

ASCENSION SUNDAY

13th May 2018

Acts 1:1-11

Rev John Barr



Sophie Zawistowska is a Polish Catholic who gets caught up in a German raid against suspected anti-Nazi elements in occupied Poland during World War Two. Sophie and her two children, Eva and Jan, are detained and then transported to Auschwitz where Sophie has to face a vile, horrendous, unimaginable choice.

Sophie's story is based on real life events and is has been published as a novel by William Styron and later made into a film starring Meryl Streep.

When Sophie arrives in the concentration camp she tells the doctor, who examines them, that they are loyal Polish Christians who speak fluent German. Realizing Sophie could be useful, the authorities listen and, in an effort to make a deal, a so-called concession is made. Sophie is given the choice of having to surrender only one of her children to the gas chamber. The other may live.

Sophie agonizes in absolute torment. How can a mother possibly make such a choice? Sophie pleads that she can't. *"I can't choose, I can't choose"* she pleads. Then, as the order is given for both children to be taken, Sophie is suddenly forced to yield. Thinking that the older Jan has a better chance of surviving the camp, Sophie releases her younger daughter to be snatched away.

(2)



On this Mother's Day, indeed, at any time, the agony and the anguish of a child being ripped away from their mother's arms is simply unimaginable.

Here in Australia our history is stained with the forced separation of young children from their mothers. This took place in name of so-called "protectionism" and the need to "assimilate" young aboriginal children into dominant white society. If you ever doubt the "stolen generations" I simply ask that you talk to Aboriginal people and hear their stories. You will be shattered as I was when, many years ago I was in ministry in the New England region of NSW and had close contacts with indigenous communities in places including Tingha, Inverell and Moree.

And then there was the post-war child migration scheme when some 7,000 British children were shipped to Australia to build up the then perceived need to bolster the Anglo population in the wake of World War Two. Here children, who had been forcibly taken from their mothers, mostly at the time of birth because of illegitimacy, broken homes and poverty, were released from overcrowded institutions and put on boats to Australia. Their grieving mothers were often told their children had died.

Such torment and heartbreak caused by the horrific separation of mother and child eventually led Sophie Zawistowska to suicide. She simply could not cope with such an overwhelming sense of grief, sadness and loss. For many Aboriginal mothers, their experience of having their children seized and taken away left them with an acute sense of despair and overwhelming loss. Their pain has been so strong, so intense and so deep, that many are unable speak about it.

(3)



For those mums in Britain, who were told their children had either died after childbirth or had been adopted out, there is a sense of anger and even rage. In this case mothers were often lied to by the authorities as their offspring ended up as wards of the state here in Australia where they were institutionalized and, in many cases, subjected to terrible abuse.

The forced separation of mother and child is surely one the most confronting, unimaginable, unspeakable, terrifying things that can ever happen. Indeed, the experience of separation from anyone with whom we hold a close bond and a real love, whether it be a partner, a sibling, a friend or a colleague, is one of the most painful things we will ever encounter.

And separation can be sudden. It can be intense, distressing and sad. Separation can be traumatic and long-lasting. It can be with us every day of our lives. Yet separation is a fact of life. On days like today, when we celebrate gift of mothers and motherhood, we become acutely aware of such things.

With this in mind, I wonder how Jesus' followers felt when, as we read today in the Acts of the Apostles, that Jesus was "lifted up" and taken away from them by a cloud?

In what is referred to as the Ascension of Christ, the apostles are confronted with a real experience of separation. After 40 days, days that formed what were the intense, turbulent, tumultuous events of Easter, Jesus is taken from his friends. Jesus is raised on high and disappears from their sight.

The apostles must have been baffled, bewildered, mystified and quite troubled as their Lord, crucified and now risen from the dead, is taken from them.

(4)

For, here the One who they witnessed praying his heart out in the garden, the One they saw brutally executed on a cross, the One they encountered on the road to Emmaus, the One who stood among them with the words “Peace be with you” now disappears from their sight.

