

Treasure in clay jars

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 2 June 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 2B

2 Corinthians 4; 5-12; Psalm 139: selected verses; Mark 2: 23-3:6

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

The writings of Paul tend to get a bad rap in progressive Christian circles. He gets the blame for the subjugation of women, the rejection of queer people and the affirmation of slavery. He is seen as a conservatising force, taking the early church away from the radical message of Jesus and turning that message into something more palatable to conservative Roman culture and thus enabling its spread.

Some of that critique is certainly appropriate to the second century writings, such as the pastoral epistles of Timothy and Titus ascribed to Paul by much later writers. However, parts of Paul's writings reveal a radical thinker, capable of reframing the reforming Judaism of his upbringing into an entirely new faith – a faith moreover informed by his own experiences of persecution and imprisonment. Today's passage invites Paul's readers to a number of fresh perspectives on God, creation, and the purpose of life, that continue to challenge our own thinking today. Let's look at some of it a little more closely.

For it is the God who said, *'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.* Wow – that might be enough to contemplate for a few years just on its own! What's Paul trying to say?

Firstly, he is identifying God as the God who has been involved in human history and the history of the planet from the very beginning, referencing the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, where God says, *'let there be light'*. When Paul wrote that, human history was relatively young, and human understanding of the length and complexity of evolution from the first beginnings of the universe non-existent. It was a radical statement then, but much more so now for us.

The light that was in the beginning – the uncreated light as the Orthodox teach us – has now *'shone in our hearts'*. The scale of this is mind-blowing when we take a moment to receive it. The infinite complexity of God expressed over aeons as light, is now in our hearts. And that light is there to give us knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Again, it's the contrast of scale that stuns – the glory of God, that shekinah from which Moses turned his face in fear of his life; that infinite luminosity of the divine, is to be encountered in a human face – the face of Jesus, the Christ – and consequently in the face of every one of us who is found, in Paul's term, 'in Christ'.

This is a huge claim – and Paul knows it! Which is why he goes on to say:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

For while we may be in Christ, and in that sense become ourselves light for the world, our shortcomings are clear enough. On the one hand, as the psalm proclaims, we are ‘*fearfully and wonderfully made*’ – but on the other hand we know that there are plenty of cracks in our incarnate bodies. We are clay jars – earthy, vulnerable.

Earlier in the year Kerry Holland offered us many clay jars for our contemplation, each of them unique and beautiful. Each of them also fragile; many with cracks that widen as the clay dries out – cracks that allow the passage of light even as they reveal weakness; cracks that help us understand that it is exactly when we feel at our least beautiful and capable that God’s light shines through us.

Paul knew this from personal experience, which is why he writes,

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

Now for the most part, here in relatively free and safe Australia, these words don’t resonate as they would in some parts of our world. However, events in recent months, and the general state of the world give them a power they didn’t have even twelve months ago. Most of us feel less secure and more vulnerable to attack of various kinds than we did. There is a hardening of opinion on all sides of politics and faith.

For example, those of us deeply committed to climate justice are finding ourselves discounted and even trolled not just by the conservative voices, whether Christian or secular that we have learnt over years to ignore, but increasingly by a hard secularist left that is inclined to blame the ills of the world on religion. Our more progressive stance is not saving us from their ire. They are no longer patient with what they perceive as the falsehoods of faith. We are finding ourselves the jam in this sandwich – and its dynamic can be seen across a range of issues dear to our hearts here at Pitt St, whether around Aboriginal justice, queer matters, refugees, homelessness, mental health or many other concerns of truth and justice.

Conservatives attack us for radical ideas; radicals attack us for our association with ideas they perceive as outdated and harmful.

So how are we to respond?

Part of me would like just to bury my head ostrich like in the sand, and hope that everything will just calm down and go away. Maybe you feel like that too sometimes. But it’s not going to go away, and unless those of us with some breadth of understanding and wisdom around human nature continue to express a different viewpoint, matters will simply become more polarised. It is also very hard when faced with attack to avoid the twin temptations of retaliation and self-justification. But resist them we must, and Paul expresses this clearly when he writes:

For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

Paul is not just referring to physical death, though it was certainly dangerous being a Christian in those early decades. We are '*always being given up to death*' he writes, so what is intended is the spiritual death of ego and self-reliance that is a continuous process as we mature in faith. This is the kind of death that is life affirming and transformative and provides a different and ultimately more life-giving response to the attacks and trials we encounter in our life and faith. It is a response that Paul recognised in another place when he wrote: '*do everything in such a way that the divine can be revealed through it.*'

Stephanie Dowrick in her book *Seeking the Sacred* expresses it well,

*Dying to the limitations in the way you usually see yourself; living to the call and the strengths of the soul; daring to open to our inner beauty and strengths: that is spiritual transformation.*¹

We live in a time of enormous global change, and with all the tensions that accompany such shifts in humanity's sense of itself and of what matters. Paul lived in a similar époque and his insight, insight gained through lived experience of trial and difficulty, can help us as we work out how to respond in ways that will bring fresh life and hope to our world.

We cannot run away; we must not attack or justify ourselves; we need by gentle practice to let go of those instincts of the ego, and in Stephanie's words: *surrendering, discovering what is already there, what we already have, who and what we already are.*

'You wander' says the poet Rumi: *'from place to place.*

You hunt for a necklace of diamonds.

*It is already around your neck.*²

With the psalmist and with Paul we could go further and say: it is already in the very cells of our body and being for we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

In our 'clay jars' the light of God shines, that has the power to illuminate this struggling world and bring peace.

What is asked of us is trust and the courage to live all our life in such a way that the divine can be seen through it. Amen

¹ *Seeking the Sacred: Transforming our View of Ourselves and One another* – Stephanie Dowrick pub. Allen and Unwin p.322

² *ibid* 325