**MF14 Ascension Day**

**God’s Encompassing Love of all Creation**

In a visionary essay *Humankind: a hopeful history)* this week Dutch historian Rutger Bregman observes that during the COVID 19 crisis hedge fund managers and multinational tax specialists have not been in great demand as being vital for human survival. Instead the key players have been doctors and nurses, social workers, teachers, supermarket staff, transport operators, cleaners and, one might add, the many volunteers at foodbanks and in family support.

Bregman further comments: “The general rule seems to be: the more vital your work, the less you are paid, the more insecure your employment and the more at risk you are in the fight against the coronavirus.” Dr Ashley Bloomfield has more than earned his salary, of course, and security of employment is probably not as issue for over-burdened doctors and nurses. But for many of the lowly paid – the ones that deliver our groceries and pizza, or clear away our trash – vulnerability is an ongoing dynamic.

Add in those who have no job at all, or those living in crowded slums, refugee camps and prisons, and one sees just how many billions are affected by COVID 19 worldwide. COVID can strike any of us, rich or poor, but what Bregman is saying to us – and we know he’s right - that it strikes the poor and vulnerable disproportionately compared with many of us. Which leads us nicely into Jesus’ Ascension, which the Church observed on Thursday.

In Acts 1.9 today we read that Jesus ‘was taken up into heaven as the disciples watched, and a cloud hid him from their sight’. (You may recall pictures from Sunday School days of the awestruck disciples gazing upward at two feet hanging out the bottom of a cloud).

It is a symbolic image that begs the question: what does the Ascension mean in our global society today? Jesus’ life and mission were lived out among a particular people (the Jews) in a particular place (Palestine) in a particular time (1st C). His incarnation was local, but God’s mission was always universal, for all people in every age and place. The Ascension symbolises the lifting of Jesus from that local context into a global one for all time. Just as COVID 19 is binding together the whole human race, so Jesus’ ascension symbolises the love of God in Christ encompassing every person and place, binding us as one family. Whoever “they” may be, “they” are part of “us”.

In Acts 1. 8, 9 Jesus tells his disciples that they will be filled with power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and that they will be ‘witnesses for Him in Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’. Thus the feast of Pentecost, which we observe next Sunday, is foreshadowed – the day when the Holy Spirit fell with tongues of fire on the heads of the disciples, and God’s word was heard by people of every race, each in their own language. These verses also remind us of Jesus’ call to us to be “witnesses unto me” in all we do – life, work and conversation.

In today’s Gospel (John 17. 1-11) there are two key themes, one about eternal life, and one about the nature of God’s glory. John speaks of eternal life as the special relationship between God and Jesus, a relationship extended to Jesus’ disciples. V3: this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Eternal life is not about life for eternity after we die (Life after death is a topic for another sermon!). John uses the Greek word *aionios, (*eon in English*)* not in a chronological sense, like going on for ever and ever, but rather life of a different nature, or quality, perhaps tikanga Christian, not bound by time, but life lived in relationship with God in Christ. It is a present reality lived by all those who know God, and Jesus Christ whom God has sent. Each one of us can live this eternal life now.

Secondly, the Gospel talks about God’s glory. Jesus prays (v1) : “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you”. God’s glory has been revealed in Jesus throughout his life, seen (for example) in Jesus’ miracles, or signs, most recently in the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11.1-45). But now Jesus will glorify God through his death on the Cross. Thus the glory of God is revealed not just in strength and authority, but also in weakness, the weakness of love and self-giving. As he died on the Cross Jesus said “It is finished” (*tetelestai,*  from *telos*, meaning purpose). His work/purpose on earth was complete.

St Paul puts this well in Philippians 2.6-11 when he writes of Jesus who, being in the nature of God, took on the very nature of a servant,… and   humbled himself by becoming obedient to death…Therefore God exalted him to the highest place…so that every tongue might confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God.

Asension Day speaks to us of God’ love which extends over all the earth, binding us together as one family, and one Creation. It is with this perspective that we should approach the Covid pandemic. Rutger Bregman writes that “the age of excessive individualism and competition could come to an end, and we could inaugurate a new age of solidarity and connection…I am not optimistic, but hopeful, for hope propels us to action.”

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