**Sermons on 1 Timothy**

**Sept-Nov 2019**

**Pentecost 15**
**22/9/2019**

**1 Timothy 1:1-7, 18-19a; Psalm 16; Luke 16:1-9**

**Timotheic**

In a sentence:Scripture speaks of God’s honouring of us, and calls us to the honouring of God

‘Fake news’ has been no small part of the news over the last few years.

Whatever else can be said about it (not least that it is scarcely a new phenomenon), the most insidious form of fake news is that which we might have reason to believe is correct. It might not likely be believed that the candidate for election is a child-sacrificing Satanist, but be quite believable that he is philanderer or has manipulated some public process for personal gain. Believability is an important element of ‘useful’ or effective fake news. It has to be a report not only that we might want to believe but that we can believe.

We begin our reading of 1 Timothy today by considering the strong majority conclusion in critical scholarship that the letter was not written by Paul, and dates from perhaps as much as a century after Paul’s death (with a similar conclusion with respect to 2 Timothy and Titus). The reasons for this conclusion include the language in the letter, and the emphases and the context to which it seems to be written, all of which differ considerably from those in other letters of Paul.

Our point here this morning is not to test the theory – we’ll take it for granted. More important is to ask what it might mean for the reading of the letter and of the Scriptures as a whole. In particular, the question of authority presses forward – the authority first of the letter itself and then of a Bible which contains such fake news. For if it is fake, it may be untruth of that more dangerous type: close enough to what is possible that we might believe it to be true. There was a Timothy, and there was a Paul – a very, very important Paul. What that Paul might have said to that Timothy, then, is itself very, very important. It would seem to matter, then, whether or not Paul wrote this letter.

Indeed, this is a significant historical question, in the sense that historians are right to do the kinds of things historians do to establish as closely as possible what is the case about historical records.

Whether or not Paul wrote the letter, however, is not a very important theological question. For we must also take seriously the way in which the Scriptures are used in the Churches – or, at least, ought to be used. We noted, for example, that the prophet Hosea was not writing to us but to eighth century Israelites. We believe there to be continuities between ourselves and them but we also know that there are great differences. And so we ‘translate’ and ‘interpret’ in order that we might hear God speak to us in our own ‘here and now’. If it is Hosea we use, it is not quite Hosea we hear.

In the same way, if Paul did write to Timothy, he was not writing to us, and so we seek to read between the lines to understand more how Paul’s exchange with Timothy might matter to us. This is part and parcel of our not being in the ‘thick of things’ so far as the texts of the Scriptures are concerned.

The rumoured ‘fakeness’ of such a letter as Paul’s to Timothy – its ‘pseudonymity’ – is not, then, merely a ‘literary’ conclusion, as if the matter rested only on analysing the language and context for comparison to that of other letters in Paul. Rather, pseudonymity borders on being a theological requirement of a biblical text. This is because every text ceases to be what Paul said to Timothy or the Galatians or the Corinthians, and becomes a text addressed to us – independent of the historical personage of Paul.

All Scripture is, theologically, pseudonymous in this sense: we read it ‘as if’ we were the ones addressed by the text, and ‘as if’ our reading of the text is the address to us of the real or purported author. There is, then, a sense in which – as forgeries – the pastoral letters of Paul perfect the Scriptural principle. They demonstrate precisely what is required of us as we hear and speak the gospel: they write new Scripture from the authority of the old.

To suggest that Paul might not have written the Timothy letters (among others) is, then, simply to observe that the Bible itself already contains precisely the engagement with gospel truth that we ourselves enter into each time we open it. We read Scripture to discover what God might be saying to us here and now, and we see that the Bible itself contains texts which are doing just that. The pastoral letters are traces of how the gospel was already being addressed to a time and context quite different from that of its original speakers – Paul – and hearers, Timothy.

But in this these letters are crucial because, in the end, it is the ‘from…to’ address of Scripture which matters: ‘From Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God…to Timothy, loyal child in faith…’:

There is a hint about this in the name ‘Timothy’. While we are confident that Paul had an apprentice named Timothy, at this distance (that is, the distance between the man and his name appearing in the Scriptures), the very name ‘Timothy’ becomes more significant than the man himself. The name is a compound of two Greek words, the ‘Tim-’ meaning ‘honour’ (timé) and the ‘-thy’ meaning God (theos). Timothy is either ‘one who honours God’ or ‘one honoured by God’. (In the letter the name appears three times: at the very beginning (v.2), where Timothy is identified as the ‘to’ of the letter, at the end of the introductory section (1.18), and then at the very end of the letter (6.20) – ‘Guard, O Timothy, what has been entrusted to you’.)

