

## *The Powers Put on Notice*

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 4 February 2024

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

**The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

*Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39*

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

As ever our opportunity in this Epiphany Season is to better understand who our God is, what our God does, and what that means for us as Christians. Today in our first reading Isaiah asks and answers these questions, knowing how often the people of God get them all wrong. We're told by Isaiah that our God is cosmic, sovereign, more powerful than the nations, whose princes rise and fall at God's will, a God who sets the starry firmament in order, and so it goes. But then what might sound like religious poetry at best, or mythological gobbledygook at worst, reveals its point: that God is *our* God, trustworthy, empowering the fainthearted, supplying energy and vigour even greater than in youth. But of course, we can only dare to hope that all this might be true if God is indeed as powerful and as omni-dexterous as Isaiah says.

This message of Isaiah, and that of our psalm which echoes it, might come through more strongly in today's world if we unpack its original context a little. All those things over which God's sovereignty is declared by Isaiah and the psalmist today are the controlling forces that ran the ancient world. These were pagan deities charging the physical world with sacred power, from the heavens and the stars to the nations each with their protecting gods. And nowhere in that ancient world did people matter to these gods. Which is why Israel's story of their God who was close to the oppressed and the broken hearted was so strikingly different.

For us, then, whose world is run by stock markets, by the flow of global capital, by social media, and by all those individually and collectively destructive psychological mechanisms, the message of a God who's above all that yet reaches through all that with tender care remains every bit as remarkable, though I hope it might now be a little more accessible. The cosmic impact is the same, though now the invisible forces that our God outs and disempowers are ones that we humans have generated, and which now oppress and de-generate us.

As ever in our Gospels, the point is that where the loving God of Israel is, there we find Jesus of Nazareth—the one who Christians have come to know and proclaim as God *with* us, as God *for* us. So, in Mark's Gospel today Jesus is doing what God does: healing and blessing, overcoming the forces that control and diminish human life. These forces used to be understood as things that go bump in the night; now they're things that go bump in the economy, in geopolitical warmongering, on social media, in cultlike fascination with authoritarian populism, in family dysfunction, and in the crippling attitudes and rusted-on behaviours that make life so unbearable for so many—in all, what the African philosopher Achille Mbembe calls necropolitics. Christ the liberator, who banished the demons of ancient imagination, now brings liberation from the many demons of poisonous contemporary reality. The Church's saints and all its redeemed sinners bear witness to this, that God makes a difference through Jesus Christ: that life can be different, that hopeless situations can be changed, that there's a force of love at work in the world beyond the power of evil and death. Isaiah knew it, the Gospel writers knew it, and modern Christians discover it too: the same life-giving reality although in our very-differently-imagined world.

Now, before winding up, I want you to notice what Jesus *will not do* in today's gospel. He won't stay put and set up a healing shrine in Capernaum, becoming a cult leader for all those whose lives he'd touched so powerfully. Indeed, he refuses to be known as a wonder worker altogether—that way lies fanaticism and all sorts of crowd manipulation. Instead, Jesus withdraws to be with God in prayer, and then he tells his disciples who come to him eager for more excitement that it's time to move on, to spread the good news more widely: acting locally but thinking globally, if you like, reversing a well-known axiom.

This universal mission of Christ is something that St Paul celebrates in our second reading today, and the way Paul commends it must be understood by the Church and taken to heart. Yes, for Paul this is the great and strong God of Israel, who we meet in the particularity of Jesus. But for Paul in our reading today this God has no hang-ups about the company God keeps, the boundaries God crosses, the welcomes God issues and the rules God breaks. For Paul the law is no longer a badge of religious favouritism but a pointer to something far bigger and richer than law. God's power and largeness are displayed by the breadth of this reach, this calmness in encounter, this non-anxious mixing with who knows who, and all for the sake of a whole world that God loves.

So, friends there's a lesson here for all those frightened so-called conservative Christians in our Church and elsewhere who think that God needs protecting and that God's message needs protecting, while in truth this is chiefly to ensure that their control of the narrative prevails. I'm thinking of the so-called conservative Christians who fear independent women, who hate everyone LGBTIQ, and who need their punishing God to keep everyone in their proper place—God love them, they're such a burden to themselves, let alone to others.

Sadly for them, friends, the God of Jesus Christ has a different narrative. It's more powerful than theirs, but in an unexpectedly roundabout way. Instead, Jesus's strength is made perfect in weakness—in the weakness of the cross, in the mysteriousness of the resurrection, in the quiet but stubborn work of the Holy Spirit among us, and in the gentle week-by-week subversiveness of the Eucharist.

The Lord be with you ...