

# Hope Plus

Sermon for Easter Day, 21 April 2019

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

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; Acts 10: 34-43; Luke 24: 1-12

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

When Lisa and I were young newlyweds on our first trip to England, we did a so-called ABC tour: 'another bloody cathedral'. You arrive, check out the town, explore the cathedral, with Choral Evensong at 4pm, then straight to the pub for a pint. And so it goes on. For me, despite seeing many wonderful medieval cathedrals, which celebrated the bygone vision of an integral creation in stone—with the sacred forest represented by columns and vaulting, with the cruciform shape of the nave and transepts imagining the cross of Christ at the heart of creation, and with a huge amount of stained glass to tell the sacred story as soon as architects had worked out how to make the walls non-load bearing, with flying buttresses like at Notre Dame—despite all this, which I loved, the English cathedral I loved best was nothing at all like it.

It was the Cathedral of St Michael in Coventry, built after the war. The old cathedral was bombed by the Germans and only parts of the walls remained in ruins, bordering a new public square. The new Cathedral, sitting at right angles to the old, is thoroughly modern, and it celebrates a newer version of the ancient Christian vision: of light from darkness, of horror giving way to hope thanks to the risen Jesus Christ, and of the angels present in witness. Though these angels appear there in ethereal etched glass, perhaps as a sign of modern people's fragile belief in the supernatural. And instead of stained glass, the eyes of worshippers are drawn outward through plain glass to the rising secular city beyond. Michael the great archangel is there of course, vaulting armed and forceful from the wall in bronze, and it's a decidedly Teutonic-looking horned and helmeted Satan that he conquers: in this great Epstein statue, recent history and ancient mythology are combined in witness to Jesus Christ and the triumph of his cross and resurrection over human evil and violence.

Friends, I rejoice that Notre Dame de Paris was largely saved, and I join millions around the world longing to see it restored better than ever—probably with modern steel behind the scenes instead of medieval oak, and no doubt with a sprinkler system. And I hope when they rebuild it that they might squeeze in a Chapelle des Pompiers, because without those brave and resourceful firefighters

they'd have lost the lot. But in a way if they had lost the lot it wouldn't have been the end of the world. A completely new Cathedral would have sprung up on the Île de la Cité like the one in Coventry—or, closer to home, like the wonderful architectural triumph of faith that sprang up after a similar fire in Parramatta, springing off from but also imaginatively transcending the former Catholic cathedral.

People talk about a phoenix rising from the ashes, about resilience, and about hope springing eternal, with a billion dollars pledged already for the rebuilding of Notre Dame. But I for one love to see not just rebuilding of Churches but their purpose-built reimagining, as in the marvellous new Cathedral of the Angels in Los Angeles. I've visited it three times now, and will again, and each time it reminds me not just of generic hopefulness and standard new beginnings, but of something beyond humanity's familiar capacity to spring back from defeat. I get a sense of resurrection when I visit cutting edge modern Churches like this—a sense of hope in God's future, not just respect for God's past.

The pundits all tell us at this time of year about hope and how much we need it: there's the predictable editorial in *The Weekend Australian*, for instance, and the unremarkable Easter press releases from the bishops that get quoted on page three. And of course there

are the bunnies and the Easter eggs that echo an older, pagan faith in fertility and changing seasons and new beginnings, which no agrarian society could have done without. And, from a scientific perspective, we can presume that our being hopeful creatures must have brought us evolutionary advantages—a morose and readily defeated species isn't going to fare well in the survival and reproduction stakes, is it? But in a post-Christian society this natural human capacity for hopefulness is all that's typically left to us. Even many Christians don't quite know what to make of the Easter proclamation with its empty tomb and its risen Jesus.

I want to start pondering this theme of hopefulness and whether we can trust it via our Old Testament readings today, from Isaiah and Psalm 118. In Isaiah every human burden that Israel knew so well is named, and a wonderful vision is declared as God's coming gift to his faithful people: instead of being bereaved of their children, or dying before their time, or losing everything they've worked for, so that others reap the benefit of their labours, a new day is coming for Israel, a fresh start on God's holy mountain. Isaiah dreams of a life beyond the depredations of physical entropy and the scourge of human violence: a place of vegan predators and peaceful humans, both equally unlikely! The psalmist likewise points us today to a new gate opening before us in the march of history, which if we take it will usher in this new age for human beings.

