

**WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, FORREST, ACT.
PENTECOST 8
10:45am Liturgy
Sunday, July 14th, 2024**



Caravaggio's 'The Beheading of St John the Baptist', is perhaps the best known of such art works.

On the left hand-side Salome, bends down with a serving dish in readiness to receive the head. An old woman stands alongside her, looking on with dismay as she clutches her head in what is perhaps an involuntary gesture. She also provides a stark contrast of age, beauty and emotion to her younger companion – a device often used by Caravaggio. As with Caravaggio, the light says it all. But Scripture, especially the Gospel of John renders meaning to John who testifies to the light. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." (John 1:6-8)

These few weeks we have been following Mark's readings which have to do with demons and demonology, an ancient way of understanding human suffering, experienced through natural events, illness, as well as cultural, social and political structures. For Mark, with its setting in Rome – which was initially hostile to Christians and Christianity – suffering was a lived daily reality, where Christians had to keep their heads beneath the parapet. The great irony in Mark is that while Christian identity invites persecution and pain, it is precisely human alienation that God in Jesus, comes to remedy. The invitation of Mark is that Christians persevere, last the distance, as they reach forward to the kingdom of God.

Today, we hear of the demons, in their political form as Herod, Herodias and Salome, conspire to murder John the Baptizer.

THE GATHERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Prelude: Vater unser im Himmelreich (JS Bach, 1685-1750/ Georg Böhm, 1661-1733)

News and Notices

Acknowledgement of First Nation's People

Let us acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples,
The first inhabitants of this place,
part of God's good creation.
We honour them for their custodianship of the land,
on which we gather today.

A Safe Space

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God, and so we accept every individual regardless of race, age, creed, sexuality and gender.

Welcome and Invocation of the Trinity

In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit

Collect

In this collect we ask that we be grafted into Christ. The line "increase in us true religion" may raise eyebrows, as even among contemporary Christians the term 'religion' is uncomfortable. Let us recall that the term 'religion' is grounded in the Latin word "religare" which means *to be tied back to...* It really reinforces the earlier idea of being grafted into, being made one with.

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same;
through Jesus Christ our Lord

Call to Worship

When we witness our work bear good fruit and rejoice in all God has done among us...

we gather for worship.

When misunderstanding and misinformation threaten to divide instead of unite us...

we gather for worship.

When we dance together in the joy of knowing we belong to God and one another...

we gather for worship.

When we stumble and bumble our way forward as God's grace guides us into greater love and deeper communion...

we gather for worship.

Thanks be to God.

Lighting the Community Candle from the Christ candle

Hymn 225, My heart and voice I raise (Ascalon, Silesian Folk Song, Benjamin Rhodes, 1743-1815)

A Prayer: "A Black Eucharist"

In this prayer we focus on the Gospel reading for today – the story of the execution of John the Baptizer. The theology for this prayer and for this whole liturgy has to do with the sacrament of eucharist. Mark is about to speak of two feasts; one celebrating the bread of life for Israel – the feeding of the 5000, and one celebrating the bread of life for the Gentiles, the feeding of the 4000. When he reports Jesus' discussion of the significance of these two miraculous feedings in 8:14-20, Mark begins by reminding us of the 'leaven' of Herod (8:16). We are meant to see the link. Mark connects the three feasts under the rubric of 'leaven' or bread. The feedings of the 5000 and 4000 foreshadow this meal of life through Christ. *Herod's feast is the counterpoint. It is a black eucharist: John's head is brought forward on a platter at the height of its 'liturgy'.*

Lamp light catches the edge of the sword
just before its swing,
and for an instant John has
a memory of sunlight
dancing on water
and droplets glittering in air
as his hands poured the waters of Jordan
over the bowed head of one
who, standing there,
has brought all hope
into one sharp focus.

He smiles,
 his heart already soaring
 toward the approaching dove
 as the blade begins to descend.

Our Confession and Reconciliation

Let us be still and listen to the voice of God

Silence

Let us confess

That we claim to follow Jesus Christ,
 as vehicles for and expressions of life,
 but our worldview and values fail are harsh and death-dealing,
as a black-eucharist.

That we claim to follow Jesus Christ,
 as means to life for others,
 but our relationships are harsh and death-dealing,
 judgmental, lacking in generosity,
as a black eucharist.

