



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE

+ ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

Sunday 21st May 2023, Easter 7

I am with you always by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Exodus 19:19-20, 20:18-21

As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.....When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but they doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Sermon: I am with you always

Today is the final Sunday of the season of Easter, often called Ascension Sunday because the Church remembers the story of Christ “ascending into heaven to the Father’s right hand”. It’s the event that paves the way for Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the birthday of the Church.

You’ll notice we’re not remembering the Ascension today. And that’s because the Ascension is a story peculiar to Luke and the Book of Acts – which was also written by Luke. And this year, we’re focusing on Matthew. Matthew doesn’t recall the Ascension of Christ. Whereas Luke ends with Christ leaving the disciples, Matthew ends with a rather surprising and yet explicit claim that Christ has never left us. In fact, that Christ is still very much with us. Matthew’s Gospel ends with a promise, as the disciples are sent out to proclaim the news to the world, that Christ is with them to the end of the age.

Now, in a way, I think Luke and Matthew are saying the same thing in different ways. I’m not trying to throw shade on Luke. In a way we’re talking about Ascension in a different way. But I am wanting to stress today that Matthew wants us to reckon with the fact that the risen Jesus is still with us, still speaking to us, still leading us. The Jesus that sent out the disciples two thousand years ago is the same Jesus who sends us out into the world today.

You’ve probably heard the phrase, “what would Jesus do?” In fact, I’ve heard it a number of times since I’ve been here. And when I’ve heard it, I’ve been encouraged – because the question brings Jesus front and centre. So, to those who have been asking that question, thank you. The moment that Jesus ceases to be the centre of what we do as the church is the moment we cease to be the church at all.

The question is limited though. And that’s because it infers that Jesus is not in fact present. It’s in the question: what would Jesus do, if Jesus were here today? I wonder if Matthew would rephrase that to say: what is Jesus saying and doing among us today? WIJSADAUT isn’t quite as catchy as WWJD so I don’t think it’ll catch on.

Now all of this may seem semantics. But I think it makes a difference. The thing is the Church today, I think, is at very real risk of being infiltrated by a kind of functional atheism. And by that, I mean that we run the church in such a way that God doesn’t need to exist; we slave away as if this church is dependent on us; as if the risen Jesus were not among us speaking to us afresh, as if the Spirit were not sustaining us and guiding us.

We come up with mission and vision statements, develop strategic plans and goals, come up with KPIs and measurable outcomes. All in the hope that, if we get the formula just right, we might turn this sinking ship around.

I realise the irony of all this as we begin a five-year strategic planning process...but I don't want to suggest that mission and vision statements and strategic plans and measurable goals are not important for a church community. They are. It's good to plan. It's good to steward our resources wisely for the future. It's good to funnel our energies into areas that we believe Christ is leading us.

But therein lies the rub... where Christ is leading us. This isn't our church. And it's not ours to save. Nor can we save it. We belong to Christ and to him alone. And we've not been called to do anything other than to follow him and obey his words. All this doesn't mean we don't develop a strategic plan. But it does mean we ask different questions and prioritise different things.

I often hear the lament that the church is no longer relevant. That we're not meeting the needs of today's people. That if we just tweaked this, moved this here, sung different songs, used different words, provided the right programmes, dressed ourselves in a more appealing way etc. etc. – that people will come streaming back. That we'll be relevant again.

But here's my question: when did the Church ever stop being relevant? When did Christ, who lives among us, stop being relevant? Or do we have such little faith in the gospel that we believe we need to dress Jesus up in more appealing garb for people to swallow him? I'm reminded of my cat's worm medicine which you need to hide in his food so that he swallows it unwittingly.

So, here's what I believe. I believe the Church is eternally relevant because I believe Christ is eternally relevant. And I believe that when people gather in his name, to listen to his word, to be transformed by his self-giving love, to follow him into the world – that people will want to be part of it. And even if people don't want to be part of it, well, we're still not called to do anything else.

I've just heard this week in our small group discussions about how much loneliness exists in our community. How much isolation. Those people don't need "cool" or "relevant". They need belonging, community, people who see them and love them. And we can be that. We can be Jesus for them.

There is something very challenging about trusting that God has things in control, particularly at a time when the Church in New Zealand is rapidly declining in numbers. It's understandable that we would want to take matters into our own hands. To try ditch the old and try the new in the hope that we'll land on a sustainable model.

I'm mindful of our Old Testament reading, which recalls the events immediately surrounding the giving of God's Word, Torah, the ten commandments. Moses, we're told, goes up the mountain alone, while the people gather at the foot of the mountain. And God comes among them. His presence is heralded by trumpets and thunder and lightning and cloud and smoke. But: God remains hidden, veiled from the eyes of the people, cloaked in "thick darkness". And the people are afraid,

quaking with fear. Moses reassures them and says God is testing them
I can't help but see a parallel with our own experience. Like them, we too gather in God's presence. And like them, God is veiled from our eyes. We believe Christ is present. But we don't see him. Like them, we stare into the "thick darkness" – looking for some kind of proof that God has things in control.

But we never get the proof we're looking for. Instead – as with the people of Israel – what we get is God's Word – God's promise – and an invitation to follow in faith.

I'm struck that, in our gospel reading, Matthew seems almost uninterested in what the risen Jesus looks like. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples. The risen Jesus speaks to them. But Matthew gives no details about the event itself. Instead, the focus is on his words.

I wonder if it's Matthew's way of saying to the church: if you want to encounter the risen Jesus among you – listen to his Word. Attend to his Word and he will be with you; attend to his Word and by his Spirit you will discern what he is saying to you; attend to his Word and your life will be shaped by his as a holy communion of saints; attend to his Word as he leads you into the world and to a life of loving service; attend to his Word for he is with us always – and our calling has never been anything else than to be with him, until the end of the age.

Amen.