Friends, the use of hyperbole in these readings is palpable, and can't you hear the sceptics? We don't mind hearing this stuff, they'll admit, and it's even a bit uplifting, but ultimately it's for children; it's not how things go in the real world, where death and decay and violence always have the last word and where, if we're brutally honest, the best we can hope for is a few days of sunshine before the blow finally falls—which it inevitably will. We can rebuild after disasters, we can plan for the future, and we can hope for some improvement in our circumstances, but we shouldn't overdo it. Hope is fine, and it helps us do what we have to do, but hope doesn't represent the deepest logic of reality. And so say many of us, even many Christians.

But then what are we to make of our Easter Gospel today, from Luke? Is this just more of the same: a nice story, and where would we be without nice stories to lift our spirits, though ultimately it's all just whistling in the dark? But wait a minute. Here's a story of hope that acknowledges its own plain unlikelihood. We're not shown any resurrection, it's just pointed to: first by the two angelic figures at the tomb, who are the standard figures we'd expect if we're used to how great events are presented in the Old Testament. Then there's the testimony of women, who we know weren't allowed to be legal witnesses in that society—the point being that everyone knows their

report could be disputed. And so it was: we read that even the Apostles thought that they were hearing an idle tale—this story of angels declaring Jesus risen from the dead, and so soon after Good Friday, with all the Apostles' raw grief over Jesus and his movement suffering such a violent and final defeat: this was just too much.

As Luke's chapter 24 goes on past today's passage, of course, we can read about the risen Jesus revealed to his unsuspecting fellow travellers on the road to Emmaus, in an encounter which clearly signifies the gathering of Christians for word and sacrament. And later still in the chapter the first Christians share their perplexing resurrection stories from their various different perspectives—including an encounter of Peter with the risen Jesus that we're not privy to. And finally in Luke the risen Jesus is encountered in person and the penny finally drops. Here is something real and verifiable; here is hope lifted from the realm of hopefulness and wishful thinking, and made a concrete part of real history.

We see this new conviction developing in our readings today, and I take you now to Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Peter the Church's leader declares in his sermon that all Israel's hopes against hope for a just and humanising future were coming true. Peter and the Apostles had seen this hope come alive in Jesus' ministry of healing and liberation with their own eyes, how it had

proved stronger than the *Realpolitik* of Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of earthly power, and finally how it had been vindicated in the resurrection. This is a faith that Peter now had clear and was proclaiming fearlessly in the face of opposition.

What we have on Easter day is a force multiplier for human hopefulness, a happy ending without the morning after letdown, a gate opening on a trustworthy path to new future, a path up that Holy Mountain of Isaiah which no longer threatens to peter out in hyperbole. This isn't a hope that's content simply to rebuild a damaged cathedral, or effect any other simple triumph of human resilience. Instead, it's a hope fit for rebuilding a defeated Church, for giving heart to disempowered people who've had the stuffing and the fight knocked out of them, who've sunk so far in sin and failure and self-loathing that they couldn't find their way back otherwise; it's a hope able to galvanise a resistance movement beyond the limits on normal, natural human hopefulness set by fear of death and its handmaid violence. Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ takes place not in the world of fairy tales, but in actual Roman history, with its echoes still sounding in our modern history as well.

So, friends, today we don't just celebrate good feelings, or natural optimism, or every cloud having a silver lining—this isn't Monty

Python's 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life', and it isn't *The Life of Brian*. Instead, today we frankly acknowledge that there are a lot of idle tales around, a lot of unlikely stories meant to gee us up—today's Gospel actually names this, with its unlikely witnesses and its sceptical apostles. But then the Holy Spirit gets to work, and the risen Jesus comes to us himself in word and sacrament from within the very life of God. And so Christians begin to see differently, as Peter did. Now we can trust our native human hopefulness because we know it has genuine foundations. We can trust Isaiah's vision for all its hyperbole, too, and we can trust our Psalmist today—another great witness to hope in the face of honest doubt—as we join with him in his stubborn words of rejoicing: "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it".

The Lord be with you ...