

# Super-abundance

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 22 May 2022

A reflection by Rev Radhika Sukumar-White

Easter 6C, Ascension

Acts 1: 1-11; Luke 24: 44-53

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Good morning friends; it is a delight to join you this morning. Thanks, Jo, for the invitation! My name is Radhika, my pronouns are she/her, I'm one of the ministers at Leichhardt, and I'm also Chair of our Presbytery's Pastoral Relations Committee. I stand here and preach on stolen land, where sovereignty was never ceded; I pay my respects to those who have walked on this land long before me, and to any First Nations people here today. Let us pray...

On a first reading, Luke's Ascension is actually a distressing story, because it appears to both repeat and fulfil a narrative which has become very familiar in our modern age: the one about a God who deliberately distances Godself from those who need God, and who, in the end, abandons God's people to their own powers of survival. That is: *Dad's not gonna clean up your messes anymore; pull your shit together cos you're on your own.*

How might we respond to such thinking, such theology? Perhaps like this.

It is important to recognise the legitimacy of the experience from which it arises. For many folk, Christ has indeed left the building. Many choose to distance themselves from the institutional Church because of, say, the abuse of children by clergy, or the blindness to domestic violence, or seemingly getting into bed with politicians, or incredibly harmful theology. For many, any sense of Christ's tangible, transformational presence in the world is mere apparition.

And who can blame them, or any victims of abuse or repression or prejudice, for seeing things like that? But I want to bear witness to another way of reading the Ascension story, and I believe that if we can only allow ourselves this enlarged lens, then even the very real 'fact' and 'experience' of divine abandonment will turn out to be something contrary to what it appears to be. And I do this to perhaps remind or reorient us to what it means to be the church.

Let me summarise what Luke has to say like this. *While, by virtue of the Ascension, Christ is indeed no longer present as a particular human being who occupies a particular place and time, he is nevertheless, also by virtue of the Ascension, more abundantly present and active than he has ever been before. And this not as some kind of ghostly presence who hangs in the air but never takes form.*

No, says the writer, *Christ is now present as this: the material body of Christian believers brought into being and inspired by the very Spirit that made Jesus who and what he was. The Spirit now makes the Church what Jesus of Nazareth was, so infusing and shaping its life and work that the mission of Jesus continues in the Church as a real and tangible Christ-presence for the world.*

The mission of Jesus (not the mission of the Church, but of Jesus) who went about doing good, proclaiming the kingdom, healing the sick, giving himself in love; Jesus, who did not stand gloriously atop the universe, but trod the weary paths of Galilee, not much more than the area of greater Sydney, but with only a fraction of its population; Jesus, who for one, possibly three years, spoke and lived love, mostly in anonymity; Jesus, who was easily erased as inconvenient, unauthorised, controversial, socially destabilising, wandering preacher; Jesus, whose life was poured out in love and whose love bled down a wooden cross but then conquered even death...the mission of this loving, but vulnerable, humanly limited, wonderful yet ordinary human being, is the mission that continues in the Church, in ordinary humans bringing the Kingdom forth.

We heard two accounts of the Ascension this morning, both by the same writer. We heard the end of Part 1 and the beginning of Part 2 of his opus. And Part 2 begins with a word about "*all that Jesus began to do and teach.*" A sequel is often necessary in films and books because the story's hero still has many more acts to accomplish. So even after the events of Easter, what compels Luke is still Jesus. Even if he is for the most part unseen, Jesus is not absent, but is somewhere just off-stage, directing the action. Luke's sequel should really be called Acts of the Ascended Jesus.

Now, this next bit is a little tricky. In the wake of the Ascension, Christ remains present to us, but this presence is of a different order. It is what Jean-Luc Marion calls a '*saturating presence*,' a presence which so pervades and infuses the world with God's glory that it confuses and dazzles our limited imaginations. Ever heard the expression "*He couldn't see the wood for the trees*"? It's like that.

While we may not be able to pin Christ down to a particular bodily form and draw borders around him which define where he is and where he is not, he is abundantly, even super-abundantly, present in material reality which we encounter everyday: in the body which is the Church, past, present and future; in the bread and wine broken and poured out for the life of the world; in the Scriptures read and preached; in music; in fellowship; at rallies and public actions; and in the stranger, the widow and the orphan we are called to meet in our ministry of service and justice.

