



MESSAGE FROM LCA BISHOP JOHN HENDERSON

Video Script #4, 9 April 2020

The peace of the Lord be with you.

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

I'm speaking to you today during the holy week of our Lord's passion and death. It's my fourth video message during this time of global pandemic.

Almost 20 years ago I visited the former site of the World Trade Centre in New York, where the massive skyscrapers had been brought down by the impact of passenger planes. It was a massive, brutal catastrophe that we hope is never repeated. Thousands died. The shockwaves spread around the world. But at ground zero, once the rubble had been cleared away, was just a huge, gaping hole.

Holy Week is like the 'ground zero' of faith. It is the end of our 'business as usual' approach to life. God's Son, God's only Son, is tortured on the cross, and taken to the grave. He leaves nothing behind. The public ridicule him, forget what he taught them, and his followers have scattered in fear.

All we see, then, is Jesus. He is all that matters. Jesus Christ – who lived, suffered, was crucified and raised, and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. The very centre of the Bible's message.

God suffers, and God dies. For our sakes. That's about the sum of it. Our minds just can't take it in. It is unthinkable. We often say that Jesus suffered and died for us. We can never say that easily. How can we grasp the immensity? Jesus' death is an infinite contradiction of the way things should be. We struggle to imagine our own death and do everything we can to prevent it. But God? God, by very definition, cannot die.

Cannot? Are some things forbidden to God? Well, in theory, no. We believe God can do all things. But in practice, it's different. In practice we seem to think there are all sorts of things God cannot do. Why else would we succumb so easily to fear, react out of panic, and so quickly turn in on ourselves?

Holy Week takes us on the journey to Jesus' cross. In 2020, under circumstances of infection, disease and social isolation, with the health, family, societal, employment and financial impacts of that, can we go on the journey a little more deeply than usual? As you read or hear the words, remember, the Bible is not a mere collection of good stories, timeless wisdom and memorable quotes. It's alive. God is speaking to you in those pages, right now.

One thing I often fail to notice is what Jesus says, at the Last Supper, *'I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'*ⁱ

Jesus was true to his word. After the mock trial and being taken to Golgotha for execution, someone offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall. This bitter substance might have been a drug to blunt the pain. Surely it was a kindly act, *'but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.'*ⁱⁱ The Father's kingdom had not come, not yet.

Later, just before his death, Jesus cried out, *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* These are some of the most powerful words in the Bible. In total abandonment, beyond human imagining, God left his Son to die. No archangel, no seraphim, not even a whisper. Total silence. Who was he calling? Elijah? *'At once, one of the bystanders ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.'* Now, the time was right. Jesus drank the wine, *'cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

This is it. This is ground zero. This is the moment when God's Kingdom comes. What a strange reversal! We expect trumpets and noise and triumph. But here is utter annihilation, the gaping hole of death. There's no easy way to say it. Jesus gives up everything – everything – to save the world.

There's no short cut to sidestep this moment. Faith takes us right there, into his death. Faith abandons everything that is old, everything sinful – ego, pride, selfishness, love of material wealth, delusions, guilt, greed, and even our most cherished notions about God, religion and truth. Everything is turned on its head. It all goes to death, the grave. Nothing is left. Nothing survives being abandoned by God.

This is our only hope. This week's journey teaches that surrender, suffering and death will come before Sunday's resurrection. It's the only path to salvation that God offers.

For us, this is impossible, but with God, everything is possible. When Jesus dies, the kingdom comes, because he has taken away the sin of the world. Everything is new again.

May God deepen your faith, and your love, through this Holy Week, and the coming Easter season. We might be physically separated from each other for a brief while, but soon we will be reunited with each other, in the warm embrace of Christ, our risen Lord. In the meantime, he is there with you, in your home, or wherever you are. Physical separation, and even death, are no barrier to him. He has gone through all of that. Today he is alive, bringing us life for now, and life for eternity.

Believe in him, in all your need. For as the Bible assures you in the gospel of John, *'Everything is done'*.^{iv}

ⁱ Matthew 26:29

ⁱⁱ Matthew 27:34

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 27:47-50

^{iv} John 19:30