



Andrew Murray Pretoria
9th of August 2020
Liturgist:
Rev. Stefan Botha



† **Invocation and Greeting:**

Lord, we live in a world of change.
Every day is filled with uncertainty.
We are surrounded by the twists and turns of life,
and we often feel we have little or no control over things that happen to us.
Lord, we come to stand in Your eternal presence.
We come to You to find ourselves, to find our way, to find hope.
We come to You because in Christ You first came to us.

**Family of God, it is with joy that I greet you all in the Name of the Sovereign God.
I greet you in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

† **Scripture Reading and Sermon: “*God and the pandemic.*” Jesus and the Gospels.**

Good morning to all. We are busy with a series on “*God and the pandemic*”, based on the book of NT Wright. We started by looking at the Church’s task and calling. Then we turned to the Old Testament to help us understand our life and times. Now we turn to Jesus and the Gospels.

One of the great New Testament words is “*Now*”. That was then, this is now. “*But now*”, says Paul, moving from his analysis of human plight to his exposition of God’s solution (Romans 3:21). Something new is happening.

“*The time is fulfilled,*” said Jesus; and his hearers, conscious of living within the perplexing story of Israel’s scriptures, picked up at least that something long-awaited was now arriving. Or at least that Jesus thought it was.

Jesus, like the ancient prophets before him whom he quoted, was announcing that people should repent. Well of course; isn’t that what prophets are supposed to do?

Yes and no. Jesus could on occasion point to disasters that had happened and warn his hearers that unless they repented, they would be next (Luke 13:1–9). Yet that was very specific: The Roman governor had sent in the troops and killed pilgrims in the temple, and then a nearby tower had collapsed and crushed eighteen people to death.

Were they worse sinners than all the others in Jerusalem? “*No,*” said Jesus: “*Unless you repent, you will all be destroyed in the same way.*”

This was a particular moment, the decisive moment in fact for the history of ancient Israel, of the Jewish people and institutions of the time. The warnings were all about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. Unless the people changed their ways radically, then Roman swords and falling stonework would finish most of them off. Jesus could read “*the signs of the times*” even if most of his contemporaries couldn’t (Luke 12:49–59). So far, so prophetic. Forty years later, Jesus was proved right.

Yet Jesus went further. When people asked him for “a *sign from heaven*”, he saw their request as a sign of unbelief. They wanted things to be obvious. The only sign he would give them, he said, was another prophetic sign: the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:39).

Jonah disappeared into the belly of the whale—and then came out alive, three days later. That, said Jesus, was the “*sign*” that would tell his generation what was going on. The other “*signs*” that Jesus was doing were not negative ones. They were not like the prophetic “*signs*” to which Amos referred, or indeed like the “*signs*” that Moses and Aaron performed in Egypt to try to shake Pharaoh out of his complacency and allow the Israelites to go free.

Those “*signs*” were strange warning signals: plagues of frogs, or locusts, or rivers turning into blood.

Jesus’ “*signs*” (John gives us a neat catalogue of them) were all about new creation: water into wine, healings, food for the hungry, sight for the blind, life for the dead. The other Gospels chip in with several more, including parties with all the wrong kind of people, indicating a future full of forgiveness. All these were forward-looking signs, declaring the new thing that God was doing. Was doing **now**.

So, Jesus seemed to have been standing at the threshold. Sometimes he could speak and act like an Old Testament prophet—and people did say that he reminded them of Jeremiah or Elijah, which gives you rather a different picture to the standard image of Jesus as “*meek and mild*”.

On another occasion, after healing a man, he warns him, “*Now you are well; so, stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.*” (John 5:14) Yet at other times he seemed to have been looking, not backward to sins which might bring about judgment, but forward to the new thing that was happening: the kingdom of God.

That is certainly the picture we get from John 9. Jesus and his disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked the standard question, not that different from the question many people are asking today about the coronavirus:

“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”

“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered.

“This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.” (John 9:1–3)

Jesus, in other words, didn’t look back to a hypothetical cause which would enable the onlookers to feel smug that they had understood some inner cosmic moral mechanism, some sin that God had had to punish. He looked forward to see what God is going to do about it. That translates directly into what he, Jesus, is going to do about it. For he is the light of the world.

So, he healed the man. This is the “*now time*”. Not the time for speculating about previous sin (even in a time of Corona).

