

CHALLENGES AHEAD!

Sunday 10th June 2018

2 Corinthians 4:13- 5:1

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If there is one person I would really like to meet when I get to heaven, its St Paul. He is such an intriguing person, passionate, brilliant and controversial. Paul together with his dedicated followers managed to penetrate the sophisticated and most powerful pagan world of the Mediterranean with the message concerning a crucified Jewish Messiah who was raised from the dead. Here Paul, against incredible odds, laid the foundation of the Christian church that we know today.

What's particularly intriguing for me is the way Paul and his followers got the message across, in the midst of controversy, hostility and persecution.

Some prefer to think of Paul as a so-called misogynist who taught women must not speak in church and that they must be subject to their husbands in home. And then there is Paul's apparent endorsement of slavery.

Meanwhile Paul's teaching on sexual ethics is a continuing point of controversy particularly when it comes to homosexuality. Many read Paul as condemning homosexual practices forthwith while others claim Paul is more concerned about relationships that exploit and abuse. Such a view suggests the quality, the sincerity and the degree of commitment expressed in such relationships was the point rather than the gender differences of those involved.

Then, in his correspondence with the church in Corinth, Paul says women who grow their hair long bring glory upon themselves. Here Paul also commands women to cover their heads by wearing veils during worship. Men, on the other hand, who chose to grow their hair long are said to degrade themselves while men who cover their heads while praying and prophesizing are said to be a disgrace (1 Corinthians 11: 1-16).

How are we to interpret this teaching today? It seems that Paul is a pretty difficult fellow to really get one's head around at times!

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Indeed, with some extensive discussion going on at the moment in the community and the church about marriage, the reality is that Paul really saw marriage as a bit of decoy. Paul seemed too busy for such things as he says in 1 Corinthians 7:18:

“to the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

Then on women and slavery, Paul seems to be quite out of step. Today we value freedom and equality. But in Paul’s day there was little or no such things. It was a man’s world and a huge percentage of the population were classified as slaves.



The truth of the matter is that Paul was walking a tight rope. As a Jew with virtually no real civic profile, Paul didn’t intend to spark a social revolution or provoke a radical movement of reform aimed at destabilising places like Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. Rather Paul’s intent was to focus on deeper more critical matters that went beyond far the reform of society to centre on the “rescue” or “salvation” of humankind.

Here Paul was deeply committed to liberating people from those forces which cut people off and left them estranged from God. Paul was incredibly passionate about the offering Good News that gave hope where there was no hope, peace where there was no peace, and life where there was no life.

And here the important thing to remember is that Paul was absolutely convinced Jesus was the Son of God. Paul was unequivocal that Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, came to heal our estrangement from God, reconcile us to our Creator and offer us a fullness and richness of life that is truly reflected the image of God that is in every one of us.

For Paul, nothing else mattered. Absolutely nothing. And Paul threw himself into this with enormous zeal and with great passion. Just listen to Paul’s words as he writes to the church in Corinth:

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1. Corinthians 1:18).

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Friends, when I encounter Paul in the New Testament I see a person who is totally committed to each and every one of us knowing Christ and being reconciled with our God. I meet a person who is convinced Jesus is Lord and that is Jesus who we must trust and obey. I see a person who is incredibly strong in faith and who is willing to stake everything on that faith, even to the point of losing his life.

I encounter a follower of Jesus whose zeal and passion for the truth of the Gospel is so intense and so infective that he influenced some of the greatest Christian leaders in history including St Augustine, Martin Luther and John Wesley.

Friends, for this reason, we cannot afford to overlook or ignore Paul and his incredible witness. Rather than trying to analyse every precise detail of Paul's writing it's important to grasp the bigger picture.

For example in the case of Paul's letter to the Romans and his condemnation of certain sexual activities, I believe Paul is addressing the human condition as a whole where the focus is on self and self-fulfilment rather than on God and what God intends. And this is a matter that should not be isolated to any one part of the community, to any particular people or to any certain sexual orientation. Friends, it's a matter for all of us!

In the case of Paul's reference to slavery, I believe the real issue Paul is on about is the freedom that is granted to every person in Christ. This is a freedom for those who are slaves and for those who are free. It's a liberation that cannot be impeded, obstructed, defined or restricted by any human institution.

Here there is a bigger picture as, in the case of Paul's teaching on women and on Paul's difficult reference to appropriate headwear. Early Christian communities were often influenced many philosophic trends, a multitude of competing social forces and a plethora of new religious obsessions. Controversies, quarrels and disputes menaced the church. They threatened to destabilise the Christian community.



