

Easter Means Liberation

Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter, Year C, 17 May 2020

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

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Acts 17: 22-31; Psalm 66: 7-19; 1 Peter 3: 8-22; John 14: 15-21



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

In a post-truth world blighted by conspiracy theories and the organized denial of plain facts, the Nazi era with its toxic fantasies, repression and murder still stands out. Yet even in the death camps,

kingdoms of fear and anxious self-preservation, the witness to Easter told an alternative story, a story of liberation.

I'll never forget visiting the death cell of Father Maximilian Kolbe at Auschwitz, where he took the place of a Jewish prisoner. And last year I was bowled over after a very sobering day exploring the extensive site at Dachau, to come upon its tiny Russian Orthodox memorial chapel, with its remarkable icon of the harrowing of hell. It wasn't only Jews who suffered and died at Dachau but all sorts of political prisoners, and captured Red Army soldiers. Lisa and I discovered a lovely glade in the forest, and a moment's peace, only to find a plaque marking it as the SS Officers' pistol range, where they made Russian prisoners run up and down, so they could practice shooting at moving targets. But in that magnificent Russian icon, Christ flings open the gates of hell, with its watchtowers, barbed wire, searchlights and machine guns, all befitting a great prison of fear and repression, and he leads the captives out.

We'll testify in our creed in a few moments that Christ descended to the dead, and in today's second reading we hear about the risen Christ making this proclamation to the spirits in prison, in one of only two passages about this in the whole New Testament, both in 1 Peter. Today's second reading uses this image of Christ descending into Hell as a way of talking about the liberated life of Easter.

And what does this liberation look like? Well, for one thing, the resurrection frees us from having to feel intimidated, a consequence of which is that we no longer seek payback when we're wronged. Our conscience is made unafraid by the hope of the Gospel, hence we don't have to justify ourselves, to get our own back. And Easter invites us to join our suffering with that of Christ as the path to finding new life with him—a path that begins in the waters of baptism. Baptised into the risen life of Jesus Christ we can breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that all the powers and principalities accustomed to running our world cannot defeat or silence the risen Jesus Christ, and the new reality that he makes possible. As many Christians discovered in the death camps, in the midst of what the existentialists interpreted as God's absence, their suffering actually served to bring them closer to God. They found their way to heaven with the risen Christ even in the midst of hell. They made Christ's descent to the dead their own, and with him they too ministered to the spirits in prison. Theirs was the stubborn witness of today's psalm: "You let our enemies ride over our heads, we went through fire and water: but you brought us out into a place of liberty" (Psalm 66: 11).

Now, friends, the Nazis were dedicated pagans. They talked about the so-called Jewish question but also about what they called the

Church question, because Christianity was an affront to them and they planned to root it out. They preferred a virile Teutonic paganism, grounded in blood and soil. And they admired the Greeks. They would have loved the vista that Paul looked out on in today's Acts reading, and maybe they'd imagine Berlin looking like that one day. All those temples with their sacrificial cults, making sure that the sacred was kept predictable, reliable, and at their disposal, while the more sophisticated among them tried to update the old world of the gods with some dodgy new philosophy. And into this kingdom of the smug and the deluded saunters Paul, with his witty banter at the start of today's Acts reading about what the Stoics and Epicureans were missing out on in their thinking about God. What they were missing out on, Paul proclaims to them: the universalism, one-world-under-one-God; the non-xenophobic, non-elitist unfamiliarity of it; and the breakthrough message that the true sacred is not under human control, or defined by serving human agendas.

So at the end of our Acts reading Paul drops a bomb on them. Repent, he says, because this whole religious and philosophical world you've made for yourselves is being undone in a way that you could hardly begin to imagine: "because [God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17: 31). And of course we know

who this man is: we see him in that Russian icon from Dachau, leading his beloved out of the prison house of paganism and intimidation and violence and fear into a liberated future.

Now, that future means a life caught up in God's life, joined to the risen Jesus even though we don't see him anymore, gathered by the Holy Spirit who is being given to us. This is set out for us in our Gospel from John, where we find ourselves on the post-Easter travelator, carried along on a journey that leads to Ascension, to Pentecost, to Trinity and to Corpus Christi, as the different aspects of this liberation are liturgically set out for us over the next four Sundays.

As for the world, though, the risen Jesus tells his beloved in today's Gospel that it's on a different wavelength, that the world can't make sense of what happening to us. We no longer have to make meaning and stick up for ourselves, because God is making meaning and enlisting us as witnesses, in the face of so much of what James Alison calls junk meaning. This is why the Holy Spirit is described in our Gospel today as an Advocate—God's lawyer for the defence, as René Girard puts it, against all those advocates for the prosecution out there and in here who blight the human story with their toxic version of reality.

Friends, at the far end of the enormous Dachau compound, you can find living proof of this Easter liberation. Sixteen Discalced Carmelite nuns live together in their Convent of the Holy Blood, built onto the death camp in an architectural style reflecting its barracks and guard towers. It was founded after the war by a Catholic bishop who'd been a prisoner in the camp. I'll see if I can put some pictures on "Church Chat" this week. These sisters live out the liberating truth of Easter in this sober memorial to a totalizing world of death and lies, and they share their joyful hope through an effective global ministry to survivors of the camps and their descendants.

The philosophers may not get it, in our day as in Paul's day; the world will not understand, as we're told in our Epistle and Gospel today, but we know that Christ is alive through the Holy Spirit, as we see for example in that community of Christian women at Dachau serving a voluntary life sentence in horror's heartland—doing exactly what 1 Peter calls for today: living together in Christian love, tender and united, giving an account of the hope that's in them, but with gentleness and respect. So, friends, this is our vocation, too, baptised into the love and life of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit as witnesses to a remarkable freedom, putting the world on notice, made fearless by the Gospel of Easter, of Ascension, of Pentecost.

The Lord be with you ...