We have seen how the Gospels present Jesus as standing at a moment of great transition. He was summing up the whole ancient prophetic tradition and re-expressing its message in terms of the last great warning to Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

“Turn now,” he said, “follow God’s way of peace rather than your crazy flight into national rebellion against Rome. If you don’t, it will mean disaster.”

This becomes perhaps most explicit in Luke 19, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey—in tears, lamenting the destruction that will come on the city because the people had indeed refused his way of peace.

At the same time, Jesus was pointing forwards to a new world, a world in which he himself will be the one true sign: pointing—like Jonah’s symbolic “*death and resurrection*”—to the worldwide call to repent. When he did talk of wars, famines, earthquakes and the like he didn’t say “*So when these things happen you must think carefully about what you and your society should be repenting of*”.

He said, “*Don’t be disturbed; the end is not yet!*” (Matt. 24:6). If people had paid attention to that, we should have had less alarmist teaching about “*the End-Times*”, whether the Hal Lindsay variety, the LaHaye and Jenkins kind, or the present new wave. Conspiracy theories were thriving in the first century, just as they are today. Jesus pushed them aside. “*Stay calm,*” he said, “*and trust in me.*”

In particular—it is remarkable how little this gets noticed—Jesus gave his followers a prayer, which more or less all Christian traditions use to this day, and which anchors the key prophetic points in the now of the Gospel.

In this “*Lord’s Prayer*” Jesus-followers pray, not just when a sudden global crisis occurs, but every single day, “*Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven*”. They also pray, every day, not simply when a horrible event acts as a trigger, “*Forgive us our trespasses*”.

Being kingdom-people and being penitence-people comes with the turf. That’s part of what following Jesus is all about. Praying those two prayers—the kingdom-prayer, the forgiveness-prayer—might just alert us to the real anti-kingdom forces at work in our world, our real “*trespasses*” (against one another, in our political systems; against the natural world and particularly the animal kingdom, in our farming and food-chain systems) of which we should have repented long ago.

In other words, if Jesus’ followers are waiting for special events to nudge them into looking for Jesus’ kingdom on earth as in heaven, or to tell them to repent when they were drifting into careless sin, then they’ve gone to sleep on the job.

That is not to say, of course, that Christians never do go to sleep on the job, or that God cannot and doesn’t give them a kick or a prod from time to time to get them back on track. That, too, is taken care of in the Lord’s Prayer: “*don’t lead us into the time of testing, and deliver us from evil.*” In a sense, learning to follow Jesus is simply learning to pray the Lord’s Prayer.

If we really do that, we will be delivered from the false “*explanations*” that imagine that the kingdom will come with sudden signs (**despite the fact that Jesus said it wouldn’t**), or that a new event, after the time of Jesus, will be a global call to repent (**despite the fact that Jesus saw his own death and resurrection as the once-for-all summons**).

We shall discover the truth that the Letter to the Hebrews declares when it puts Jesus as the last and greatest of the prophets: God has indeed spoken of old through the prophets, but in these last days “*God has spoken through his son*” (Hebrews 1:2).

This provides a vital answer to the question which lies behind a lot of the speculation and argument about how to apply the Bible to great and disturbing events of our own time. The New Testament insists that we put Jesus at the centre of the picture and work outwards from there.

The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, but without looking carefully at Jesus, we are in serious danger of forcing through an “*interpretation*” which might look attractive—it might seem quite “*spiritual*” and awe-inspiring—but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture. As the old saying has it, if he is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all.

So, what might, trusting in Jesus, mean in practice?

There is after all only one Jesus: the Jesus of Nazareth who came into Galilee saying “*Now*”.

- Now is the time for God to become king.
- Now is the time to repent and believe the good news.

At every point Jesus was redefining all the ancient promises about God becoming king, about the good news that God was coming back at last to set everything right. He was redefining it all around his own vision.

That’s why he told “*parables*”—vivid stories which said “*Yes*” to the kingdom of God and “*No*” to the ways in which most of his contemporaries were seeing that “*kingdom*”, that “*sovereignty*”, that divine “*control*”.

That’s not just a first-century issue, though it certainly was that too. It is vital for our own reflection. A lot of the talk about “*What is God doing in the coronavirus pandemic*” assumes that God is “*sovereign*”, and it assumes what that “*sovereignty*” will mean.

Jesus, though, was unveiling a different meaning of divine sovereignty.

