

Sermon

Saint Peter's Brighton Beach

The Third Sunday of Easter, 2020 (Anzac Day, COVID-19)

'To make the Word of God fully known'

Luke 24.13-35

In Charles Dickens classic, 'A Christmas carol', Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Face to face for the first time with his own mortality, with his future destiny, Ebenezer turns the misery of a self-centred life around. Waking up on Christmas Day, his misery turns to joy, when he sees that he has been given a second chance at life. He becomes a kinder, gentler – a new - man. A Christmas carol is such a classic tale, you can only imagine my surprise when, watching a more recent version, in a highly unusual and dramatic twist, the dream revealed to Ebenezer is one that ends not in death, but through death, into glorious, resurrection life.

Only thus, in the glory of his resurrection, is Jesus Christ the hope of Christmas yet to come. The hope of Easter yet to come. The Son of God, our future, is in him. The Son of God, our world has a future, only in him.

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A century ago, it fell to Karl Barth, the most famous Christian theologian of the first half of the 20th century, to spell out to our modern world, the Christian message of the kingdom of God as one that is relevant to our contemporary, modern world. He did this by a twin message: first, the kingdom of God is the relation of God's own reality to the world. Second, the relation is one of judgment on the modern world, for making itself independent of God.

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A century ago, the readiness to accept this more relevant interpretation of the message of the kingdom of God, on the part of our modern world, was facilitated by the disaster of World War I. This worldwide public crisis brought with it, within the public imagination, a new sensitivity to the meaning of the final frontier of death, not least in the way our modern world thinks about life. We may reckon with the possibility of this happening again, a century later, facilitated by the disaster of the coronavirus.

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Reflecting on COV19, The Australian's Greg Sheridan writes that 'In some ways it closely resembles the sudden outbreak of World War I. At the beginning of 1914, the world looked out on unprecedented prosperity and globalisation. Then Austria's Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated by a terrorist, who wanted global disorder, and the world was at war.'

By the grace of God, we are not at war. And yet the suddenness of the current worldwide coronavirus pandemic, as the world looked out on unprecedented prosperity and globalization, resembles much of the same situation in which the modern world found itself, a century ago.

But we must not follow Barth in seeing the future judgment of God upon the world in the *present* crisis, whether of world war or pandemic. The kingdom of God is future event. A future that has now come into the world in Jesus Christ, but has not yet come, for the world. The end of the world is not found in present suffering. These are merely the birth pangs of that end (Romans 8). The end of the world is found only in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The One in whom the future of the world has now come. But only as a 'flash forward', as the coming

of the future, not by a dream as in Dickens, but by a reality that is the historical resurrection of Jesus.

Says Wolfhart Pannenberg, a student of Barth, 'The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.'

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The quality of surprise that comes with the resurrection, is clear from Jesus himself in the Gospel account of Jesus' appearances to his disciples on the Emmaus Road, after his death: 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer, and then enter his glory?'

To understand the meaning of Jesus' ministry and message, to understand the meaning of kingdom of God that has now come into the world with him, we must understand the *context* of his coming. This is crucial. We must go back into, we must go back and enter into, the context of Israel's hope, that was around at the time of Jesus, and that may be traced back to the prophets, to 'all that the prophets have declared!'

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The large promise, from God himself, of a future kingdom, of a future king (Messiah, Christ), came first to king David through the lips of the prophet Nathan - 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.'

This promise would later assume much larger significance, as the identity of promised kingdom, and the promised king, was from a royal, human king to a *divine* king. We see this in Isaiah:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God..
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.

During the exile, which was God's judgment on Israel for its apostasy against God, these expectations for a Messiah, who would bring peace and justice to the world, were cast forward into the long term future as promised, anticipated messiah. Faced with the present crisis, in which the reality of the world around them, and within its own life, bore little or no relation to its hope in God, the temptation was to lose hope. It was precisely in the place of crisis, and out of crisis, that Israel's hope in its Messiah, far from being abandoned, was utterly transformed. And it was transformed in two ways. First, the promised, anticipated messiah, was no longer the hope of present, but now future transformation. Second, the messiah, was no longer the hope of Israel, but of the human race. And all of this in fulfilment of God's original promise, his covenant with Israel, through its founder Abraham, 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

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The apocalyptic message of the Old Testament prophets is the interpretative clue by which the meaning of the New Testament becomes clear; the key to opening up the meaning of the New Testament. Says one writer: ‘This fact has emerged with more clarity and certainty than any other in the course of modern New Testament studies. It is a fact which has occasioned a good deal of embarrassment as most of the..New Testament scholarship for over a century has been devoted to attempts to divorce the meaning of Jesus and his message from its strange apocalyptic message.’

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, in whom God is now fulfilling his promise to the world, of reconciliation with God, declared by the prophet Isaiah that ‘by his stripes we are healed’. And in whom God is now fulfilling his promise to the world, of future hope, in relationship with God, declared through the prophet Daniel that ‘Many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.’

‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer, and then enter his glory?’

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“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Faced with the reality of the crucified and risen Christ, the early disciples came to that understanding of Jesus’ ministry and message that led to the worldwide missionary movement of early Christianity of which Paul wrote:

‘I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and..for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.’

The Son of God, incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. In him, the end of the world has now come. In him, the future kingdom of God, has drawn near. In him, his message, his ministry continues, through the Christian Church, even to the ends of the earth.

‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe in the good news.’

The kingdom of God is good news, in a world that is passing away. It has now come into the world in Jesus, but only as a flash forward. An anticipation. Of the future day of the Lord, that will one day bring God’s final blessing to his world, through his judgment of all injustice, his transformation of all human society, and his resurrection of all who have died in him. On that day God will become all in all. God will finally reveal himself as the one true God of all people. God will vindicate himself, as a God of justice, righteousness, and peace.

As he has already now done, if only as a flash forward, not in a dream, but in the person and history of Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

The Lord be with you