**21st April 2024**

**Call to worship**

Come, everyone, to Christ the cornerstone.
Come to the one who gives resources to build the kingdom.
God invites you, and empowers you with the Spirit.
So come and worship Jesus, beloved Son of the Father.

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

We so often follow the latest trend, so often are easily led without thinking whether the trend is the right one to take. We go with the flow, not challenging or changing. We look to the powerful and influential no matter what lifestyles they live. We don’t give a second glance to the poor and the bottom of the pile. We forget compassion, humility and generosity; we forget our Christian values.
Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forgive us for our blindness, for our lack of thought, for all that we have done and said that has not helped but has hindered, that has not healed but has hurt. We offer our sorrow, repenting of such ways that don’t lead us and others closer to you and your kingdom. **Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

From the burden of our failings, from the guilt of our wrongdoing,
God releases us, renews us, redeems us. Thanks be to God.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

We give thanks, O God, that on your firm foundation we can build our lives, live our lives, find purpose and meaning, stability and peace.
We give thanks that with you as our rock, our cornerstone, we can navigate the tussles and troubles of the world, not avoiding them, but making sense of them and doing all we can to make lives better.
We give thanks that our faith in you steadies us when we are surrounded by false truths, greedy ways, or power-grabbing leaders who have no thought for anyone but themselves.
For your promises and firm foundation, we give thanks.
**Amen.**

**Acts 4.5-12;**

In the news this week we saw a Muslim pupil lose her case in the High Court that her school had discriminated against her and others of her faith by banning Muslim prayers in school. Whether you think she was right or wrong to challenge her school we can admire the courage it must have taken to stand up to her headteacher and to stand by her conviction all the way to the High Court. The school isn’t changing its position but everyone in the community has had to think about the place of prayer in schools and whether students should be supported by their schools in practicing their faith. One pupil did all that.

What issue would you fight to the high court? How would you feel if people in power were telling you to stop, to back off?

God gave Peter & John courage to stand their ground against the Jewish authorities over whether they should preach about Jesus in the temple - even though all the power was against them. What influence do you have? Where is God calling you to stand your ground this week?

Passionate, spirited action can be costly and demands courage.

Last Sunday's Acts reading focused on Peter's Temple speech (3.12-19) after the miraculous healing of the man who had always begged at the Beautiful Gate (3.1-11). Today's reading continues with further repercussions of that healing.

The Temple authorities have seen the public nature of the healing and Peter's address as a major challenge to their power. They were Sadducees who didn’t believe in the resurrection. They were collaborators with the Romans and so had a vested interest in keeping the peace and their power and status.

So Peter and John have been arrested and detained overnight. Now they must give account of themselves before the ruling circle. Has a night of detention given these uneducated, ordinary men a sobering sense of perspective? Will they now see the folly of their ways and relearn respectable inactivity?

As Luke tells it, two things make the return to inaction impossible.

Firstly, the healing of this man (even the authorities could not deny the healing had happened, v. 7), showed that the name of Jesus of Nazareth had a power that endless visits to the Temple gate did not.

Secondly, the personal experience of being filled with God's Spirit gave these followers of Jesus a boldness that swept away all their deference, unquestioned religious respect and internalised inferiority.

First of all, Peter and John knew that there was power in the name of Jesus. They had been witnesses to the resurrection and now to the healing of the lame man. No wonder they were bold in their defence of the gospel.

*Verse 12: Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.’*

 In our age of multiculturalism and sensitivities to other faiths and beliefs – with anti terror legislation and concern over incitement to religious hatred, just reading out this text may offend.

The New Testament of course was written after the Easter event. Time and time again in the apostles teaching they talk about the vindication of Jesus. You killed him, but God raised him from the dead. The resurrection became for them the clinching argument. Condemned as a heretic, a blasphemer, a charlatan, Jesus was raised from the dead – God has shown to us that he is the one – No other name has been granted to us.….

2000 years later doubts set in, we weren’t witnesses, it was a long time ago, historical arguments swirl; Popular fiction spin conspiracy theories; other religions show their muscle. The comforts and distractions of modern life seduce and the need to fit in with society around us and what we believe others believe. We lose our confidence and boldness to even dare suggest that there is no other name.

Maybe, in the light of our cultural context, that is not a bad thing. We know it can be off putting and even dangerous when people think they are absolutely right and therefore other people are absolutely wrong. A little reserve and self doubt can be a good, loving and tolerant thing. Even Peter in his letter urged the first Christians to

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,****16****keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander*. (1 Peter 3.15-16)

Yet we are still challenged to work out our faith and have confidence in the gospel. I’ve found that nothing sharpens you up for that task than others finding out that you go to church or have some belief in God. Like Peter and John you can be called to account for your faith in the name of Jesus.

Experiences help. The healing of the odd lame man wouldn’t go amiss! Sadly those stories are somewhat rare and one can speculate as to the reasons why?

Maybe we have had dramatic and spectacular answers to prayer. Experiences like that, answered prayer, inspiration, insight, can all help your confidence in the gospel. But I think you have to be cautious. All these things contain mystery; sometimes you can offer rational explanations, sometimes you can’t. You always have to be careful that it doesn’t draw attention to you but brings glory to God; otherwise pride gets the better of you; and all these happenings leave you with other questions, say about unanswered prayers. You will have to decide whether you can fall back on faith, a basic trust that God is good, God is loving and that there is power in the name of Jesus.

