



Christian! Death cannot hurt you! Death is your best friend – who is commissioned by Christ to summon you from the world of vanity and woe, and from a body of sin and death – to the blissful regions of glory and immortality, to meet your Lord, and to be forever with Him.

May 12th The Shofar The Ascension

while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. Amen

One of the strange realities burdening the world today is the absence of a saviour. Jesus is long gone and, it would seem, so has the source for the forgiveness of sins, the transformation of lives and the chance to find peace on earth and a meaning for living.

While God is no longer in the forefront of our living and planning, it would seem that the divine has not yet been successfully replaced, by a force or person, able to do the multitude of things the God of the Bible has been doing from the time of creation onwards.

As one of my favourite authors wrote: *Do we wander aimlessly along a vague dirt track signposted by the black stump of dead faith, winding through a desert strewn with the bones of lost belief?* (**John Carroll**).

For Carroll and others, there is something innate in human beings that leads us to be searching for a saviour, to find someone or something that will illuminate the way forward to a fullness of life. People yearn for an alternative to our modern world of unbelief. This is evidenced in census figures and other data showing how a growing percentage of the population consider themselves to be spiritual but avoid association with established religion.

What is a Saviour?

A saviour is a person who knows the mystery of life, who comes among us as one who holds the keys to a good life, to a life illustrating the way all men and women should be living to find the illusive “good life.” That *good* life has been the quest of philosophers and theologians from the very beginning of time.

Our saviour is one whose life illustrates the faith that he or she preaches. People are able to see in their words and their actions, the fullness of life for which all people yearn. They offer a glimpse of a life that extends beyond the mortal, of what life could be like.

Such a person draws to himself or herself others who are themselves searching for meaning to life, for the existence of something beyond the moral life we are living in the present.

This is most likely the main source of unbelief. While creeds may be preached and theological insights taught from our pulpits, little positive evidence is seen and experienced beyond mere words.

This is why Jesus made such an imprint onto our lives. He may be long gone, but all he represented and proclaimed is still fundamental to our thinking, our legal structures, our language and our history. That which he represents, the vision and hope he espoused is still there. The longing for immortality, something beyond our final breaths still expresses itself in our world.

Since the beginning of the last century, we have tried a wide range of possible replacements for our Saviour Jesus Christ, but none of them has endured. We have tried everything – Marxist, existentialism, communism, atheism, the contemporary Social Justice theories and a whole lot more. None have produced enduring results leaving us with unfulfilled and empty promises.

One of our difficulties is the way most people in the West have full lives. What we are required to be doing is building a life that offers fun while at the same time diminishes that which distresses us. We strive to achieve the respect and love of others, build a family, and belong to a community of some kind. Life should be one of growing prosperity in which our esteem in the mind of others grows and showers us with the blessings the world around us. This is the narrative we hear in our funeral services today. The eulogy has become more important than the prayers of committal or the plea for divine mercy on the soul of the person who has died.

Life is short and then there is...?

These lives are composed of surface pleasures and are supported by the quest for more things to come in the future. Our hope comes from our quest for satisfaction and not from self-reflection. More and

more of the material paints a picture of a successful and happy life but not necessarily a life filled with joy. We live longer but for what? We even manage to avoid speaking of death or other human frailties.

Unbelief is not seen as a burden and modern minds remain sceptical about anything that cannot be measured; unless they can *put my fingers into the holes the nails made, and my hand into the wound in his side*. There is no room for any grand, overarching spiritual structures of meaning. Life simply is what it is, and what we can make of it while we are alive.

But then along comes some disaster, something that shakes our contentment and our confidence in our ability to maintain control our lives. It does not take much to undermine that sense of being in possession of all we need. Birth, death, catastrophes of one kind or another, physical or spiritual, life ending or just some new insight into our fragility.

Certainty then becomes doubt; black and white merges to form a confusing grey; the absurd suddenly becomes possible, futility takes over and our anxiety grows. With a fragile hold on life our philosophies no longer offer the consolation and peace they proclaimed.

Unbelief thus becomes the scourge of life in the West. Without a higher divinity having oversight of human living, we are reduced to a reliance on what others can provide for us or we can do on our own.

What new philosophies cannot do is answer, satisfactorily, the great questions every generation of human asks: what is the meaning of life? Why are we here? What happens when we die? What can we use as a guide to the way we should be living?

Everything we are is by chance?

Without God, life and everything in it becomes a kind of lottery. Our birth comes about by the accidental joining of cells. We have no say in the society, nation or historical time of our birth. We could be born in a time of war or a time of peace and prosperity. All by chance. We live in suburbs, meet potential friends and find work through a series of accidental encounters. Even our genetic composition comes together by chance. In the lottery of life we could end up with inherited diseases, a face made for movies or a height perfect for baseball. Not our doing.

Without God, life bumps along through a series of chance encounters and opportunities that can make or break us. How did we meet that significant other? What brought me together in contact with that person who becomes my best friend or mate? So much comes down to sheer luck, an opportunity available at the moment and grasped before it moves on. As Macbeth observed...*life's but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more*.

We need to believe

We Christians have the answers to life's meaning in the person, teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is our saviour and our messiah. In Jesus the great questions are answered: death is not death at all.

In the imitating of Jesus we find ourselves on the pathway to meaning now in this life and salvation in the life beyond the grave. He leads us to a life of virtue, one in which we can, with humility, find the forgiveness of sins and the opportunity to begin again. The way to the future grows out of the manner in which we live in Christ in the present. His life is a testimony to all we are expected to be and to because. We are baptised into his Body and the more we strive to make that a reality, the clearer our way forward becomes.

Christ lives in us just as we live in Christ. It is his spirit which empowers us and enlightens us. He walks with us and it is through faith we are aware of him. But it is Jesus with us who provides the meaning to life and meaning in the midst of whatever life throws up.

Jesus, Risen and Ascended

The reality of the Ascension is that it is God's guarantee that we have alongside of the Father, a Son who has offered the perfect sacrifice, a sacrifice making us acceptable to God the Father – sinners though we may be. That is the answer to the meaning of life. Where Jesus has gone, we too are invited to follow. He is the firstborn of the dead and we follow after him. We know the way we should be living because the Way is both the person proclaiming it and the one illuminating it by both his life and his death.

The Ascension highlights what God is doing today. In the Son enthroned alongside of (Him) we have someone we can approach, someone to whom we can offer our prayers and intercessions knowing we will be heard. The rainbow in the sky was a reminder **to God** that he had vowed never again to destroy the earth by a flood. The enthroned Jesus is our guarantee that the Father reaches out to us and