

Leura UC Service of Worship, Sunday 7th February 2021, Epiphany 5 (Prepared by Mark Hillis)

Acknowledgement of Country

This Christian congregation respectfully acknowledges the Dharug and Gundungurra peoples as original owners, inhabitants, and custodians of this land for millennia. We honour their descendants and their elders: past, present, and emerging.

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CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 147)

Praise the LORD!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
the gracious one, who deserves our songs of praise.

The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
and gathers the outcasts of Israel.
**The Lord heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.**

The Lord determines the number of the stars;
and gives to all of them their names.
**Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
whose understanding is beyond measure.**

The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;
and casts the wicked to the ground.
**Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.**

Hymn 106(i) *Now thank we all our God*

PRAYER OF ADORATION, CONFESSION & THANKSGIVING

We will use the **Hymn 706** as a response in prayer:

Leader: *Bless the Lord, my soul*

Cantor (Carolyn Craig-Emilsen): ***Bless the Lord, my soul, and bless God's holy name. Bless the Lord, my soul, who leads me into life.***

We praise you God for every sign of beauty around us. For the abundance of life and our very capacity to enjoy it. For our senses, however frail, which enable appreciation and our intelligence, however humble, which enlivens our curiosity and creativity. *Bless the Lord, my soul...*

Gracious God, who enriches our lives with companions and friends and with the great gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Forgive us when we turn away from co-responsibility to care for your world. Forgive us when we frustrate those who love us with selfish demands or thoughtless words and actions. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. *Bless the Lord, my soul*

Forgive us, loving God, take our failures and half-hearted gestures and even our selfish prayers. By the power of your Spirit, re-energise us for faithful service in Christ's name. *Bless the Lord, my soul Amen.*

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Give thanks to God, who is goodness itself;
Give praise to God whose love never ends;
Trust in the Lord, you are forgiven!
Blessed be God forever. AMEN.

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 9: 16—23

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path. (Ps 119:105)

Mark 1: 29—39

In this is the Gospel of the Lord:
Praise to Jesus Christ, the Word!



Hymn 693 *Come as you are*

SHARING THE WORD

The Winner

1 Corinthians 9:16-23 & Mark 1:29-39

Once upon a time there was a distance runner named John in a race with other athletes. Another athlete, Ron, stumbled and fell on the track. The crowd of spectators expressed its disappointment with a collective gasp. They gasped even more when John stopped to help Ron regain his footing. The crowd cheered both men, and John made up the ground to go on and win the race! *Truth or fiction?*¹

What is your understanding of the word “win”? Who are some of the winners you know? One consummate winner is Marjorie Jackson. A track and field star of the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, the “Lithgow Flash” was peerless in the 1950s. There are hundreds of slogans about winning, we shall look at a few. Many of them are familiar.



Paul uses the word “win” five times in the short passage from his first letter to the church in Corinth which we read today. How are we to interpret what he is saying? In the verses which come before today’s reading (9:8-15), Paul has been boasting about not taking any reward for preaching the Gospel, which he was entitled to do. Yet, if he did, he writes, that would “*deprive me of my ground for boasting!*” He may be teasing his readers: but there is there something a little uncomfortable about his approach?

Paul’s argument seems to be that because he does not seek material recompense for his labours, he is “free” from obligation. Yet, his free choice is to become “*a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.*”

Paul proceeds into his exposition of all the freedom he has willingly given up “in order to win” various communities of people for the Gospel. His most disconcerting claim is “*I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*” The first image which comes to mind for me is of a salesman who finds a way to agree with you no matter what you say: someone who tries to sell their product without any sense of personal dignity. Have you ever met with such a person? Paul, a sleazy salesman? Not very likely. He is just entirely focussed on his vocation.

¹ Actual footage of the 1956 race <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/landy-assists-fallen-rival-and-still-wins-mile-rac/query/Clarks>. Briefer version on <https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/547440>. Accessed 01-02-2021.

Paul is the winner. The word “win” is a verb in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul means to win people for Christ’s community. He will not allow his personal agendas to get in the way of someone meeting Jesus Christ. He seeks to empathise with each person he meets. He meets them where they are, on their own ground. Paul seeks to understand how the Gospel will find expression in each of their contexts. That is the revolutionary part of his teaching. Paul believes in the continuity of Christian faith with Jewish heritage, but he does not accept that Christians should be required to become Jews before their baptism as Christians. Paul is, in fact, interpreting the notion of freedom in Christ for those who are followers of Jesus. Faith in Jesus does not require each person or community to fit a pre-set mould or cookie-cutter. In his own day, the cookie cutter (if you will pardon the expression) was male circumcision. Largely thanks to Paul, baptism became the only initiation rite required by Christian conversion.



Allow me to offer a couple of everyday examples, applying Paul’s proclamation in First Corinthians chapter 9. *If I’m having dinner with an alcoholic, I will exercise my freedom NOT to have a glass of wine. Out of love for my new friend, I will exercise my freedom to drink the best quality soft drinks with him or her.* If we are hosting a meal with vegetarians, we will exercise our freedom not to eat meat. In fact, we may, out of love for them, prepare a fully vegetarian meal.

