of Israel they were not deported but remained in the land. It would lead to a difference in the understanding of faith. For the Samaritans the holy mountain was Mt. Gerizim; for the leaders of the tribes who would return the holy mountain would be Zion and the focus of true worship would become the Temple.

Luke refers favourably to the Samaritans on two occasions. The other instance has to do with the healing of the ten lepers: only one returns to give thanks to Jesus and that is the lone Samaritan. In the parable Jesus is faced with a trick question from an 'expert in the law'. It is provoked by the question 'who is my neighbour?'. The lawyer posing the question would not have expected the answer Jesus gave. The priest and Levite (icons of the Jewish faith) do not stop to help the man who has been set upon by robbers. That failure to give assistance is not due to their hard-heartedness or indifference – or fear that the robbers may still be lurking. It is much more likely that the wounded man represented a breach of the codes of purity and holiness. They do not stop because their understanding of God prevents them from doing so. By way of comparison the Samaritan stops, provides time (several days) and resources, and embodies an example of compassion / mercy - one of Luke's favourite themes. This is the only parable Jesus tells which ends with him saying 'Go, and do likewise'.

The parable invites us to consider who is our neighbour. In the example Jesus gives it is the one who sees beyond the constraints of culture and discerns the needs of the person who is in the most vulnerable of situations. The parable stands inside Luke's concern for an inclusive gospel that crosses cultures – and here it is the culture about which we might be most suspicious that does 'the right thing' (as per Galatians last week). The reading from the epistle to the Colossians presumes that spread of the gospel. Its introduction follows the normal pattern of a Greek letter inasmuch as it spells out who is writing, to whom, and then proceeds to a greeting and a word of thanksgiving.

PENTECOST 6 – 17TH JULY

Colossians 1:15-23; Luke 10:38-42

Theme: 'The gospel of creation'

The reading in Colossians for today is sometimes described as a 'hymn'. It is one which is rather startling for it speaks about the gospel having been 'proclaimed to every creature under heaven'. Some translations speak about 'the gospel of creation'. It is not surprising then that it is sometimes used by theologians who demonstrate a concern for the state of the environment, changes to what is called the Earth System and the 'climate emergency'.

Jesus was not of course a climate activist or deep ecologist ahead of his time. Nor were any of his contemporaries. It can be said that he was embedded in the natural world, however. He makes use of flowers, the birds of the air and animals like sheep, goats and wolves in his talking about the life of discipleship and the breaking in the kingdom of God. What this reading does is takes thing a step further. The hymn describes how 'all things on heaven and on earth were created ... through him and for him' and how 'in him all things hold together'.

If this is so, then how we care for all created things in what Paul, elsewhere, identifies as this 'groaning creation' is bound up with confessing who Christ is. In the book of Genesis the days of creation end with God declaring the creation to be 'good'. In the book of Proverbs we hear that the figure of Wisdom was with God before the dawn of creation. Now all things have been made in and through the cosmic Christ who holds things together.

Perhaps it is time to reflect more deeply on this connection and ask how does it feature in our future directions. How we care for the planet and its climate is tied up with how we respect Christ. So often other activities, interests and hobbies can get in the way of time dedicated to such reflection. In our gospel reading Martha is always busy. Jesus commends Mary on this occasion as she

'sat at Jesus' feet'. This is a way of saying

that Mary has put herself into the role of a learner, a pupil, a disciple who sits at the feet of the teacher and is seeking to be instructed and learn more.



PENTECOST 7 – 24TH JULY

Hosea 1:2-10; Luke 11:1-13

Theme: The Lord's Prayer

Our default practice is to say the Lord's Prayer far too fast! It is so easy to slip into automatic mode. One of the great 'secular' saints of the twentieth century was Simone Weil. She has sometimes been described as the 'patron saints of outsiders'. One of her spiritual practices each day was to say the Lord's Prayer very slowly, very deliberately as if she was 'chewing' the words. In the past I have led workshops where I encouraged people to recite the Lord's Prayer in such a way that they left time to dwell upon the words of each line and think about how they might speak into their experience of the world. Read in this way the Lord's Prayer attracts a relevance and currency that is surprising.

The Lord's Prayer – slowed down – is revolutionary and calls into practice many of the values presently held in our society. One of the comments made by Gustavo Gutierrez in his liberation theology was that many people are inclined to pray the equivalent of 'Our Father in heaven, stay there'. Gutierrez is assuming that life on earth ought to be transformed in the light of the concern Jesus showed for the poor and disadvantaged: he is imagining that the kingdom of God is seeking to make life on earth as it is in heaven. Those familiar lines to do with having sufficient daily bread (rather than excess), the hope that debts will be forgiven, and that we will not be complicit (intentionally or otherwise) in the ways of evil are sufficient in and of themselves – said slowly, and contemplated upon.

The version that we find in Luke's gospel is much shorter than its equivalent in Matthew. It has to do essentially with the provision of daily sustenance, forgiveness and avoiding evil. The way it is introduced is via a request made of Jesus by the disciples asking him to teach them as John the Baptist taught his followers. This request is situated within a wider concern for perseverance.

The Lord's Prayer plays a part in naming who we are – our identity in Christ. The disciples make this request of Jesus after having watched him pray. The Hosea reading begins with a loss of identity and status within the reconciling purposes of God. The book of Hosea belongs to the category of the minor Hebrew prophets – the major ones are Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah. It is reckoned to have been written somewhere between 760 and 720 BC. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has fallen to the Assyrians. It seems as if the leaders of the people had turned away from the covenantal God of Israel and begun worshipping the Canaanite deity, Baal and the calves of Jeroboam. The book of Hosea compares their conduct to Hosea's relationship with his unfaithful wife, Gomer. The names of her children bear names that reflect Yahweh's (God) response to their peoples apostasy. Hosea will remain faithful as will God who will eventually transform the people back into 'the children of the living God'.

PENTECOST 8 – 31ST JULY

Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12: 13-21

Theme: Well Off and Foolish

The gospel of Luke is noted for its bias to the poor and its warnings with regards to seeking security in the riches of this world. In this instance the parable Jesus tells is sometimes called the parable of the rich fool. That naming seems a bit harsh! In today's cultural climate we might deem him to be a wise steward, a good investor, someone worth imitating. He has made the most of what he has got and his land has 'produced abundantly'. He is in a position to enjoy the good life insofar as he has 'ample goods' and so, why not 'relax, eat, drink and be merry'.

It is God in the parable who declares him to be the 'fool'. Sometimes the language of the fool is actually used positively in the New Testament. Think of how Paul describes the cross as the foolishness of God. Here the charge of being a fool follows from the mistaken conviction that the good life depends upon material security. The rich man may have the necessary goods to enjoy life but his life is about to come to an end that very night and he is deemed not to be 'rich toward God'.

The placement of this parable demonstrates how the rich man has made the wrong choices. It follows hard upon Jesus speaking about those who will acknowledge him and those who will not. It is followed by the teaching to do with not to be anxious about tomorrow, 'what you will eat, about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and clothing'.

In keeping with the tone of this parable the Colossians passage invites those who have been raised with Christ to 'seek the things that are above'. It amounts to an invitation to be a citizen of heaven while living in the earthly city with all its temptations and compromises. The epistle aspires after a 'new self', renewal and being appropriately clothed not in fine apparel but in the practices of one who has been 'stripped of the old practices; and now is free in Christ.