- This is what it looks like, he was saying as he healed a leper, or as he announced forgiveness on his own authority to a penitent woman.
- This is what it looks like, he was saying as he celebrated parties with all the wrong people.
- This is what it looks like, he was saying as he went up to Jerusalem that last time and solemnly announced God’s final judgment on the city, the system, and the institution—the Temple—that had refused God’s way of peace.
- This is what it looks like, he said as he broke bread on the last night with his friends.
- This is what it looks like, he said as he hung on the cross, with the words “*King of the Jews*” above his head.
- This is what it looks like, he was saying three days later to his astonished friends in the upper room.

Unless we are prepared to see these events—the Jesus-events, the messianic moment—as the ultimate call to penitence, because they are the ultimate announcement of the arrival of God’s kingdom, we will be bound to over-interpret other events to compensate.

There will be a vacuum, a Jesus-shaped blank, and we shall fill it by saying (as Jesus had warned that people would say) “*You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you.*” (Luke 17:21)

For Jesus’ first followers, then, his death and resurrection were now the single, ultimate “*sign*”. Prophets like Amos had been forerunners. God has now spoken through the Son, once and for all. For us to try to read God’s secret code off the pages of the newspapers may look clever. We may even get a reputation for spiritual insight—but actually, we are doing it because we have forgotten where the true key to understanding is now to be found.

Similarly, any claim to tell from world events when the “*second coming*” will occur is a claim to know more than Jesus himself (Mark 13:32).

- Jesus himself is the reason why people should turn from idolatry, injustice and all wickedness.
- The cross is where all the world’s sufferings and horrors have been heaped up and dealt with.
- The resurrection is the launch of God’s new creation, of his sovereign saving rule on earth—starting with the physical body of Jesus himself.

Those events are now the summons to repent and the clue to what God is doing in the world. Trying to jump from an earthquake, a tsunami, a pandemic or anything else to a conclusion about “*what God is saying here*” without going through the Gospel story is to make the basic theological mistake of trying to deduce something about God while going behind Jesus’ back.

You can see the same point in Jesus’ story about the vineyard tenants (Mark 12:1–12, with parallels in Matthew and Luke). The story is well known: the vineyard owner sends messengers to get fruit, and the tenants reject them and even kill some of them. Finally, the owner plays his last possible card: he sends his only son. Surely, he thinks, they will respect him. But they don’t. They kill him, too, and throw his body out. After that there can be no more messengers. The application is obvious. Jesus is saying, “**No more warning signs after this.**”

The historical point here is that once God’s people have rejected him, they have blown their last chance to avoid the destruction that Jesus had warned would come upon the nation and particularly the Temple. Yet the point applies equally as the Church moves forwards.

What was said about the One God sending his only son to the vineyard tenants—to the people of Israel—was then applied to the Church’s mission to the world. If there is One God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one.

Of course, again, God can do whatever God wants. If he wants to draw things to people’s attention in a special way, that is up to him. But this is not the norm. It is not what we should expect. We are not to be like horses and mules, without understanding, needing to be prodded and yanked by bits and bridles (Psalm 32:9).

From now on, the summons to repentance, and the announcement of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, come not through wars, earthquakes, famines or plagues. They come through Jesus. Through the story of Jesus himself, told, preached, announced; through the people of Jesus, the people in whose lives Jesus himself lives by his Spirit; through the strange work of Jesus even in parts of the world where his name is not recognized.

If God wants to alert us to things that are wrong in the way we have been running the world—and that seems to me highly likely—they will come to us Jesus-shaped. Jesus’ announcement of God’s kingdom is the gold standard.

There is a good reason why the reading of a passage from the Gospels is a compulsory part of all traditional repetitions of Jesus’ Last Supper. These are the words of life—which therefore contain also the words of warning. There are **not** going to be any more “*final messengers*”.

When we talk about God’s coming kingdom, and about it being inaugurated already through the work of Jesus, it may be worth reminding ourselves what this actually means. So much misinformation on this

subject has leaked into Christianity over the last few hundred years that it's sometimes hard to get things straight.

When we talk about "*the kingdom of God*", or God's ultimate future, from whatever angle, the New Testament insists that this is not a matter of saved souls "*going to heaven*" and leaving "*earth*" behind for good.

Paul speaks glowingly in Ephesians 1:10 of God's ultimate plan being to sum up everything in the Messiah, things in heaven and things on earth. The Platonic dream, so popular in much Christian piety (particularly when faced with a rampant secular culture that appears to have taken over the "earth"), is simply escapist.

