

# Sermon for 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of Bethlehem Church, Hermannsburg

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The text for today is 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our rock and our Redeemer.

Today is a thanksgiving service.

What is that?

It is a time when we look back and thank God as the giver of all good things, especially the giver of the good news of Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

We thank God for those who brought the Gospel to this part of the world and still do.

We thank God for missionaries and pastors and evangelists and people who helped build these church buildings so we could gather and have somewhere to bring people for baptism, and to listen to God's Word and to receive the Sacrament.

It is also a time when we look forward. We look forward in hope and trust in God's guidance. We look forward not with human confidence but with confidence in God. God wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the Saviour Jesus Christ. God wants all to hear of forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ and eternal salvation for all who believe.

A church thanksgiving service reminds me of a relay. You know about a relay. We have a stick we call a baton. The first runner has it and runs and passes it to the second runner. The second runner gives it to the third runner and so on until the end of the race. The life of the church is a bit like that.

We are one generation. We receive the baton of faith from the last generation and we ask God's help to pass it on to the next generation. If the baton gets dropped we pick it up again and start running again.

In the reading for today Paul says he passed on what he received. The way he talks is like a picture, passing on the Christian faith a bit like a relay.

This is interesting. After Jesus rose from the dead and before he ascended to heaven he gathered his disciples together and he spoke to them.

In John's Gospel we read that he said,

As the Father has sent me I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins their sins are forgiven, if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven.

In Luke's Gospel we read that he said,  
Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.

And in Matthews Gospel we read he said,  
Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.  
And I am with you always to the end of the age.

Jesus sent the apostles out to be in the relay, passing on the Gospel, the good news of forgiveness of sins to all nations.

Those apostles went to towns and cities close by and far away. To places like Ephesus and Corinth and Rome.

Eventually the message spread throughout Europe and into North Africa and India.

In time it spread to the Americas and Asia and Australia.  
And by the grace of God the good news of Jesus was brought by missionaries from Germany right here.

And for about 140 years here one generation has passed on the Christian teaching to each new generation.

You here are part of a worldwide church.

Today again we will remember that connection as we confess the Creed and say, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the holy catholic church, that is, the church throughout the world.

The epistle reading from 1 Timothy today speaks in much the same way.  
It says Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Today is a good day to do that again. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. There may be some of you here today who have been struggling to believe in Jesus, struggling to stay close to the church, struggling with all sorts of things in life.

Jesus stays close to you. He doesn't leave you or forsake you.

He loves you and welcomes you back into his church at any time.

He encourages us all today to keep on running the race of faith, to keep on taking hold of eternal life, to keep on believing even when it is difficult and not everyone supports you.

Run the race of faith and keep on running it. Run it in the church, with the help of other Christians, but most importantly with the help of the Holy Spirit that God gives to his people when they listen to his word and receive it in to their daily life.

There is so much this day to be thankful for.

During the week I was reading again about the time the first missionaries came here. Many of you will know the story better than me so forgive me if I am not accurate. And I thanked God.

I was reminded about seven baptisms in 1887 and then more baptisms in 1890.

And I thanked God.

I read part of a sermon of one of the first evangelists where he encouraged the faithful Christian here to spread the good news to other communities. He reminded people here that they had had the Word of God for over 50 years and now it was time to take it to other communities.

And I thanked God.

And so then I read about mission work being done into the Haasts Bluff, Papunya and Areyonga communities. And I thanked God.

I read about pastors from the Wilhelm Lohe seminary in Neuendetteslau in Germany and from the Hermannsburg seminary also in Germany. They came with family and made incredible sacrifices. They helped write down the language and began to translate the bible. And I thanked God for their contribution to the relay of faith.

I read about the people who invented the pedal wireless so you could then have radio contact with Alice Springs. And I thanked God.

I read about the railway line being built to Alice Springs in 1929. And I thanked God.

I read about the water coming from Kapprilya Springs in 1935. And I thanked God.

I read about the beginning of training for evangelists and pastors. And I thanked God.

I read about the first two indigenous pastors ordained in 1964. And I thanked God.

That became my litany – I thanked God. I thanked God. I thanked God.

I heard about the pastors and lay workers who have served here and I thanked God.

I thought about all the LCA support workers and staff who have served here over the many years in the church and the store and working for Finke River Mission. And I thanked God.

And I thought about the sem bush weeks I have been privileged to teach in Utopia and Stirling and Yirara and here at Hermannsburg on that very piece of lawn outside. And I thanked God.

You will have your own reasons to thank God on this special thanksgiving Sunday.

Look at the font. Thank God for your baptism and if you aren't yet baptised talk to pastor about that.

Look at the pulpit and the lectern and thank God for the gift of His Word to listen to, to study, to talk about in groups.

Look at the altar rail. Thank God that he gives you the body and blood of Jesus with the bread and wine for your forgiveness of sins, your new life as child of God, your salvation for all eternity.

Look at the organ which is a symbol of all of our music and our singing. What a privilege to be able to sing to God and thank him like they did in the psalms for all his good gifts.

People in the past had great vision and courage from God to plan and build these church buildings and to train and support pastors and evangelists to teach and preach and bring the Gospel to you.

And now you look ahead. Today is not the end. It is a landmark along the journey.

It is a day to look at the baton, the baton of faith, and ask God to give you help and strength and courage to pass it on to a new generation.

You see, you play your part too now in the relay of faith.

Bring people for baptism, teach the Word of God, help people understand the great gifts he gives at the altar.

Encourage your pastors and evangelists and pray for them as they bring you the Word of God, preaching and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Encourage those who work in other communities. I think some have come here today to help celebrate.

We are one church and we run the relay together, helping each other as best we can, praying for each other and our leaders, and asking God to help us and give us wisdom as we seek to pass on the faith to the next generation.

All of us, sing together in praise to God, pray for one another and for those who will not or cannot pray for themselves, care for one another when you are in trouble with the care and comfort you receive from God.

Today is a day of great thanksgiving.

It is a day to thank God we are part of the relay of faith.

Passing on what we have received so that still more people can hear of the good news of Jesus.

Jesus who said I am the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus who said I am the resurrection and the life.

Jesus who said I am the bread of life.

Jesus who said Come to me all of you and I will give you rest.

Give thanks to God the Father in the name of Jesus our Saviour by the power of the Holy Spirit who is at work in us who believe. Give thanks for the part others have taken in their part in the relay of faith.

Ask God to give you help as you take your part in the relay of faith. Ask God for courage and strength and patience and wisdom. And he who is faithful will strengthen you for your part as you pass on what you have received. To him be the glory, Amen.