The Gospel for today endorses Paul's approach to mission. Simon Peter's mother-in-law and Jesus himself exemplify lives of service. The unnamed mother-in-law immediately serves Jesus (same term as used for a church deacon). This lady shows the men how to do it. Where Jesus has been trying to share his authority as a servant leader with his male disciples, here is a woman who immediately responds with action.

This is how she celebrates her healing. And Jesus, rather than returning to the crowd that now appreciates him, turns to the next ministry task awaiting him. This is a fact about Jesus which his disciples found difficult to learn. Surely, when you are "the man" or work for "the man," you should enjoy the top-dog privileges and perks of your position in the community. Goodness knows, many of his followers since have only too readily believed that to be right. *Mark 1:35-37* demonstrates that attitude. When Jesus was not doing what his followers expected, his male disciples went “hunting” for him! “Come on, Jesus, do your thing: perform for your support base: give them what they want!” Peter’s mother-in-law was not like the men! She knew what to do, and Jesus enabled her to do it.

We too will have to learn this truth about Jesus. If you want to enjoy the wholeness and joy of friendship Jesus, you must be ready for anything (see verse 38). He is not one to wait around 'soaking up the glory.' If you want to learn from him, you need to be on your toes. The real winners are the ones who are ready to put into action what Jesus teaches them by his life and example. The real winners are adaptable and have a sense of vocation that is neither settled nor self-satisfied. Our confidence is in Jesus, the living Word, not a set of dictums that are immutable and fixed forevermore.

SILENT MEDITATION [You may like to read another passage of Paul’s writing, such as 1 Corinthians 1: 26-29, to experience the consistency of his proclamation]

Hymn 692 *Sometimes a healing word is comfort*

OFFERINGS AND DEDICATION

NOTICES

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE & LORD'S PRAYER (Prepared by Ross Neville)

Let us come before God in prayer. After each topic in the prayer there will be brief time of silence [marked by (...)] for your thoughts to be brought to God and I will finish with the phrase 'Lord hear our prayer.'

O heavenly Father our heart is heavy with the state of our world. There are so many sad things happening. Many of the issues are caused by the hardness of heart and selfishness of humans to each other. Forgive us as a people Lord.

We think especially of the people of Myanmar and the recent military coup. Many ordinary people and Christians are struggling to make a difference in a lot of countries, including Russia, France, and India. Strengthen, encourage, and help these people to feel your love, support, and concern in their struggles. (...)

Lord hear our prayer.

The unequal distribution of the COVID vaccine around the world is an issue. Help the leaders of the wealthy countries display compassion and concern for the poorer nations as they struggle to gain access to the vaccine. It is a time like this when we can see the selfishness and greed of some peoples and nations come to the light. We pray for the conviction and change of heart of these leaders. (...)

Lord hear our prayer.

We pray for those who are losing, or have recently lost, members of their family to COVID19. Especially we remember the people we know in countries that are struggling with overwhelming numbers contracting COVID19, or who are dying: UK, USA, and Brazil. We pray for those who are leading the burials and funeral services, helping people cope with their grief. Help them to enable people to see your love and care in their loss. (...)

Lord hear our prayer.

Especially we remember our friends in Fiji. These caring, cheerful people are struggling. They are dealing with impacts and effects of the second cyclone to devastate their islands over the last month. We pray especially for the Christian churches that they may be able to offer practical aid and continue to offer hope and love at this time. (...)

Lord hear our prayer.

We bring before you the weary and exhausted firefighters in Western Australia. It is exhausting to continually offer yourself and put yourself at risk in front of walls of fire and to continually see sites of devastation. We pray for these workers, volunteers, counsellors, and helpers in Perth. We pray for their wisdom, energy and compassion to be renewed by you, as they help those who are affected. (...)

(You may remember someone you know who is being affected)

Lord hear our prayer.

Lord we bring before you those who are in ministry here in the Blue Mountains.

Especially we remember those in the Parramatta Nepean Presbytery. We think of those who are leading or organising ministry in Katoomba, Blackheath, Leura, and Lawson. As the year of group activity begins under the restrictions of COVID19, we pray that we may encourage the conviction, enthusiasm and concern of those organising activities with people in our

community. Empower them to be alert and compassionate as they begin and continue to arrange their contacts. Especially, we remember *Open Table, Taize, Junction 142, Children's ministry, Retreats, and ministry with refugees.* (....)

Lord hear our prayer.

Lastly, we remember ourselves and our friends who need healing, support, encouragement and loving care. We remember them now in our thoughts. (....) We especially remember Gwen Wilson and her family as they adjust to and accept Gwen's passing. We thank you for Gwen's life and presence with us and we pray for your peace and love to be felt by the immediate family. Be with us this week in our activities, our contacts, our times of reflection, and our conversations. May we reflect your nature this week in all that we do. (....)

Lord hear our prayer.

Let us say together the prayer Jesus used with his disciples.

*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.

Hymn 611 *God of grace and God of glory*

BENEDICTION

The grace of Christ attend you;
the love of God surround you;
the Holy Spirit keep you;
this day and forever. **Amen**

1 Corinthians 1: 26-29

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

St Paul Icon - Saint Paul the
Apostle Orthodox Church,
Las Vegas, Nevada USA

