

Alive to God in Jesus Christ

Sermon for Easter Day, 17 April 2022

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

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Hymn to the Risen Christ; 1 Corinthians 15: 19-26; John 20: 1-18

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

Hands up if you like listening to opera or going to the opera. Keep your hands up if you like German opera. What about twentieth-century German opera? Any hands still up? Now, how about the seventeen operas of Richard Strauss? Nobody left? Well, if you don't know or like his opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*, I'm sure you'll like the story—which I suggest is an Easter story, which shows us what living the resurrection looks like in the real world.

The story goes like this. A rich man plans a grand evening celebration with a crowd of guests on his estate. The lavish entertainment is to include two complete opera performances, a tragic opera then a comic opera. Until unforeseen circumstances require the evening's program to be curtailed. So, the rich man tells his opera performers that, to save time, they have to perform the two operas together, the tragic and the comic, in a single performance. So, they get underway.

At one point, the tragic heroine is lamenting her cruel fate and contemplating suicide, then on comes the character Zerbinetta, from the comic opera, who cheers up the tragic heroine, and off they go together into a bright future. Rowan Williams explains that the tragic and the comic both recognise the fragile and compromised nature of our human condition, but the comic reminds us that what proves painful need not prove lethal. So it is with the resurrection, and the baptised life that emerges from it.

Isaiah in our first reading today shows us what hope like this looks like, with the Jewish exiles returning home from their lost years in Babylon, with a new start for Jerusalem, a stable future with ancestral property restored, and a marvellous image of cosmic peace as wolf and lamb feed together. You can imagine that people with this vision, with this imagination, were going to be the ones who stood out in the restored community, acting not just dreaming, building with confidence, and not letting negativity or exhaustion get the better of them.

Friends, this is what a resurrection community looks like. It knows with St Paul in our epistle today that it's not just for this life that we hope, but for something altogether more comprehensive, Christ having turned the cosmic tide at Easter: a new human condition in which the power of death is overcome. And of course, if we believe this, we're going to live differently in the here and now, having been freed from the fear of death. Because this fear of death paralyses us, it makes us play it safe, it makes us look out for number one, it limits our dreams to a bucket list.

This fear of death includes the fear of insignificance, of smallness, of powerlessness, of not amounting to much, and hence people in the grip of this fear can take desperate measures to fill the void—the Trumps and Putins of this world, for instance, who may celebrate Easter but who couldn't possibly understand it. For Trump, Easter may involve dreams of his own resurrection in 2024, after his Good Friday of November 2020. For Putin, the crucified Russian people of his perverted Good Friday theology will be triumphing over their Ukrainian enemies in the perverted Easter hope that he'll celebrate in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour next Sunday—in step with the equally deluded Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus, over four hundred of whose priests in Ukraine are publicly denouncing him and calling for his removal.

But none of this has anything to do with genuine Easter hope, which doesn't just promise that every cloud has a silver lining, or that there's a light at the end of the tunnel. It isn't just a metaphor for this-worldly confidence, to encourage patience, which is how some in our federal election campaign will probably see it. Instead, it's about the cross of the Son of God, about erasing forever the link between God and success and winning that comes to us so naturally, since that's not how God plays it on Good Friday. Because Jesus willingly embracing the shame and defeat of the cross tells an entirely different story about God.

And if God's isn't about success and winning, then we can acknowledge the tragic depths that life reveals without taking them too seriously. If Christ is risen, then there's no overpowering darkness, there's no entrapment in the same old same old, and there's no need to hit back against those we think have stolen our place in the queue.

Friends, the resurrection means a restart for humanity on new terms. It doesn't mean a remarkable event of long ago that we look at with admiration—or perhaps with scepticism, as we know many Anglicans do. Yes, there was an event, but the Gospels paint that event in varying styles. Today in John we're in a garden, and Mary Magdalene thinks she's meeting the gardener. John's theological imagination is telling us that we're back in the Garden of Eden, and here's the new Adam, the new gardener, the new humanity, the new creation, as Jesus is revealed alive from God to Mary Magdalene.

The resurrection for her—the penny dropping, the Poirot moment—is this birth of an irresistible faith in Jesus Christ, in which Mary Magdalene suddenly grasps what their years with Jesus had meant, and that now sends her out as a witness—which, incidentally, brings with it a whole new status for women.

Friends, in the Sundays ahead we'll consider further dimensions of the resurrection as it's presented in our Gospel readings. It's never just an alleged take-it-or-leave-it fact about a dead body, though Jesus' transformed body revealed from God as the newborn Church gathered for the Eucharist is central to it. At its heart, the resurrection is about the body of Christ conceived in the widest possible way, centred on the empty tomb and the first witnesses, then, later, the baptised who make up his Church, then extended to the world that Christians love because Jesus loves it, until finally the whole cosmos finds its ultimate fulfillment in God. And we believe this chiefly because Jesus' resurrection bears fruit in real world experience. Christians do find hope to live and love and laugh in the face of tragedy, new creation does announce itself in changed lives, healed wounds, fresh starts out of awful circumstances, and the power to stand up for Christ, for love, for justice, even at the cost of death. And all of this because fear of death has lost its power over us.

So, friends, like in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, we the baptised are called to enact our comic opera as life's tragic opera plays out around us—and among us, too. We don't naively deny the tragic—if we do, then we risk losing our faith the minute things turn really sour. Instead, resurrection faith never forgets Good Friday, it never expects chocolates every day. But it knows that the power of death has been overcome—the power to silence us, to defeat us, to turn us inward, to make us despair, to make suicide attractive because it gives us back some lost agency. And so we can laugh, going about our lives in the world with a different attitude and a different agenda. Friends, where would the world be without a people like that—without a faithful Church, which is God's Easter gift to humanity in tragic times?

The Lord be with you ...