



Laura Uniting Church
ORDER OF SERVICE, 30 AUGUST
Rev William Emilsen
Ordinary Sunday 22, Year A

The Gathering of the People of God

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us worship God...

God is spirit,
and those who worship God
must worship in spirit and truth.

GREETING

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Prelude

Libera—Deep Peace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qvMFIL62XA>

OPENING PRAYER

In the light of Christ,
Crucified and Risen,
we watch and pray for the day
we can gather again as one.
We do this in solidarity
with those who are suffering,
 caring for the sick,
 mourning the death of loved ones;
with those most affected and isolated,
including the dying separated from family
 by border closures;
and friends unable to connect
 via digital means.

We pray for those killed and wounded in the explosion
 that shook Beirut ...
 for those missing ...
 for those scarred for life ...
 for those displaced from their homes ...

We join with all committed to climate action
—researchers and reformers, activists and farmers ...

We watch and pray in hope
for a safe, just and peaceful world
for us and for all. **Amen.**

Silence.

We struggle with accepting your cross.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

We fail to follow you.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

We fail to set our minds on divine thing,

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Hear Christ's word of grace to us:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

Thanks be to God.

READINGS FROM THE SCRIPTURES

Epistle: Romans `12:3–21 (Lorraine)

Gospel: Matthew 16: 21–28 (Lorraine)

Homily: On Being the Body of Christ during the Pandemic

Romans 12:3–21, Matthew 16: 21–28

'We ... are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another' (Rom 12:3).
Have you *really* thought about what Paul is saying here?
He says we belong to one another;
Paul challenges our individualism,
our desire to go our own way,
to do whatever we please
and if it's a problem for someone else, too bad!

In my early 20s I went to a university church that met at St Jude's, Randwick.

There were small groups that gathered after the service each Sunday evening in people's homes.

I remember saying to the leader of the home group I went to that I was considering moving away. (In this instance it was simply for work reasons.)

He gently replied,

'Have you considered what your move might mean for others in the group?'

I hadn't....

But whenever I hear of people disgruntled or unhappy with their church for some reason or other I think of his words:

'Did you consider us in your decision?'

The fact is, it's hard 'belonging' to one another like we do in the church.

For one thing, the church is made up of real people ...

and we make mistakes...

and can be critical and grumpy and judgemental;

and stubborn, short-sighted, and petty;

and insensitive, inconsiderate and hypocritical;
 and proud, legalistic, and stingy;
 and unreliable, worldly and weak.

(I could go on!)

But remarkably, Paul here in Romans 12 —and throughout his epistles— looks at the likes of us and pronounces us ‘the body of Christ’.

Just what does it mean to be ‘the body of Christ’? *corpus Christi*?

Certainly not a ‘corpse’ though some churches look pretty cadaverous,
 with all the vital signs saying,
 ‘No life here;
 the breath of God is nowhere to be found.’

No; when Jesus says to Peter that he will build his church, a new community, on his bedrock confession:

“you are the messiah the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16,18),
 he means that he will build a church that allows itself to be like Jesus
 —the body of the living Christ
 —vibrant, active, brave, radical, sacrificial, loving, fruitful... and alive!

It is not easy being the body of Christ at the best of times, and certainly not in a pandemic.
 We are in new territory.

Most of us are thankful that we can connect like we do, but it is not the same.

Most of us try to worship God in our homes, but it is not the same.

Most of us try to meet informally, but it is not the same.

We don’t want to feel dismembered, atomised;
 we want to be the body of Christ

- a church of men and women that is courageous and joyful kind and loving (Matt 16:18).
- a church that can sing together,
- a church that is like no other human enterprise or institution.
- a church that is committed to being Christ’s body in and for the world.

But we don’t feel like the body of Christ when we are not meeting face to face.

We don’t feel connected when we don’t gather.

We are like a body without touch, smell, sweat, and blood.

In the ZOOM-world we feel disembodied.

The Gospel answer to being a connected, unified, vital and vibrant church is to *embody* Peter’s confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16).

The Church is the body of Christ when it confesses that Jesus is the Christ and faithfully witnesses to God’s power in the cross.

Jesus’ teaching on cross bearing is often misinterpreted;

He does not mean accepting oppression by others or putting up with domestic violence.

He does not mean causing harm to one’s physical and emotional health.

He does not mean that you shouldn't pursue your dreams and develop your talents.
He does not mean not setting healthy and realistic boundaries on your time and energies.

It does mean, though, that we, as a community, are witnesses to God's enduring love for humanity.

So, when you next look at the blue Iona cross at the front and centre of our church, remember that everything we do as a church—worship, Christian education, mission and evangelism, social justice, walking, interfaith, retreats, finances, Open Table, everything—should be shaped around and in the light of the cross.

Unless what we do as a church witnesses to the power of the cross it will soon become self-serving.

* * *

The pandemic has forced us to think again about what it means to be the body of Christ. Being the body of Christ is more than meeting face to face (as important as that is in a world where people are separated and lonely).

Being the body of Christ is more than gathering in a sacred place (as important as that is) And being the body of Christ is even more than singing together (though I have heard people say that if there is no singing there is no church);

Being the body of Christ *is, above all,*
grounded in a commitment to witness to God's radical love for others.

or, put in more familiar words:

it is in giving our lives over to Christ to be used as a blessing for each other,
and for our community
and the world.