When I stand over a coffin at some one’s funeral, my first words are bold words of faith: ‘Jesus says ‘I am the resurrection and the life, those who have faith in me shall live, even though they die.’ Let us pray for God to make us bold but gentle in our faith.

I’m sure that was the prayer that Peter and John made sat in that prison cell waiting to be tried before the court. Peter had to speak to a group of people who were among the wealthiest, the most intellectual and the most powerful in the land. Peter, the rough hot-tempered fisherman, would stand before them as their judge rather than as their victim.

Verse 13 says: *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

Long time ago, in life before Debbie, I had to meet the father of my then girlfriend. He just happened to be one of the top civil servants in the country. He had half rimmed glasses and would literally look down his nose at you. Over dinner he tried to expose my deprived upbringing by conversing about opera and Italian wines. He knew nothing about football! Being young and with a broader Lancastrian accent than I have now, I was thoroughly intimidated. His face always comes to mind when I am tempted to look down at others.

This court had condemned Jesus, unjustly. Peter knew it, and he knew that at that moment he was taking his life in his hands.

There are two kinds of courage. There is the reckless courage which responds instinctively almost without concern for the dangers that have to be faced. Most people who win medals for bravery fall into this category. They were just there, at the moment, and their instincts were to immediately help, to jump in, and to risk their lives for others. They did it without thinking.

But there is also a more calculated courage, which arguably is much greater. This is a courage where you know the danger ahead and yet you are still prepared to go for it. Peter went for it.

Peter is preaching in the very same courtyard where he had denied any knowledge of his leader for fear of what might happen to him. No doubt he is in front of some of the same people. Fear can be so powerful that it can paralyse us but on this occasion Peter is no longer afraid. Was it his encounter with Jesus on the lakeshore that had strengthened his confidence (John 21.15-19)? How can we guard against giving in to our fear of what others might think or say, thereby compromising our integrity?

Getting over mistakes, particularly when they have become public knowledge, requires great inner strength. Personal experiences of failure, errors of judgement, saying a word out of turn, can all leave us feeling hugely inadequate so it’s not hard to understand how Peter might have felt. How do we face up to errors in ourselves and in others? Do we realise that mistakes do not define a person’s usefulness. That in actual fact if you learn from your mistakes you become stronger.

Peter’s confidence is not in himself but in the power of the Holy Spirit. He has moved through the isolation of rejection to this place where he has discovered the source of real power. He realises that the gift he has received is also able to change the lives of other people. ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give: in the name of Jesus Christ, stand up and walk’ (acts 3.6). Those in judgement, who wished to silence these bearers of good news, are also discovering where power really lies – in the name of Jesus.

It was Christ who restored Peter and gave him the confidence to stand before others. Our encounter with Christ today can give us the confidence, the self-esteem, based on the knowledge of God’s grace and love for us. This can help us stand.

Millions of people in our world, like Peter and John, have had no formal education. Many others find themselves confronting negative or stereotypical attitudes that devalue their contribution. What can we do to encourage people in such situations not to shy away from confronting their past failings or lack of background? They may need to gain confidence to take on certain responsibilities. They may need the kind of support that can give them the incentive to stand up and be counted.

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in us and in our church, enabling each of us to play our role and empowering us in the tasks to which God calls us.

Let us seek the Spirit’s strength – just as Peter did.

Like them may we have confidence in the power of the name of Jesus; like them may we have the courage and commitment to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

**Prayers of intercession**

God of the universe, we pray for the rapidly changing situation in the Middle East. We pray for the United Nations as it seeks to foster the values enshrined in its charter of peace, justice, respect, human rights, tolerance and solidarity.

We ask that the leaders of the nations of the Middle East will seek harmony and lasting peace.

May power and influence
**be used with wisdom and compassion.**

God of all nations, we pray for those who work for the police and in justice systems throughout the world. Be especially close to those who work in Sydney as they cope with the aftermath of the attacks in a shopping mall and church.

We ask that those who strive to keep their fellows safe and those who administer justice may be strengthened and supported.

May power and influence
**be used with wisdom and compassion.**

God of wholeness and health, we pray for all patients in hospital. We remember those awaiting appointments, tests and test results, their families and all who are concerned for them.

Enable policymakers and administrators to make decisions in imaginative and innovative ways.

May power and influence
**be used with wisdom and compassion.**

God of Church and Chapel, we pray for members of synods and conferences, councils, assemblies and meetings. Help them to respond to agenda items with justice and concern for all people.

Guide all Christian leaders to follow Jesus’ example of service and humility.

May power and influence
**be used with wisdom and compassion.**

God of all people, lastly we pray for ourselves. Help us to be aware that our conduct can make a difference and that our words can bring about change. Help us to be inspired by justice, to seek to serve rather than be served, and to be bold in challenging the status quo when it needs to be challenged.

May power and influence
**be used with wisdom and compassion.**

In the name of Jesus we pray.

**Amen**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Spirit of Jesus,
help us to use our power and gifts
to do good things;
good things for each other, (*point to others*)
good things for the world, (*make a globe shape*)
good things for you and your kingdom. (*point up*)
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

God, our heavenly father,
send us out in the power of your Spirit,
to build on the cornerstone of our faith,
Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.
**Amen.**