



17 March 2023

## Easter Pastoral Letter to The Anglican Community of St Mark

Kia ora Whanau

Warm Greetings this Easter in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is Risen!

The truth of Easter remains constant and unchanged: by Jesus' Cross and Resurrection, God has defeated the powers of sin, conquered the dominion of darkness, and overcome death. This is the victory we celebrate on Easter and live into every day. We are Easter People!

The call and response of the Chris Tomlin song that became very popular during lockdown goes like this:

*"Do you feel the world is broken? We do. Do you feel the shadows deepen? We do. Do you wish that you could see it all made new? We do."* (Is He Worthy? Chris Tomlin, Andrew Peterson, Ben Shive)

We know from personal experience that we live in a broken, fragile and conflicted world. The part of Turkey devastated by earthquakes is now ravaged by floods. Putin pursues his despicable assault on Ukraine. The Church, especially in the Western World, continues to experience what might be considered a growing hostile environment. Barnabas Aid reported recently that Christians were killed in a church bombing in DR Congo, believers were slain in a church attack in Myanmar, and a church minister was burned to death in Nigeria.

The erosion of church unity continues. The decisions made by the Church of England last month to allow the blessing of same sex unions has caused deep sadness, pain and grief across the Anglican Communion. To many, this decision seems similar to that made in Aotearoa New Zealand by the General Synod / Te Hīnota Whānui (GSTHW). Amidst my anguished prayer for our church, I found joy in remembering your convictions for forming the Anglican Community of St Mark and I was filled with gratitude for you. Although your members are scattered across various ecclesiastical units, you have common convictions, charism and commitments: To build hope-filled churches in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

I feel very honoured to be part of the family as your Protector Bishop. I am here for your encouragement, to support you and advocate for you.



I felt led by the Spirit to bring you an Easter reassurance from Paul's letter to Ephesians.

*<sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, <sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength <sup>20</sup> he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 1:18-20.)*

Paul crafts this beautiful prayer for people he loved and respected. He prays that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened to know three things: hope, riches, and power.

The young Christians in Ephesians had received and embraced the Gospel but there were so much more riches that they could experience. That's the invitation for us also; to have our eyes opened to see the unshakable hope, the endless riches and the incomparable power available to us in the Gospel.

My world got a whole lot more focused recently. I now wear reading glasses that are making a huge difference to almost everything I do! I have been considering a spiritual perspective of this change in my life. When I look at the work of the church, I sometimes find it hard to see Christ and the truth of the Gospel can seem reduced to a blurry smudge. What difference does wearing 'Gospel lenses' make to the challenges we face today? I join in Paul's prayer that our eyes will be open to the hope, riches and power available "for us who believe".

In the diocese of Nelson, we are in a season of discernment seeking for clarity from the Holy Spirit as to the future direction of the church that will bring about Gospel growth and how to align ourselves to that. It is a big project that is taking a lot of effort. A while back when we lived in Christchurch, I decided it was time to cut down a tree and I tried doing that using a hand saw. After several blisters and a sore back, I sat exhausted on my lawn to recover. My neighbour saw me and suggested I borrow his chain saw. The difference was huge. I was reminded recently that, in Christ, we have access to His power that is so much greater than my own. This is the same power that raised Christ from the dead. (Ephesians 1: 19)

This Easter, I pray that you will experience this resurrection power in three ways:

Firstly, in the battles you face. It's easy for you (the ACM) to feel fragile, powerless, and surrounded by suspicion. No matter your current realities, which you do need to face, lean into the unshakable hope of God's completed work in Christ. When Israel was encircled by the Arameans, God opened Elisha's servant's eyes to the unseen spiritual reality before him. (2 Kings 6) Sometimes the anxiety of the current situation can be a veil across the supernatural work of God. Much of life involves spiritual battles which we are often oblivious to. The enemy works in whatever underhand way possible to distract and spread doubt and discouragement. Remember, the battles you face are not just about your situation. They are also a battle for the hearts and souls of people around you. May the Lord open your eyes to see the power available to you in the wars or battles you face.

Secondly, that our eyes would be opened to see the power of God's grace in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). I recently read a startling statistic by Barna group: 38% of pastors were thinking of quitting vocational ministry in the past year. Although yes, that was in the USA, and during COVID (2021), I've been deeply concerned about the burden upon church ministers and volunteers across our country. These burdens are putting a significant strain on their well-being and diminishing their vitality for ministry. It feels to me like we are living in a kind of wilderness where there are long distances to walk, in a harsh climate with little resources. This Easter, may God open your eyes to see his grace that is available for you, not only to endure through the wilderness in a non-anxious way, but also to flourish and sustain a lifetime of faithful ministry in the Gospel.

Finally, the power to change lives. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.* (Romans 1:16) I was in a Christian meeting recently where someone said, "There's not much we can do to reach a secular, post-Christian Society like New Zealand. All we can do is to be nice." I immediately thought, if that is true, there is no hope! How tragic it would be if we lost confidence in the power of the gospel to change lives. I pray for you as Paul prayed for the Ephesians, that your spiritual eyes be opened to see the power accessible to all who believe. The power that raised Jesus from death. Believing that, will lead to renewed confidence to do work in His name and you will continue to see the power of the Gospel transforming your lives and the lives of those you bring to Jesus.

This Easter may your eyes be opened to see the hope, riches and power available to you. It is this hope of Resurrection that I commend us to lean into this Easter and beyond.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

In Christ, Our Risen Saviour and Hope

→ Steve

Bishop Steve  
Protector Bishop Anglican Community of St Mark

