

# Sermon for Ascension Day

## At the Time of the Coronavirus

Ps 47, Eph 11.15-23, Mt 28.16-20



Good morning. It is good to be with you. I miss you. And the fullness of our worship together. May our deeper experience of Lent this year, lead us to a deeper experience of Easter this year. May our fasting deepen our hunger, for our Eucharistic life together, feasting on the risen Christ.

Since the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of the Easter season, the worldwide Church has celebrated the ascension of Christ. Often overlooked in the West, this is a deeply significant celebration, bringing to completion Jesus' 'intercession' on behalf of the world – which he made in the incarnation, his atoning death, his resurrection from the dead.

This intercession, this incursion, comes to an end only with the return of Christ into heaven, from whence he first came. Where he now reigns, in a hidden way, over the life of the world, with the authority of God himself. As we hear Jesus proclaim in our Gospel this morning, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'.

The feast of the Ascension marks this world Government of God. The reign of God the Father, which is now permanently established in the world, in the Son. At whose hand, world history is being directed, despite appearances, to a happy ending. A divine action, a mighty hand, whose character may be seen as turning evil into good. As overturning evil, with his goodness, with his mercy. The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. So that the psalmist can proclaim this morning:

‘For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome. A great king over all the earth. God is the king of all the earth. God is king over the nations. God sits on his holy throne.’

Only at the end of history, when the kingdom of God comes a final time, when we will see the end of evil, the perfection of the world, the resurrection from the dead, will this become clear, for all the world to see. In the meantime, the world government of God is a hidden reality. We see it only in part, as one day we will see it face to face. And yet the fingerprints of God are all over history. Most centrally, in the person and history of Jesus. But also, in your and my history. In the history of the world.

Where might the fingerprints of God be seen, at this time of natural evil? Where may we be seeing God himself at work, turning evil into good?

Speaking to Mum this week, I listened as she spoke about the way in which her thoughts at this time, go back to her mother. An Anglican, she lived at a time when life in many ways was simpler. Slower. Grounded, in time and place. The place related liturgical

life of her local Anglican parish. The place related social life of her family and friends.

Mum spoke of her joy at seeing people back on the streets again. Talking to each other, where they didn't talk to each other before. Of people becoming more aware, more connected, to people around them. People becoming more aware, more connected, to society around them. Of being part of society, where once they may have seen themselves above it.

Mum spoke of her amazement at what is happening in the political life of society. For the first time, in perhaps a very long time, we are seeing in political life, too, people, political parties, talking to each other, who didn't talk to each other before. Of political leaders and parties becoming more aware, more connected, to society. Of political divisions being set aside, in public service of the common good. So that we may speak of a *political order* once more in the modern life of Australia. With political leaders who stand publicly and professionally in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Christian religion that alone can bring a measure of justice and peace to the world, and legitimacy to the political order of Australia.

More basic, is the question, ‘What might the coronavirus mean, for the social order in Australia, and in the west more generally, that itself wants to be God (Gen 3)? That imagines itself to be alone in the world. An imagining, an aloneness, that makes of itself a god. In the way of John Lennon, and an early coronavirus celebrity effort,

‘Imagine there's no heaven

Its easy if you try.

No hell below us.

Above us only sky.’

Where might the fingerprints of God be seen, at this time of natural evil? Where may we be seeing God himself at work, turning evil into good?

Speaking to a deanery colleague in leafy Bayside, a while ago, I asked him how do people, who have everything, come to follow Jesus. ‘Through a crisis’ he said simply. ‘Through an experience of suffering.’

The reign of God is hidden, not only in its transcendence over the world, ‘in heaven’ with God. The reign of God is hidden, in that it is the reign of the *crucified* God. A reign that is, paradoxically, ‘hidden in suffering’. Luther’s theology of the cross has received renewed interest in the past century, in light of the increasingly urgent question ‘Is God *really* there in the midst of suffering?’ If the world’s answer to that question is no, the Christian answer to that question is yes. That it is precisely in the midst of suffering, the suffering of Christ, and the suffering of the world, that we see the love of God at work, for the salvation of the world. So that the Apostle Paul can say of the message of the cross, that to the Gentiles it is foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

There is a way back for the Prodigal culture of the modern world. A way back from alienation. A way back from spiritual and social isolation. For Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the King of the world, only as he is the one who first made the necessary, the once for all, the atoning sacrifice of God, for the sin, for the salvation of the world. By which we are made one once more with the Father. And through him, with the worldwide church. In whose place-related liturgical life, by the actual presence of Christ himself, a

new day has now dawned in the world. The dawning, of the day, of the new world without end.

What does the coronavirus mean for the worship of the church, for the church, as this has been defined since Vatican II as a communion or network of local, place related liturgical lives? So that, in each local celebration, because of the presence of Christ, the whole church is present? Says NT Wright, we must 'Recognize the present moment as a time of *exile*. We find ourselves “by the waters of Babylon,” thoroughly confused and grieving for the loss of our normal life. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?,” as in Psalm 137, translates quite easily into “How can I know the joy of the Eucharist sitting in front of a computer?” Or “How can I celebrate Ascension or Pentecost without being with my brothers and sisters?”..Perhaps this, too, is simply to be accepted as part of what life in Babylon is like. We must, as Jeremiah said, settle down into this regime and “seek the welfare of the city” where we are. But let’s not pretend it’s where we want to be. Let’s not forget Jerusalem. Let’s not decide to stay here.’

Let us pray:

‘I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.