

# Caught Up

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension, Year C, 2 June 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Acts 16: 16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22: 12-22; John 17: 20-26

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, this week our Easter Season draws to a close. The Sunday after Ascension, the last Sunday of Easter, is the one before Pentecost, then comes Trinity, then the long run of green Sundays after Pentecost right through to Christ the King in November—which we used to call Ordinary Sundays, until we realised that sounded a bit too underwhelming. And over these couple of Sundays marking the transition, we pack in a lot of spiritual insight and a lot of vocational self-discovery for God's people.

At Easter Jesus dies the death of the scapegoat victim, liquidated for the sake of keeping the peace in that violent way that's still so popular. But then in the Resurrection, God turns the tables on all that and lets the cat among the pigeons ever after: the world needn't be like that anymore; let's try something different.

One dimension of God's glory revealed in Jesus' resurrection—a non-violent, lump-in-the-throat-type of glory, a world transforming type of glory—is the story of Jesus' Ascension, which the Church marked last Thursday. It's not a story about Jesus achieving escape velocity or anything fundamentalist like that. Rather, it's a way of transitioning from Jesus' visible presence to the new mode of his presence through the Holy Spirit, poured out in the upper room of the last Supper according to John, and on the Old Testament Feast of Pentecost according to Luke. Through Easter to Pentecost, as the shape of this new reality emerges in the early Christian imagination, Jesus is recognised for who he most truly is. In Christian hearts and minds he's now acknowledged to be sharing in his Father's glory, sitting at the right hand of God—as God's right hand man if you like—set above every power and threat in the world, lifting up our hearts, and putting our fatalism on notice.

Then at Pentecost the nature of Jesus' presence with us is celebrated, present in his Spirit sent from God to shape Jesus' mind and to establish Jesus' life here in the Holy Church, which gathers not only in his name but in his presence. The early Christians were convinced that Jesus continued his mission of bringing God among us in the here and now. He wasn't a dead founder who we look back to with thanks, but a living saviour who's with us still—who's welcomed

in the Eucharistic community with joy, and with the fruit of changed lives.

And finally on Trinity Sunday Christians testify that we can't help ourselves; that we Christians have had to rethink God because of Jesus, who was dead but is now alive in the Spirit among us. So whatever "God" used to mean, we have this run of Sundays at the end of the Easter season to remind us of who God has become for us Christians. Today's Sunday after Ascension is an important stage on the way. So what do we learn about God today, and what do we learn about ourselves as Christians?

The key thing is that there's been a changing of the guard. The risen, ascended Jesus is now revealed as Lord of the universe. The Game of Thrones is coming to an end, and the violent, pagan pretenders who repress humanity are put firmly on notice. In our psalm today, the storms, the mountains, the heavens—the realms where pagan divinities held sway—are now declared to be the property of our God, the God of Israel's covenant, so the righteous and faithful people of God can rejoice: "Free at last, Free at last, Lord God almighty we're free at last ...".

An example of that freedom, that putting-on-notice of the powers, is there in our Acts reading this morning, with Paul and Silas in the

lockup in the pagan town of Philippi for messing with the status quo. And here the Holy Spirit stages a jailbreak. The message for us is that God's word, God's mission, and our part in it if we're up for it, is unstoppable. In the face of this the Roman Empire is at a complete loss, represented by that hapless jailer. And in the conversion and baptism of his family by Paul and Silas, we see the Church's power, its mission *and its future* revealed for all to see.

In our Revelations reading today we're right at the end of the Bible, and we're invited to claim our place in the heavenly city—having let go of the pagan ways that used to make our world go round, with all the lying and murdering. If that's what we want, according to today's reading, then all we'll get is plague and exclusion, which constitute the actual law of history if you think about it. But here for us instead the Spirit and the bride make their invitation: the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church summons us *here* today to be with Christ *there*, now and forever. And isn't this ultimately a Eucharistic invitation, to the thirsty who cherish this water of life Sunday by Sunday?

Then, friends, in our Gospel reading today the connections are all made for us. No wonder people call this fourth gospel a mystical gospel. But it's not for remote adepts or cave-dwelling gurus. It's for the likes of you and me: to be caught up in the glory of God, to realise that in the risen, ascended Jesus the fulness of God is

summoning and welcoming us, making us into a Church that can reveal that life-giving glory and hand it on. And we do it through our mutual love in the Church, through our unity. That way we prove that our eyes and our hearts have been lifted up to something far greater than the petty squabbles and immature games-playing that human beings typically prefer, and not least in the Church. Friends, we can aim higher than that, we can claim a better address than that, and here in the Eucharist we can find that glory, along with our part in it. More of this next Sunday and the one after that, with Pentecost and Trinity. In the meantime, for us today, there's that invitation from the end of the Bible that makes us what we are as Christians:

The Spirit and the bride say,

“Come.”

And let everyone who hears say,

“Come.”

And let everyone who is thirsty

come.

Let anyone who wishes to take

the water of life as a gift (Rev 22: 17).

The Lord be with you ...