

8th May 2005 St Philip

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Readings:

- Acts 1.6-14
- Psalm 68.1-10, 32-35 page 288
- 1 Peter 5
- John 17:1-11

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!

"The Kingdom of Heaven" is the name of a movie showing at theatres in Canberra. It is about the Crusades of the 11th to 12th centuries when "Christian" armies of Europe sought to recover the Holy Land from Islam.

The review in Saturday's Canberra Times reads:

"Of all the reasons for starting a war, the least defensible is that the enemy worships a different deity. Since Christ walked the earth, Christians have initiated more wars and professed Christianity to be the only true way, more vigorously than any other religion. Quite often, one flavour of Christianity has set upon another for reasons of suspected heresy, apostasy, or sectarian disagreement."

The writer goes on to say:

"Nearly one thousand years ago, Christian fervour, European poverty and political turmoil combined to generate modern history's most unjustified, wasteful and useless military adventure and kept it going for more than a century. The consequences of the Crusades are still with us. People seem unwilling to learn the lessons of history."

The sad thing is — he is correct!

As a means of serving God and the purposes of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Crusades were a very bad idea. They did *for a short time* increase the geographical influence of the "Christian" tradition and culture but eventually the expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1300's) and the failure of Pope Pius II to gain support for further crusades in the mid 1400's brought the curtain down on an infamous era in Christian history. It is interesting to ponder this nature of Christian expansion under the heading "the Kingdom of Heaven" as we reflect today on the Ascension of Christ and the

nature of his rule, on the need for prayer and the search for Christian Unity

let alone the desire to include all humanity under the love of Christ!

I heard some reports that some modern Christians were disappointed to see how poorly the Christians were portrayed in the film — Surprise! Surprise!

The fact is we have often been misguided and sometimes just plain wrong in our attempts to serve Christ. We need to face the truth about that!

But there are still many in the world who advance the Christendom model — the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven by human, political and military means.

Last Thursday was the day the Church observed the Lord's Ascension — forty days from Easter, the disciples see the Lord taken up out of sight.

I don't want to get into the discussion about the physical details because once again, the biblical record speaks of an event which has huge significance — and it is the significance/the meaning which is important!

A couple of thoughts ran through my mind as I pondered the Ascension of Christ.

— That ascension is the logical progression from resurrection or rising — rising and ascending are the same thing, the continuous flow from Jesus' death is the upward movement to the glory of the Father's presence and as he passes through the earthly realms he is seen and experienced by his disciples.

— The ascension of Christ tells us that the Christ who ascends to be Lord is the Christ who loves, heals, cares, who confronts our inhumanity to each other and suffers. The Christ of heaven is the Christ of humanity ruling from heaven in the way he lived on earth.

— The Ascension also tells us that Christ shares the nature of God. Whereas the earthly messiahs (kings) ascended the steps to an earthly throne — this messiah assumes a heavenly throne. The Letter to the Ephesians puts it like this in Ch1 v20, 21

"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 in the age to come."

(Resurrection blends with Ascension)

If this is the case that Christ reigns — then the kingdom or rule is **HIS** and that has consequences for this world and creation as a whole. And the consequences are

- moral
- political
- social

- economic
- environmental

Archbishop Rowan Williams in an article on the environment in the Canberra Times last week wrote:

"An economics which ignores environmental degradation invites social degradation — in plain terms, violence."

He makes the link between God's sovereignty over creation and our stewardship of it — and the destruction of human relationships.

Surely the rule of Christ is about the healing of the environment **AS WELL AS** the healing of human lives.

I'm covering a bit of ground today!

And I want to cover some more!

I want to reflect on the end of the Second World War as many in Europe remember.

In that context I want us to pray for the Jewish people as they recall the holocaust — and pray too that it may never happen again! But as I say that It has happened time and time again on a different scale in different places ... Cambodia, Rwanda, Southern Sudan ... in Iraq and sadly by the state of Israel against the Palestinians.

In the Jewish remembrance of the holocaust there is a telling of the story of suffering but with little recognition of change and hope. The whole event seems to be weighed down with looking back at woe and suffering.

My prayer is that the reflections at this time should provoke action and produce hope!

(This is surely what the Resurrection and Ascension are about.)

I am **not** trying to provoke anti-Jewish sentiment because the whole background of Christianity is Jewish. Jesus the Jew however, offered a view of God which encouraged forgiveness for the past and moves through suffering to a future with hope.

If we continue to dwell on negativity and only say *woe is me!* — Then it will be!

pause

In our first reading today we caught a glimpse of the disciples after the Ascension of Jesus and BEFORE the fulfilment of Jesus' promise about the power of the Holy Spirit

So the Lord has gone from their midst and they return, almost one kilometre, to Jerusalem...

to the room upstairs — (upper room) where they were staying; eleven of them with certain women (and children) and Mary the mother of Jesus; devoted themselves to prayer — sense of expectancy as they wait. They wait in Prayer!

It is a lovely picture — Mary who was their at the beginning and expected that in her son a new era would be born now waits its fulfillment.

Now even though the Holy Spirit is given to be with the disciples always the gift of the Spirit is never an assured possession... there is also the need to continue to pray — the Spirit needs to be constantly sought anew in prayer.

I wonder what this says about the way we pray:

- waiting
- listening
- expectant
- aware
- open
- time

PRAYER

Peter in his letter reminds his readers not to be provoked or goaded into hasty or inappropriate action as they face persecution (was it under Nero, Domitian or Trajan?)

1Peter 5:6-11:

6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

7 Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

8 Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

10 And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

11 To him be power forever and ever. Amen.

Finally, in the Gospel we hear Jesus' prayer for the disciples before he goes to the cross — He prays:

That the Father may be glorified in him! not his ascension, but his suffering May his followers also reveal God's glory!
and
Father protect them!

Ascension marks the lordship of Christ over *all* things and we use this time to pray with Jesus for his disciples in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

It is a time when we pray with Jesus in hope and expectation for the fulfilment — the gift of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, to fill us with love and to help us to be Christ-like. Christ's lordship is NOT a reality for many — the task of the Church is to make it a reality — conquering the world NOT by force but by the Spirit of God at work in us.