I began this sermon by wondering what it means to be 'the body of Christ' in this pandemic. Now, more than ever, we need each other.

We need each other for spiritual strength and good mental health.

We need all the patience, determination, prayer and wisdom we can muster.

We need to be committed to one another.

And we need to be unified in following Jesus in the way of the cross.

In Romans 12:9–21, the Apostle Paul, gives us a twenty-one point checklist for living the Christian life.

You might imagine it as a kind of Pandemic Safety Plan to bring out the best in us.

We don't have time to go through the whole list,
so I have chosen five that are particularly suitable for these times:

- 1—Be a true friend—faithful, devoted, affectionate.
- 2—Be creative in your hospitality; look for new ways to make others feel accepted and valued and loved.
- 3—Celebrate the joys, achievements, and victories of others, and share the tears, disappointments, and defeats of others.

4—Get along with one another; there's no such thing as 'irreconcilable differences' in the body of Christ.

5—It's not always possible, but when it is, live at peace with everyone whose life touches yours.

We need not let the pandemic knock us off course and bring out the worst in us.

We should not lower the high standard that the Apostle Paul has set for us.

Yes, we may be fickle and fallible bunch, but we are the best look that many people are going to see of Christ!

Yes, we may be critical and grumpy and judgemental, but we are the best chance they'll have to be part of a loving fellowship.

Yes, we can be stubborn, short-sighted, and petty, but we try to be a community of integrity where failure and pain are not grist for the gossip mill.

Yes, we can be insensitive, inconsiderate and hypocritical but we are a safe place where
 burdens can be shared,
 doubts and frustrations expressed,
 and sins confessed and forgiven.

Yes; no matter what the pandemic throws at us, we are the body of Christ.

Discussion Question

1. 'The deep secret of Jesus' hard words (in Matt 16:24–26) is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away.' (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven*, 79). Can you share instances where this has been true in your experience?

Excerpt of Enigma Variations – E. Elgar
www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV0iXV06rDo

SONG TIS 473 'Community of Christ'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXBxzs2Ftlk>

Community Of Christ

Verse 1

Community of Christ
 Who make the Cross your own
 Live out your creed and risk your life
 For God alone
 The God who wears your face
 To whom all worlds belong
 Whose children are of every race
 And every song

Verse 2

Community of Christ
 Look past the Church's door
 And see the refugee the hungry
 And the poor
 Take hands with the oppressed
 The jobless in your street
 Take towel and water that you wash
 Your neighbour's feet

Verse 3

Community of Christ
 Through whom the word must sound
 Cry out for justice and for peace
 The whole world round
 Disarm the powers that war
 And all that can destroy
 Turn bombs to bread and tears of anguish
 Into joy

Verse 4

When menace melts away
 So shall God's will be done
 The climate of the world be peace
 And Christ its sun
 Our currency be love
 And kindness our law
 Our food and faith be shared as one
 For evermore

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Shirley Erena Murray

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NOTICES (John)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE (Stephen)

Response:

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father, in every age you have heard the cries of your people and come to deliver them. Hear us now as we bring our prayers for your world and your church.

We pray for all in places of conflict or hardship, for victims of ethnic and religious hatreds, ideological conflict, economic exploitation or environmental disaster.

We pray for those in the Black Lives Matter movement, for people suffering from discrimination and violence, and for protesters that they will not cause harm and hurt to others.

We especially remember people in Beirut, Belarus, Hong Kong, the US and Russia.

Deliver us from hostility and greed, that we may share with justice the bounty of the earth and live peaceably with all people.

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for your church, for your followers in every land, for the churches of this community, for your ministers and people who worship at home with printed Services, Zoom or by Services telecast over the internet.

We remember our Pastoral Carer's team as they keep in touch and care for our members.

Help us as your people to learn how to faithfully proclaim your gospel in this new world of isolation and shutdown. May each of us bring your love to others in this time of fear and loneliness.

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for our community, for our families and friends, for those with whom we work and learn, for those with political and legal authority and for those who are unnoticed and unheard.

We pray for families finding it difficult being separated from loved ones across state borders or overseas. We pray for those missing the interaction with friends and church family.

We pray that we may be a loving and hospitable community.

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for all in need,

We pray for the homeless and the hungry, the rejected and the lonely, for those weighed down by anxiety, grief or pain. We remember the work of Open Table and for other services offered at Junction 142.

We pray for the Headspace service that has opened in Katoomba offering mental health support for young people.

We pray for the sick and for all who care for them. We remember those in our church family listed in our Bulletin.....

Give us loving and generous hearts that we can share the joys and sorrows of your people.

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We give thanks for the lives of your faithful people, for all who have followed you to their life's end.

May we, with your disciples of every age, take up our cross and follow you,

that, being prepared to give not less than all for you, we may find eternal treasure in your presence.

Holy God, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

LORD'S PRAYER

*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.

BLESSING

'The Lord bless you and keep you' (Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICpxgEHqjFA>

Loving God,
We thank you for hearing our prayers,
feeding us with your word,
and encouraging us in our meeting together this way.
Take us and use us
to love and serve you,
and all creation,
in the power of your Spirit
and in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.