That we claim to follow Jesus Christ,
 but we do so through shallow habit,
 not thinking through what following means
 from context to context, situation to situation, person to person.
We live out a black eucharist, not the real one.

Declaration of Forgiveness

We are all beggars.

Our species is deeply compromised.

We are all creatures driven by unending doubts,
 obsessed with power, abusing power,
 restless, unhappy, if only we could see it.

But the good news is this: we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

The Peace

We greet each other with the peace of Christ. We may either shake another's hand, clasp our hands off in a prayerful way or place our right hand over our hearts.

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD

Prayers for Illumination

O God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as scriptures are read, and your word proclaimed, we may hear and interpret well what you are saying to us.

Readings:

2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12-19b pp. 244-245.

Last week we learnt how David was anointed as king of Israel. In this week's reading David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Ark had long been symbolic of the sacred presence amid God's people since the time of the Exodus. A once nomadic society is now becoming settled in its own territory under a centralized powerful king. The problem at hand is that as this new society becomes established, the mood and very ethos of Exodus is being lost and the vision of a society marked by equality and justice is fading. The Ark, the mobile presence of Yahweh will be overcome by the Temple and royal courts, and social and economic hierarchy, will prevail: a shadow of how other societies and empires work.

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ²David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. ³They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

¹²It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen

ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. ¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart. ¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. ¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Ephesians 1:3-14, p. 949

Paul in Ephesians maintains a broad view of reality. In Christ reality, the world, the cosmos is potentially transformed. This section is all about Christians as lovers of love. This letter is all about ultimate values. Paul sees love in Christ's death. In divine love we are forgiven and free to live lovingly. In turn the larger vision, the mystery is God's desire to bring the whole of creation together as one with Christ as its head.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hymn 464, Seek O seek the Lord (Venantius, James Philip McAuley, 1917-1976)

Gospel: Mark 6:14-29, pp. 817-818

This gospel reading should be read “intertextuality”. What that means is that in this reading Mark takes up previous texts from the Hebrew Bible, draws meaning from them, and adds meaning in the retelling of this account of John’s execution. This story of John echoes the drunken King Ahasuerus dispatching with Queen Vashti because she did not respond to a besotted request (Esther 1), and Solomon’s son Rehoboam following the advice of his young, foolish ‘frat’ friends, instead of the wise elders, when confronted with a reasonable request from his people (I Kings 12). If we read this story intertextually, it is about royal hubris, arrogance, entitlement. It highlights Herod’s own responsibility, not permitting a projection of guilt upon his conniving illegitimate wife and her daughter. The women of Herod’s house are guilty enough, but the intertextual reading shows that kings do exactly what God said they do in I Samuel 8.

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” ¹⁵But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” ²³And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He

went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The Gospel of the Lord
Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ

Anthem:

Homily

Prayers for the Church and World

Today we pray for the peoples of Djibouti and Somalia. We remember the peoples of Gaza, as bombardment continues in the south and the communities relocate yet again in fear of their lives. We pray for the people of Israel, who with their history as victims, live as victims creating victims, in a forever-war that has no psychological or practical end. We pray for the peoples of Russia, where their memory of empire, demands the conquest of Ukraine.

We offer the Bidding: Lord in your mercy...**hear our prayers.**

Hymn 473, Community of Christ (Leoni, Hebrew synagogue melody, Shirley Erena Murray, 1931-2020)

Offering

The congregation stands as the offering is received by the minister and prayers are offered over the gifts.

Our Father

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.

SENDING OUT

Sending Hymn 228, Crown him with many crowns (Diademata, Matthew Bridges 1800-94 and Godfrey Thring, 1823-1903)

Commission and Blessing

Friends, go from this place
inspired by the perseverance of the early Christian community of Rome.
That the crucified and resurrected Christ is worth following.
That love, life are stronger than death.

The blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
Be upon you and remain with you always.

Our service has ended.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ.

Postlude: Fugue in D Minor (Op. 37 no. 3) (Felix Mendelssohn, 1809-1847)

Liturgist and Preacher: Rev'd Dr. Geoff Dornan

Music Coordinator: Jade McFaul

Organist: Lorraine Macknight

Reader: John Sutton