

Weak, but strong

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 7 July 2024

A Reflection by Rev Christian Hohl, German Lutheran Church, Sydney.

Pentecost 7B

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10; Mark 61-13

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

Dear fellow Christians,

(1) Apostle, Weak and Meek.

St. Paul writes: "*I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*"

There are lots of people who enjoy to be a thorn in the flesh of someone. Yesterday, a British politician told us that he wants to be just that. There is another politician who always speaks about division. It seems to be his favourite subject for he is good at divisions. But Paul calls this thorn *a messenger of Satan, to torment me*. So why should a Christian person want to be this thorn?

For Paul, it is a torment that keeps him from boasting. And as we learn from 29 chapters of letters to the Corinthians, boasting was some issue in Corinth. And strength. And eloquence. And better spiritual gifts. And leadership. In summary, Paul was regarded as lacking this leadership, the cajoling rhetoric, the gifts of speaking in tongues, this strength. Not by all, but by a number of people in his congregation.

His congregation. For Paul had founded the Christian Church of Corinth. Then others had come in, an eloquent sophistic bloke from Alexandria, called Apollos. Then admirers of the Apostle Peter, who wanted to force everybody under a restrictive rule of the Jewish Law. In comparison, Paul was a good epistle writer but not so much a good speaker. They were strong and he was weak. They wouldn't even call him an apostle.

You know those people who keep on telling us how much better they are? How much cleverer? And in order to achieve their self-esteem they have to subdue and belittle others.

They are, in fact, smaller than us for they need us as a pedestal. They need to stand on our shoulders.

Now, Paul did have health issues. This thorn has often been interpreted as a migraine. Happy who doesn't know what this is! He then had problems with his eyesight so that the congregations in Galatia would have loved to give him their eyes. Not only lend him an ear. Perhaps, the problems were due to the tortures he had endured on behalf of Christ.

Yet, are people with health issues less worth? Are elderly people less worth? Are weak people less worth? Are individuals who do not fit in the mainstream less worth? Just because they are different?

A Reflection by Rev Christian Hohl: a Minister of the (United) Church in the Rhineland.

Sunday 07 July, 2024. Pentecost 7B

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For five years, I have been walking the CBD of Sydney. Our church, the German Martin-Luther-Kirche, is just 750 meters away from here. And whenever I come past this church I read about the issues that really matter in our society: First Nations People, inclusiveness, Save the Planet.

Not everybody likes your outspokenness. I overheard a warning recently, that you might be too much engaged in anything but the Christian Gospel. Well, that's not on me to decide. But we have a few people in my congregation who love to live their lives (or lies) without addressing these questions. They deny climate change and love coal, they respect the Indigenous people as long as they are neither seen nor heard. For them, the Voice movement was just as divisive as Mister Division wanted it. "*Why pay more respect to the Aboriginal people who fill the prisons and their throats?*"

I feel we all can learn from Paul. He was an apostle. He was outspoken. He could have joined in the chorus of the boasting self-praisers, since he was from the finest Jewish background, he had endured more than anybody else for his faith, and he had this spooky revelation directly out of Eden, of Paradise.

But he felt that this would distract from the message: We are not called to praise ourselves but the Lord Jesus, He has given his life for each and every one of us, so that nobody, no single individual in this church, nor outside on the streets, nor out in the country can be called hopeless or hapless.

Everyone counts in the eyes of Jesus. God has become our brother on eye level. And the gospels tell us over and over again that he has come especially for the sick and the weak. Or rather, the lost, the last, the least people.

Now, Paul is at pains to be accepted as an apostle, but one for all, the Jews and the Palestinians of his times (Samaritans!), the Romans and the Greek. But he works for the glory of God and remains himself weak and meek. For Christ's power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, Paul delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2) Exploited by Coal and Co (alitions).

Dear brothers and sisters, wouldn't you love to hear from Paul's experience when he *was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things*. Well first of all, how can I tell you inexpressible things? Secondly, Paul didn't boast with them either. And thirdly, have you ever thought about living in paradise yourselves? All right, just now, it's too cold. Then again, the sun beams unrelenting down on us. Bushfires and floods endanger our lives and properties. If we can afford "property".