My understanding is that Paul was most likely playing to the status-quo here with the intention of promoting the unity and harmony of God's people while ensuring an effective loving, caring witness to place to all.

And so to our reading today.

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Like so much of what Paul writes, this passage needs to be teased out and carefully reflected on. At first glance it may appear Paul is offering some kind of teaching on the immortality of the soul with his reference to an *“earthly tent”* that is *“destroyed”* and a heavenly home *“not made with hands”*.

But this is not the case. Here we need to look at what Paul is saying with his reference to our *“outer nature”* and our *“inner nature”* together with Paul’s reference to *“what can be seen”* and *“what cannot be seen”*.

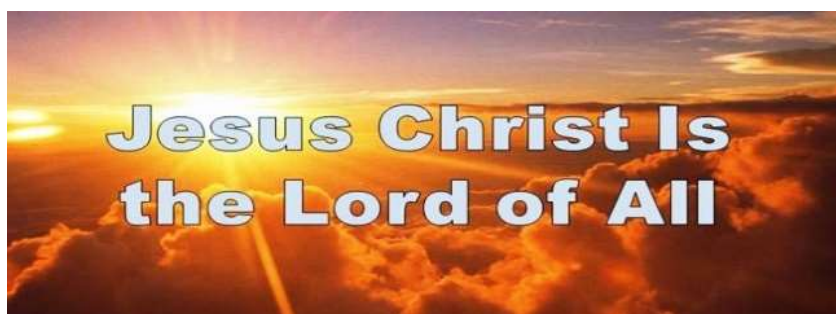
These are important references. Rather than setting up a distinction between this earthly life and the heavenly life to come, rather than setting up a division or a tension between the body and the spirit, Paul is saying earth and heaven co-exist. Body and spirit cannot be placed into two distinct realms.

Rather, the spirit of God, the salvation that is in Christ, the joy of being reconciled to our Creator is alive and working in that *“unseen”* part of our *“inner natures”*. And this *“unseen”*, *“inner nature”* is an integral part of who we are in body, mind and spirit.

In other words, Paul’s message, Paul’s understanding of the Gospel, indeed, Paul’s commitment to being a follower of Jesus, is an all-embracing one that touches every aspect of life.

It’s not *“pie in the sky after die”* stuff where we are to simply tolerate, where we are to just put-up with this earthly life in order to experience the rewards and joys of a heavenly life after death.

Rather, the fact that Jesus died and was raised from the dead for our salvation is a pivotal truth that is to impact on us every day. The fact that Christ reigns as our sovereign Lord in order that we may be rescued, healed and made whole is a decisive truth that enables us to, here right now, know God and live in relationship with God.



Friends, Paul calls for nothing less than a total commitment to Jesus Christ. Paul calls for a Christ-centred life where our *“inner nature”*, the true essence of who we are, is open to the life-giving healing power of God’s spirit.

Paul calls for a witness that looks beyond the shenanigans, the mischief and the villainy of the world in which we live to embrace the eternal truths of the Gospel that involve righteous living and a commitment to justice, mercy and peace. Here we are summoned to a life that both embodies and lives out, in every way, the unconditional love of God.

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So, as we ponder our own lives and as we consider the issues that confront us as a church, spend some time reading Paul's letters to the early church.

And as you do, don't get bogged down in the difficult, complicated and often bewildering details of what Paul is sometimes on about. Rather, embrace the big picture where we are saved and made whole in Jesus Christ, where life, and life in all its fullness, is God's gift to us through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

In four week's time the Triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church will convene in Melbourne. On the agenda are a number of matters including a response to the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, the challenge of domestic violence and a conversation on Indigenous sovereignty. There will also be a landmark statement encouraging action and advocacy on climate change and discussion on a consultation process regarding voluntary assisted dying or euthanasia. And there will be consideration of proposals on marriage and how the church understands it. This could lead to a decision to accept same-gender or same sex marriage within the church.

What do we make of these issues? Where do we stand?

Friends, as we journey through these next few months and as we face challenges set before the church today, I ask that you set your minds and actions within the context of that marvellous big picture Paul bears witness to. And that picture is one of joy in knowing Christ, it is one of hope in being assured God is always there for us, it is one of responsibility as we are called to be Christ to others, and it is one of celebration as the love, grace and mercy of God conquers all!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as you wrestle with the challenges, as some of you celebrate and as others of you don't really know what to think or do, feel uncomfortable or even angry and let down, remember Paul's big picture and consider why we are really here.

And, friends, I believe we here are to be the Body of Christ. We are here to be a loving, merciful, gracious People of God who are saved, redeemed and made whole by Jesus Christ - to be the church.

That's what it is all about - and let us never forget it!

Amen.