In fact, the modern myth that the early Christians expected "*the end of the world*" very soon is a straightforward misreading of the relevant first-century texts. Jesus insisted that God's kingdom—God's sovereign, saving rule on earth as in heaven—was being inaugurated through him and his work, and that "*some standing here*" wouldn't die until they had seen it happening "*in power*" (Mark 9:1).

So, when did that happen? According to Jesus himself, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Matthew 28:18). Not will be given; has been given.

According to Paul, summing up the Gospel message at the start of his greatest letter, Jesus "*was marked out powerfully as God's son in terms of the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead*" (Rom. 1:4).

This means—contrary to much popular imagination, both Christian and non-Christian—that Jesus is already reigning. Paul speaks in First Corinthians of Jesus' present rule over the world, starting with his resurrection and ending when he has finished the work of subduing all "*enemies*"—the last of which is death itself, a very relevant consideration at this time (1 Cor. 15:25–26).

So how do the Gospels describe the Jesus who thus embodies the renewed and rescuing sovereignty of God? What is this "*rule*" supposed now to look like? Here we encounter the thing which makes the Christian message so distinctive, and which must colour all our attempts to understand or interpret current events.

We all know, of course, that Jesus died by crucifixion, and well-taught Christians have developed various ways of spelling out the early claim that "*he died for our sins*". Rather fewer, however, have followed up the central Gospel insight which is symbolized in the "*title*" on the cross—"King of the Jews" in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

Jesus himself, in several sayings, saw his forthcoming death not only as "*salvific*" in the traditional sense of "*saving souls*", but as "*kingdom-bringing*".

When faced with two of his right-hand men, James and John, wanting the best seats "*in the kingdom*", Jesus responded by redefining power itself. The world's rulers exercise power by bossing and bullying, he said; but we're going to do it the other way. The greatest must be the servant. The one who wants to be first must be slave of all. Then comes the crunch: he explains that this is so because the son of man didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Jesus' own unique saving vocation has thus redefined power and authority for all time. What most of the western Christian tradition has managed to ignore—because it has separated out "*salvation*" on the one hand from "*power*" on the other, as though the two were not intimately related!—is that the "*atonement*"

theology of that punch-line comes within the redefinition of “power”, and vice versa. The secret of God’s saving power is the self-giving love of the incarnate Son.

The point is this. If you want to know what it means to talk about God being “*in charge of*” the world, or being “*in control*”, or being “*sovereign*”, then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of “*kingdom*”, “*control*” and “*sovereignty*” themselves, around his death on the cross.

We can focus this insight on one of the most poignant passages in the Gospels. In John 11, Jesus and his followers head back towards Jerusalem, despite, or even perhaps because of, the strong suspicion that an evil fate is waiting for him there. They come to Bethany. Word has already reached them that their friend Lazarus, who was particularly dear to Jesus, has been sick; then, soon after, that he had died. John’s reader will already be wondering: why could not Jesus, who healed a stranger’s son at a distance (John 4:43–54), not have done the same for his friend?

This is the point, however, when we begin (with fear and trembling) to see what it might mean to be a friend of Jesus. John invites us to read between the lines. When, eventually, Jesus gives the command to take away the stone from the tomb so that he can call Lazarus out and back into life, the first thing he does is to pray with thanksgiving that God had heard his prayer.

This must mean that, before journeying to Bethany, Jesus had prayed that Lazarus, though dead, would not decompose, and would be ready to be raised back to life. The stone is taken away; Martha’s fears of a rotting smell are not realized (John doesn’t say that, but he leaves us to figure it out). Jesus knows that the road is now clear. He remains sovereign through all of this; sovereign in knowing what is going on, what it will cost the family to go through this terrible moment, and what he will then do.

This is all part of the dark mystery which John is unveiling, the mystery in which Jesus himself will shortly go down into death in order to overthrow “*the ruler of this world*” (12:31), and, unlike Lazarus in this incident, will emerge into a new kind of life, and immortal physicality, the other side. (Note that Lazarus comes out of the tomb still wrapped up in the grave-clothes. Jesus, in John 20, had left his behind.)

So, here is the paradox, which I suggest as a vital clue for how we should approach the whole question of understanding our present predicament. The Jesus who has prayed, who is taking charge, who knows what he is going to do—this Jesus weeps at the tomb of his friend (John 11:35).

It would be ridiculous to suggest (as one can imagine some nervous theologians suggesting) that he was just putting on a show of emotion in order to demonstrate sympathy with Mary and Martha. No: the tears are real. The horror of death—the fact that it sneers in the face of all that is lovely and beautiful—is overwhelming, even for the Lord of life. Especially for the Lord of life.