Many other nations envy our extraordinary nature, the koalas and the kangaroos: They just don't know that they are here seen as pests. That they are brought to the brink of extinction. Those people love the gum trees we cut for the cattle. They love the beaches we are losing to the rising ocean. They love the sun that shines more than in most other places – they would love to use it for their solar energy back home. They love the winds and their potential for wind turbines.

They travel to the lovely Hunter Valley for wine and wilderness. And then they discover the huge coal mines. They are shocked about the nuclear tests in the outback and cannot believe that someone would start this again. They read about the “Black Summer” that actually lasted more than seven months. They saw the koalas crying and dying. But they don’t know that we are speaking about 3 billion victims in the animal world. They book journeys to the Great Barrier Reef and are disappointed about the bleached colours.

There was a movie issued some years ago: “*La La Land*” (2016). It’s about the ambition to become famous in L.A., in Los Angeles, in Hollywood. It’s all about careers and authenticity, love and failure. There was a similar show in the Great Barrier Reef three years ago. Diplomatic staff from countries all over the world were shown the beauty of the Reef. A publicity event to save the Reef’s reputation. A lot of money spent in order to avoid bad press, money and energy that could have helped to save the Great Barrier Reef from becoming a bleached and dying “*Ley Ley Land*”.

Just as Jesus experienced that, “*A prophet is not without honour except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home*”, this seems to apply to our paradise, too.

In Genesis, it says: “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*” That calls not for exploitation, but for good carers and custodians. They are the true and caring relatives to the land, sea, and sky. As Saint Francis addressed the earth, the sun, the moon, the rivers, and the fire as his mother, brother and sisters. So will Jesus address everyone who listens to him? He called them siblings and such people who care and become custodians.

(3) And here they are, dear fellow Christians:

Blak, loud and proud. (NAIDOC-Week theme). We acknowledge them, or do we, as the original custodians of land. We seek reconciliation and respect. We want to learn from them to care for what is entrusted into our hands. Not to exploit or even destroy it. We want to dream along with them and to feel the beauty and the warmth of this continent. We want to live in harmony with the nature that surrounds us. We hope and strive for unity in this country so that nobody, and especially no peoples are left behind.

These are good objectives, no doubt. But without our spiritual source we run out of water and dehydrate in our souls. We need a relentless spirit which for us is the Holy Spirit, the Creator Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Whether “it” appears like a dove or like a snake? Or like a rainbow? (Rainbow Spirit Theology, Adelaide 2007)

But this Spirit of God is wasted, Jesus’ ministry is wasted, God’s creation is wasted when we do not use the spiritual gifts in order **to heal** the world, the land, the nation. To find harmony and unity in God, respecting everybody, every creature, every element as our brothers and sisters whom we care for. “*Keep the Fire Burning!*”

Paul’s mission was to everybody. He was a Jew to the Jews, a Gentile to the Gentiles, a weak one in order to win the weak. (1Corinthians 9). Because in our faith, there is no difference between people of different nations, of different social status, of different sexes: The baptism has made us one in Christ. (Galatians 3)

That's why Paul is not boasting, but weak and meeek. That's why we have to cry out for those without voice and without recognition. To give them back their pride and honour. That's why we need ears to hear their loud cries, and for their needs we need eyes.

And when some of us feel they are nevertheless forgotten, lost, alone. And when some of us feel they do not have enough strength to walk on, then let us remember the words of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was killed by the regime because he had helped the Jewish fugitives to escape and he was ready to risk his life for peace and justice. Just as he had said from the beginning that the church must not simply "*bandage the victims under the wheel but jam a spoke in the wheel itself.*" (Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage, April 1933)

Bonhoeffer lived up to this, lived for the victims. And I think, that is our prophetic task, too. What fugitives, what oppressed people do we need to help?

Waiting for his ordeal, Bonhoeffer wrote a special creed for himself and for his fellow prisoners that contains the following words, which in my view resemble Paul's theology:

"I believe that God will give us in each state of emergency

as much power of resistance as we need. But he will not give in advance,

*so that we do not rely on ourselves but on **him alone**.*

Through such faith all anxiety concerning the future should be overcome."

(1943, in: Letters and Papers from Prison)

Or in Paul's words: *When I am weak, then I am strong.* For Christ is in me. Amen.

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.