It was an accident that the man Timothy had this name but it is useful for the purposes of reminding ourselves what the Bible is: it is a word about honour from God to the one addressed and about the honouring of God in return.

That two-way honouring has its content revealed in the opening chapter of the letter. First, there is God’s honouring in the gift: ‘Paul, sent by Christ Jesus, to Timothy, loyal child: grace…mercy…peace.’ The ‘to’ of Scripture always proposes this first, even in the wrath of the prophets. Grace, as mercy for peace, is the gospel regardless of the context.

And then, consequent upon the gift, is the exhortation, our honouring of God: rise, stand firm, ‘take hold of the eternal life to which you are called.’ This, too, is always present: the law by which the grace takes form. This is what the gift ‘looks like’.

Whether the ‘real’ Paul wrote this letter to the ‘real’ Timothy does not matter here. In the gift and in its consequence, we are all ‘Timothy’. We are honoured by God in grace, mercy and peace. And we are called to honour God: to take hold of eternal things in lives abounding in love which springs from purified hearts, cleared minds and sincere faith.

Let us, then, be ‘timothe-ic’. Let us live from God’s honouring of us, and live towards it in our honouring of each other, to God’s greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.

**Pentecost 17**
**6/10/2019**

**1 Timothy 1:12-17; Psalm 143; uke 17:1-10**

**The life which is really life**

In a sentence:True life is hidden from us until God reveals how we have gotten life wrong

In [one of our reflections on Hosea](http://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/7-july-on-being-a-better-sinner/) I suggested that most of us are lousy sinners: when it comes to sinning, we don’t do it very well.

Next to this, we’ve heard today that Paul (or, at least, the writer of this letter) is not susceptible to this charge, being the ‘foremost’ among sinners.

Yet, when Paul lists his faults, they are not especially impressive. Blasphemy, persecution and violence are certainly bad enough but in quantity and quality it would not be difficult to name a person or two who far exceeded Paul in these or other things; perhaps some such high achievers are sitting here among us today.

Paul holds these to be so heinous because they had to do with his active persecution of the church. More particularly, in the account of his conversion we have in Acts, a voice is heard out of blinding light: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (as distinct from ‘my church’; Acts 9.4). The voice identifies itself as the crucified and risen Jesus, the true object of Paul’s rage.

What makes Paul the foremost among sinners is not, then, ‘moral’ failings we might read into his behaviour. He does not violate this or that rule when he should have known better; he has stood against the crucified Lord.

In the account we have in 1 Timothy, Paul holds that it was ‘in ignorance’ that he did all this. The thing which matters for understanding sin and grace in proper relation, however, is that he did not know at that point what he did not know. His rage against the church was righteous so far as he and his supporters could see. He rejected – for good reason – the notion that the crucified Jesus, with the emphasis on ‘crucified’, could be the Christ. The least sympathetic critics, with Paul, read the crucifixion as proof that Jesus was a heretic.

And so the ‘ignorance’ of Paul’s actions is one of the key moments in our short passage today. The passion with which that unknowing was defended and forced upon others reveals something quite contrary to the assumption of our information- and knowledge-based culture today: the assumption that we can be confident that we are right about our rightness. It is at his pious best that Paul fails, without knowing it.

What shifted Paul from persecutor of Jesus to his champion was not reflection on the logic of belief, unbelief or heresy, or reason versus unreason; ignorance will not out.

What shifted Paul was being stopped in his tracks, confronted with a vision of God not only different but deeper and richer than he had known till then. It was only this which revealed his miscalculation of God and his lack of understanding of the breadth of God’s love and extent of God’s power.

Coming to terms with the new vision was not straightforward. It was a long time between Paul’s conversion and his beginning on missionary work. But the effect of that reflection was that he came to see how his ignorance had cast his saviour as his enemy. When we find ourselves in that situation, it is only that saviour who can save us, despite ourselves. We cannot find our way to him because, to us, he is only our enemy and everything he does would seem to be to hurt us. This is the pathos of those who, because there is no hell, necessarily find themselves in heaven but are miserable nevertheless: it is a torment to be in the presence a God we imagine to be a threat to us.

To be in heaven and to know it as heaven is to have received a new vision of ourselves and God and the world, and to have begun to live it.

This is what the writer of the letter calls, in his final remarks to Timothy, entering into real life: ‘…take hold of the life that really is life’ (6.19).