Christ is ascended to God so he can be "*everywhere present*". The power of this Ascension story is the assurance that by its virtue, there is literally nowhere on earth that the living God is not abundantly present, gloriously present, transformationally present. Yes, even in places of deep dark despair.

Now, if this were not the case, if Christ truly disappeared from the world entirely, then the Church simply would not exist. Because the Church, ideally, is a gathering of people who have experienced something of Christ and who yearn to experience and learn more. The church is a gathering of people who give thanks for Christ's saturating presence in the world, who confess the times they have forgotten this truth, who learn from this collection of stories about people in history encountering God in real, tangible ways, who uphold in prayer this world where Christ is abundantly present but the world is still aching and broken, and recommit ourselves to lives of worship, witness and service.

We, the church, are descendants of that community many generations ago who saw Jesus go from physical presence to super-abundant presence. We are the descendants of those whom Jesus commanded to proclaim the Kingdom and to be the Kingdom; to pray “*Your Kingdom come*” and to let the vision of the Kingdom set their... our ... agenda as disciples.

We were never meant to be waiting around for the Kingdom to come, qualifying ourselves for future entry and busying ourselves with recruitment drives so that others might one day enter too.

We are, for here and now, the fulfilment of Christ’s promise yet to reach its completion. We are witnesses to Christ’s vision of the Kingdom; we have glimpsed all nations at peace, swords forged into gardening tools; we have tasted in Communion the meal that promises a place for all people at God’s table. We see and bear witness to the Kingdom of God.

But we are also witnesses to the Jesus in whose ministry God’s reign already revealed itself. We join hands across the generations with those who saw at the very beginning, whose hands handled the word of life, who saw and heard Jesus in the towns of Galilee and in Jerusalem. Through them we know the story that tells of love which sets people free.

We learned of the compassion of God, as great and greater than the most compassionate parent, opening the door again to the outcast, embracing the lost son, listening to the women’s cries, taking the children and blessing them. The God who did not withdraw, the God who did not say enough, the God who offered forgiveness and reconciliation to the least loved and least loveable.

We are the witnesses of the love that did not bend to the social and political pressures of rulers impatient to preserve stability and security, the love that persevered in love despite the controversies over the prescriptions of scripture and tradition.

We are witnesses of the love which was tortured and beaten, strung up and crucified, taken away and buried. We are witnesses of a terrible story that tells itself again in every generation, wherever love and innocence and life is crushed and broken and swept aside.

And we are witnesses of a love which refuses to be congealed in the dry blood of defeat and hopelessness but bursts out again towards the vision. We are witnesses of his resurrection.

We are witnesses of that vision. We are witnesses of love’s life cycle set forth in Christ. We also have our own story to tell, our own meetings with sin and death, our own ongoing conversions and renewal. We are like the eleven and those with them, human beings, with all the gifts and all the limitations that belong to our humanness. And like them, we know our denials and our fearful abandonment of divine love. Like them, we have nothing to boast of. Our busy self-justification is just our own delusion.

Yet he comes to you and me, he comes to his Church, lifts us up, loves us without limit, and invites us to tell the story of love over and over again to tell the story of love over and over again. You shall be my witnesses to the world.

Friends, the Ascension is, for the Church, both a fact and a promise. The fact is this: that Christ is everywhere present as the authority and power of God, a power which is before and behind us and under our feet and within us and over us and all around us, a power which forever seeks our surrender to God’s love.

And here is the promise: if we will first discipline ourselves, through prayer, to discern Christ's presence in our very midst; and if we will then surrender ourselves to his transformational love, body and soul; then that wound of abandonment which haunts every human being will ultimately find its healing.

Christ has not left us as orphans. Christ is still acting and teaching and healing and ministering and redeeming the world.

So it's actually not about when Jesus is returning to fix everything up, but whether we, his disciples, will learn to catch up to what he is doing in the world now, looking outward instead of inward or heavenward.

He comes to us tangibly and bodily every day, to love and care for us as only God knows how.

He comes to us so that we might love and care for one another and our desperate world as the Body of Christ, the Church in the world.

Amen.