How do we deal with this? How do you manage when something that is very profound and special to you disappears? How do you manage when someone that you love is taken from you?

Separation is a scary, rather unsettling thing. Separation is to be detached and disconnected. Separation involves being split, severed or cut-off. And in many instances separation is final. It’s terminal. We can’t do anything about it. There’s no going back.

But, friends, it’s important to look at the text in Acts and to consider what Jesus says just before he ascends. Here Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit that will come in *“not many days from now”*. Here Jesus assures his followers that the Spirit of God will, shortly, be unleashed with power in the world.

Friends, this is significant. It’s very significant because Jesus is effectively saying his absence today is not the end of things. Separation, in Jesus’ case, does not involve severance, it does not involve disconnection, it does not involve an ending to things. Separation in Jesus’ case is not terminal.

Rather, the separation that we observe in the Ascension is a precursor to another event that we celebrate next week at Pentecost!

The separation we encounter today is an antecedent to the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is a forerunner to the coming of a living, universal presence - that is the active, empowering, life-giving Spirit of Christ in world.

In other words, what is happening here is effectively a transition, it’s a progression as the earthly Jesus, who is bound by physicality, space and time, engages with the world at Pentecost in a new and active way.

This new and active way is inclusive of all those who believe. This new and active way knows no boundaries, no limits, no barriers as the Good News is proclaimed beyond Jerusalem *“to the ends of the earth”*. And this goes on to the give birth to the universal Christian church as we know it today.

(5)

So when we speak of separation, we are not entering into a blind alley or a dead end. We are not encountering the end of the story.

Today, on this Ascension Sunday, Jesus becomes physically absent from his friends. But next week, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus becomes present in a new, dynamic way that cannot be restricted or contained. Jesus becomes present in a new, dynamic way that cannot be disconnected or cut-off.

And you see, this is the amazing thing about the Jesus we proclaim. Separation never has the last word. Endings are not part of the vocabulary. There are no dead ends!



Rather, at Pentecost we are assured Jesus is always with us. The spirit of the risen Christ is gifted to each and every one of us to nurture, encourage, sustain and equip us to be God's people in the world.

So, it's important to cease staring into space looking for Jesus. Those apostles, who witnessed the Ascension, were left gazing towards heaven and were subsequently confronted with the void that is separation. But this is not the end of the story. When it comes to Jesus, separation never has final word. For Jesus is with us every day, Jesus is with now.

Whatever you do, don't get stuck on that mountain top looking for Jesus. The void is closed, the separation is breached as the spirit of the risen Christ is alive and active in the world today.

As many of you know, I like to rise early in the morning to work in my study. As I do, I often look out into pre-dawn darkness anticipating the first orange tinges of daybreak. It's my favourite time of day, and for me, there is a story here.

For just as the rays of the rising sun pierce the void of the pre-dawn darkness, so does the spirit of the risen Christ pierce the voids in our lives to give us hope and direction.

(6)

As a people chosen and called by God, don't allow the voids, the gaps and the uncertainties that you, your community and indeed the church faces today, dictate your journey in faith.

Don't allow declining numbers on Sunday mornings or controversial issues that may cut to very bone of what is dear to you, sour your faith. Don't allow seemingly impossible tasks or, indeed, the reality of a community around us where God simply doesn't seem to rate anymore, blunt your commitment.

For what matters most is that on this day, Ascension Sunday, we proclaim Jesus has ascended on high. Here Jesus is Lord. And, as I said last week, it's not about us and it's not about what we need or want. It's never about us. Rather, it's all about Jesus – and it always will be.

And, as we celebrate this Ascension Sunday and then move onto Pentecost, we proclaim there are no voids, there are no gaps and there are no dead ends. For Jesus is one with us in spirit. Jesus is one with us in spirit to show us the way, to take us on the journey, to nurture and empower us, and to assure us that in every circumstance Jesus is there.

Let us pray:

Risen, ascended Jesus, be with us now to guide us, to nurture us and to show us the way. For you are Lord and it is to you that commit ourselves now and always, Amen.