And the tears of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus point on to “*now is my soul troubled*” in 12:27, to Mark’s and Matthew’s description of Jesus in Gethsemane, and to the awful “*My God, why did you abandon me*” on the cross itself (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

That sequence—which could of course be filled out in considerable detail—adds up to the complex ways in which the different Gospels understand the very notion of power itself, of divine “*control*” or “*taking charge*”, the central idea of “*kingdom*”, being redefined around Jesus.

Come back to the tomb of Lazarus, with our present coronavirus questions ringing in our heads. Martha and Mary, and then the bystanders, both say in effect that it’s Jesus’s fault. He could have done

something to stop this. “*Lord, if only you’d been here, my brother wouldn’t have died!*” (John 11:21, 32). “*Couldn’t he have done something?*” ask the crowd (11:37).

The question echoes down the years, with every new tragedy.
Why did God allow this?
Why didn’t God step in and stop it?

As with the man born blind, Jesus isn’t looking back to see what might or might not have happened. People have blamed him, but he isn’t going to blame anyone. He has trusted his Father, and is looking ahead to see what must now happen. And the way to that goal is through tears.

The God who John has told us became incarnate in and as Jesus of Nazareth is the God, the Word-Made-Flesh, who weeps at the tomb of his friend. That could be the clue to a great deal of wisdom. Wisdom that we need rather badly right now.

So how is Jesus to engage with Martha, Mary and the critical crowd? He doesn’t turn the tables on them and suggest that all this happened because they were sinful and now ought to repent. He just weeps.

And then—with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust—he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. If there is a word for our present situation, facing not only a pandemic but all the consequent social and cultural upheaval, I think it might be right here.

What, then, have we learned so far?

First, we’ve learned how Jesus redefines what it means to say that God is in control, that God is taking charge. We in the modern West have split apart the doctrines of providence (God’s overall supervision of everything that happens) and atonement (God’s forgiveness of our sins through the death of Jesus).

The New Testament refuses to do that. Jesus himself refused to do that. But this habit of mind has become so engrained that it is possible for theologians and popular Christian writers to talk about what we might or might not say about a major pandemic on one side of the room, as it were, and to assume on the other side of the room that this provides an occasion for us to say that Jesus died for our sins so that we could go to heaven if we trust him.

The New Testament knows nothing of a room with those two separate sides. Somehow, we have to learn to put back together what should never have been split apart.

Second, as Jesus brings to a peak the Old Testament prophetic tradition, so he rounds it off by drawing the full significance of it all on to himself and his forthcoming death and resurrection. No doubt, thereafter, God can and does use all kinds of events to alert us to things we need to see but might ignore. Yet when that happens, we should not interpret them behind the back of the incarnate Son.

In the normal course of events, we should assume that the “*sign*” par excellence of all that the One God has done, is doing and will do, is Jesus himself, Jesus the Messiah of Israel, Jesus crucified, risen, ascended, promising to return in glory; Jesus the true Lord of the world.

So, what does it look like to “*read*” the events in the world in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection? For that we will look to the rest of the New Testament next week. Amen.

† **Prayer**

Father, we praise you for Jesus.
Thank you for the way he trusted you.
Thank you that he was so certain of your love.
We praise you that he trusted you all the way to the cross to become our Saviour.

Thank you for the promise that we can share his resurrection life and power.
Father, we thank you that Jesus is not just a name in the Bible but our living Lord.
We praise you that he is not a long-dead hero but a friend for us today.

Thank you that he can be trusted and will share everything we face.
Thank you that he is always with us, not simply when we are together in church.
Thank you that he is with us at home, at school, at work, and in the world.

Thank you that he is there when we play games and when we are working very hard;
that he is with us when things are going well and when everything seems to be going wrong.
Thank you that he is with us when we are strong and when we are weak,
when we are good and when we are not.

Thank you that he is with us when we are fit and healthy, and when we are ill and in great need.
Thank you that he is with us when he is most needed and when we least expect him to be there.
Thank you that he is with us when we are kind and understanding,
and when we want our own way and deliberately choose what we know is wrong.

Thank you for your forgiveness. Please make our lives new.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

† **Benediction (Amen)**

Whatever we face, we do not face it alone.
Wherever we go, we do not journey alone.
However we suffer, we do not bear it alone.
Whoever we are and wherever we go and however we journey,
we go in peace, in hope, and in faith
for we go with Christ, who always goes with us.
Go...

**(+) In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**