



## MESSAGE FROM LCA BISHOP JOHN HENDERSON

### Video Script #2, 26 March 2020

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The peace of the Lord be with you in this Lenten season, as we focus on the passion of our Lord, and the sacrifice of his life for the life of the whole world.

I'm John Henderson, bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.

This is my second video message to the church during this pandemic. These are strange times. It's not easy, adjusting to our new circumstances. It's natural to want to shy away, to find it too hard. When you woke up this morning, you might have asked yourself whether this is really happening. It can feel like a bad dream. So much has changed, so fast, and it's far from over.

Tonight, New Zealand goes to COVID-19 Alert Level 4. This is New Zealand's highest alert level, and means the disease is not contained. Today, Australia woke up to new measures the Prime Minister announced last night after a National Cabinet meeting. Many of your workplaces, and your jobs, are affected. We have seen the Centrelink queues, either in person, or on the news. In further news for churches, attendance at weddings is now limited to 5 people, and at funerals 10 people. And wherever people are together, for any purpose, the 4 square metre rule applies. You will follow all that in the news and elsewhere, and I encourage you to get accurate information directly from government sources. If you are looking for them, we have a list on the LCA website. Just follow the links on [www.lca.org.au](http://www.lca.org.au).

If you're wondering where to go in all this trouble, and what to do, then the first thing, before anything else, is to call out to the Lord for help. Scott Morrison said yesterday that his prayer knees were getting a good work out. The people of Israel were often in desperate straits, and for them the Psalmist wrote, in Psalm 121:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*

This week you have closed your church building, if you're blessed enough to have one, and you have ceased public worship gatherings. As you did that, you knew that the LORD went with you from that place to wherever you are now – at home, or at work, or at the shops. His help is right there, with you. You are not alone, because God is not limited to the building, or the place. God will reach you where you are.

One of the remarkable things we sometimes don't notice in the Old Testament is how Israel's God was not limited to a particular place, or a particular group of people. Other tribes had local gods and regional idols, but Israel had a God of every place and every time. That God is also our God, the God of heaven and earth. In Jesus, that God came to be among us, right here on earth, to go through whatever we go through, to walk with us, to talk with us, to comfort and protect us, and to guide us. That God, that Jesus, is with you right now where you are at this very moment.

In yesterday's eNews I wrote that this is an opportunity for us to step forward, boldly and confidently, as Christian citizens who know how to practise care, compassion, and love. The hope in our hearts is greater than the troubles the world throws at us. We will find added strength in this time when we turn toward our neighbours in love. Many are afraid and uncertain, and sometimes that makes them angry and resentful. Some don't know how to cope, not just yet. Many in our secular, materialistic society have lost the inner life of faith, confidence and peace in the gospel of the Lord.

We, too, experience a sense of loss, of sadness and uncertainty. We can be tempted to clutch at straws and seek comfort elsewhere than trusting in God. I have seen these things among us, and I understand.

I encourage each of us to take all that to the throne of grace, and let it land at the feet of our Saviour. Jesus did much more than we can imagine when he gave his life on the cross of Calvary. He took on himself the sins of the whole world. What you might be feeling now, he felt. The temptations you are facing, he faced, not so that he could be better than you, but so that he can be you, and you can be him. You have the power of God, the power of Jesus, within you. He can, and he will, sustain you. You are not alone. Your help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

As members and friends of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, use this time to place your trust in him. Please don't turn to other gods, other hopes, other pieties. They will promise you something for a while, but soon they will be empty.

I know that some of us are finding it hard to give up the regular practice of Holy Communion. After nearly 40 years of ministry, during which time I have been committed to building up the frequency of communion practice in our church, I never thought I would be saying to you, 'Please don't, not for now.' Jesus is the Bread of eternal Life. He is yours, and you are his. Even if you can't commune right now, you have not lost him. When we can gather physically again, in the same place, we will commune joyfully once more.

I strongly discourage the alternative communion practices that I know some of us are considering. We are not at liberty to change Holy Communion practice. There is no need to do so at this time. If you do, you are risking spiritual damage to the message of the gospel and the community of Christ. Eucharist is the community meal of the whole Christian church on earth – all Christians. Christ himself gave it to us. All around the world Catholic and Orthodox dioceses have suspended this most sacred of meals, as have Anglicans, Lutherans, and churches of all varieties. Believe me, if they can do it, so can we. We will not lose our comfort, or our salvation, because of it.

Our motivation in all these things is to think of others, to protect the vulnerable, and to reach out in care, compassion, and love.

In your congregations, I know you will continue to worship however you can, without physical proximity. This enforced physical isolation seems to be increasing our hunger and drive for our church community, and for worship. Maybe we are feeling just a little like believers in the early church, when they could not get enough of the gospel. When St Paul wrote to the churches from his Roman prison cell, he had the Spirit, a message, some parchment, ink, and a quill. Praise God, we still have the Spirit and that message, the gospel of salvation, and we also have the internet, phones, printed materials, and (still) a physical postage system for those not yet adapted to the digital era. If Paul could do it in the 1st century, we can do it in the 21st!

This is not over yet. There is more to come. All the evidence points to that. We don't know how long it will be. In such uncertain times, faith comes to the fore. Expect people to be open, in new ways, to the faith we confess. Be ready to share that faith at every opportunity. Show the world how true Christians live, and how great is the love of our God.

*He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.*

*The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.*

*The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.*

*The LORD † will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*