

Synod Sunday Sermon based on Luke 24:50-53 by Bishop David Altus

Good morning church! - wherever you may be out there - from Mt Gambier to Yalata, Adelaide to Darwin, in Central Australia, or anywhere in between, as part of the SA-NT District of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.

If you are listening to this message today, no, I might not have died and gone to heaven, but I will have been replaced as your District Bishop!

Your delegates at our District Synod at Victor Harbour this weekend will have elected a new Bishop to serve you. Since this message was prepared before Synod I can't tell you who that is, but I am sure God has chosen someone who will serve you well, and you probably know who it is by now via the Lutheran grapevine!

Last year I signalled to you that I wouldn't be standing for election again, and I intend to retire around the middle of this year, whenever your new bishop is ready to be installed. So for a couple of months I will serve you in "caretaker" mode. (In a way we are all in "caretaker" mode, caring for each other in what, after all, is God's church, the church of which Jesus is head, and we are his body)

It has been a privilege and joy (well 99.9% of the time a joy!) to serve you as bishop for over 13 years, something I never imagined God might have on his radar for me, or for you. I thank God for you and for your prayers over the years. God has answered your prayers in ways that have given me the health, strength, and I hope "soundness of mind" over the years to serve you in this role.

The theme of our District Synod this weekend is ***"Blessed to be Church"*** and this year is the 50th coming together of our Synod in convention.

I wonder if you see yourselves as **"blessed to be church"** today?

Last Thursday was **Ascension Day** in the church calendar, something that for many of us may have passed us by with little thought or recognition. But we are only here today as church because of a blessing that Jesus gave that day to his first followers on a hillside just out of Jerusalem, 40 days after Easter.

St Luke's account in chapter 24 tells us that: **"When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."**

The risen Jesus led his small group of first Christians, **"he led them out."** The words **"led them out"** are the same words used in Luke 23 when Jesus was led out to be crucified, and were often used to describe criminals being led out to die.

As his church today we may well be led out by our crucified and risen Lord Jesus on the way of the cross – sometimes to lonely, uncomfortable, threatening spaces and experiences, and even persecution for following him out into the world. So it shouldn't surprise us that it's not easy being a Christian and Church in Australia today.

And what's more, at that very moment when he is blessing them, Jesus becomes visibly separated from them. Luke writes: **“While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.”**

But his visible absence didn't seem to matter to them. In fact **“they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God”**

Because he was blessing them, it didn't seem to matter to them that they couldn't see him. They didn't go back to the temple with dropping hands and sad faces, fearful for their own future and for the church's future.

- They were conscious of the blessing of his ongoing presence,
- They trusted his ongoing promises, and
- They waited for his ongoing power - the power of the Holy Spirit.

“In the blessing of them”, “while he was blessing them”

The blessing of Jesus continued even when Jesus was no longer visible.

We are part of that ongoing blessing, Christ's ongoing presence, promise, and power.

We are ***“Blessed to be church...”***

I hope that's how it is for you...

It has been for me.

- The blessing of Christian parents who practiced what they believed
- The blessing of youth and older members who encouraged and modelled being disciples of Jesus, gave me opportunities to serve and helped me discover gifts I didn't know I had.
- The blessing of 37 years in pastoral ministry in rural and city parishes, with aged care and schools.
- The blessing of being humbled and inspired by people like you who keep on believing and praying and serving when life, and sometimes even family have turned against you.
- The blessing of these last 13 years in an oversight role where I have seen God at work in people like you in all sorts of places. I wish you could all have come with me to see the church in action - it would give you encouragement about being church where you are today.
- Blessing from meeting God's people in Central Australia
- Blessing from getting to know other Leaders of Christian Churches in SA
- Blessing even from the more difficult and uncomfortable experiences and failures that have kept me humble and dependent on God's grace.
- And blessing from so much more.

Your story of ***“Blessed to be church”*** might look and sound different, but I pray you can look back and see the blessing of the Lord of the church on your own life, and in our common life, both in your local worshipping community, and in our District of the LCA.

It is easy to be critical of the church. We are fallen human beings. There is plenty of ammunition to fire and we do shoot ourselves in the foot a lot, but I hope you see yourselves as blessed to be, and to belong to God’s church.

- Blessed to be embraced by God’s forgiving love in Jesus
- Blessed to be baptised into his “forever family”
- Blessed to sit at his table together
- Blessed to look forward to heaven together
- Blessed not to have to worry about past sins, and blessed not to worry about our final destination

In his book ***“Life Together”*** that I have read something of for each of my 13 years as bishop and in most of my years in ministry, Bonhoeffer says the fact that anyone believes is a miracle, and we dare not take for granted that we can come together with people who share our faith and our common hope for heaven, who support each other in the struggle of life and alongside whom we are called to serve together. He writes:

“It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in the world to share God’s word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, they stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing.....the physical presence of another Christian is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer...”

So whether your worshipping community today is large or small, growing or shrinking, ageing or youthful, what you think and wish it to be, or not, as a community of disciples, you have the ongoing blessing of the same crucified and risen Jesus who remained continually present with those first believers when they went back to their temple or gathered in their homes. Jesus our ascended Lord lives to continually bless his church.

At the end of every coming together of God’s people a blessing is pronounced on your life individually and together. God goes with you, and his Spirit within you.

You go ***“Blessed to be church”*** in the world, the world for whom Jesus died.

St Luke tells us that just before Jesus blessed that little gathering of Christians on a hillside ***“he told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”***

We weren’t there that day but we are witnesses together of the difference the risen Christ makes in our own lives. How we see ourselves, each other, the world, the future, life, death, everything is different because Jesus lives, and lives with and among us today.

So we put out God's gracious invitation to turn back to him because of the gracious gift of God in Jesus. It is a blessing to be in his mission together with him.

So, church, *"How are you going today?"*

Are you leaving here led out by Jesus tired, having lost your energy, focus and purpose?

Disheartened, and disillusioned with each other?

Fearful for the future of your church?

Remember this little scene that we often overlook 40 days after Easter.

A small group of believers being blessed by Jesus even as he is taken from their line of sight.

In the very blessing of his disciples he leaves their sight. But because he is our ascended Lord, they and we, and Christians everywhere are all, and always, in his sight.

We are truly ***"Blessed to be his church"***

So this is *"Goodbye"* from me.

"Goodbye" which originally meant *"God be with you"*

I leave you as Bishop, the Synod delegates will leave the gathering of Synod, and all of you as God's people will leave your places of worship today to be led back to your lives in the world by Jesus, but we all go with his blessing.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"

And I can hear all God's people out there say: "Amen to that!"