We gather here each week precisely to be reminded of, and – God-willing – to be drawn a little more deeply into, the life which really is life. This will not always begin as a beatific vision of God and the angels, and ourselves in their midst. It will sometimes hurt. In the story of his conversion in Acts, Saul is struck blind. That his eyes no longer worked is less important than that he was reduced from clear-mindedness to being not able to see, to understanding nothing. The blind Saul is a dead Saul, shut as it were, in a tomb and waiting for the stone to be rolled away again, that a new light might flood back in. In this way, only the believer can properly sin, and so properly be forgiven, because only the believer remembers the stone being rolled away.

We each need to be buried in the same kind of way, in order to come to see how we have misjudged, over-reacted, denied what is true or affirmed what is false. And we need to see also how that new sight is both judgement and grace. Each of these two matters although, if the crucified Jesus is Lord, the judgement is something we look back on from the perspective of grace.

[In our first reflection](http://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/22-september-timotheic/http%3A/marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/22-september-timotheic/) on this letter I suggested that the basic condition for which we are created is ‘timotheic’: we are all ‘Timothies’ created for the honouring of and being honoured by God (the ‘Tim-’ meaning ‘honour’ [time] and the ‘-thy’ meaning God [theos]). This is the substance of heaven.

If we are all created to be ‘Timothy’ in that sense and yet fail to be so, we are, then, also all Paul as he describes himself today: either ignorant of the life which really is life and needing to hear of it, or now looking back in wonder at what we once thought to be true.

To grow into this estimation of our unworthiness and yet great worth is also, with Paul, each to become ‘the foremost among sinners.’ A new and more penetrating light now illuminates our world.

When this happens, it becomes possible that we might be saviours ourselves, of a kind: people who reveal and deal with the captivities of others not by accusation but by words and actions of illuminating grace which bring the light of our great worth to God and, by the way, reveal the judgement of sin, already yesterday’s news.

Such a life of righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (1 Timothy 6.11) is the life of Jesus himself, by which we have been saved, and which we are now called to live.

Let us, then, so live that others might also live.

**Pentecost 19**
**20/10/2019**

**1 Timothy 6:6-12; Psalm 40; Luke 18:1-8**

**Fight the good fight**

In a sentence:The good fight of faith is the struggle to let God be God

Most of us are fully aware that we are going to die. With that comes for many also the awareness – even the fear – that much of what we have done in our lives might well be mucked up by those who come after us.

This concern, of course, doesn’t need our impending death to be active for us. It might only be that we vacate a position in which we think we have done well done and then see that much of that achievement squandered or thrown away by our successor. We have fought a good fight, and then someone else seems to throw in the towel.

It takes great humility to be freed from fear of such loss, or from judgement of those who follow us. Or, to put it differently, it takes great humility to die: to have done what we had to do and then move on, without looking back, perhaps without any ‘true’ successor.

This dynamic of perceived loss is sometimes read into the letters to Timothy and Titus: the writer seems to weaken the penetrating and dynamic work of Paul, in whose name he writes. Paul is captivated by the justifying righteousness of God while the writer of Timothy seems principally concerned with the righteousness we ourselves must achieve.

We have already touched on the theme of ‘pseudonymity’ – the theory that Paul did not write these letters but another wrote them in his name. We won’t spend much time on why this theory is strongly held by many biblical scholars (check a commentary!) but, assuming the theory to be correct, why might someone engage in such an ‘impious’ act as forging letters like this. Why does ‘the Pastor’ (to borrow a name some have given our unknown author) write in Paul’s name?

The simple answer is the authority that name carries, and the Pastor plays heavily on Paul’s authority in the letter. But this is not yet enough. What is the need to add to what the real Paul had already said? The answer here is that Paul is no longer available, while the church has continued and now has new issues which require an authoritative word.

Paul wrote when the Christian movement was small and its organisation was strongly ‘charismatic’. Apostles could relate directly to the few scattered communities.

For the Pastor, it is quite different. If Christ has not come as we expected, what then are we to do? The answer is a kind of ‘settling’ of the church into an ongoing life in the world. And so the church takes on a clearer institutional order, apparently now authorised by one of those great charismatic leaders. Authority shifted from the conviction and encouragement and correction of recognised apostles to authority reflected in structure.

And so the Pastor is interested in bishops, deacons, elders and even a kind of order called ‘widows’. Orientation to the imminent coming of Jesus shifts to living lives which reflect that Jesus is Lord, irrespective of whether he might come again. Paul expects the arrival of God to vindicate Christian conviction and practice. The Pastor expects piety and peacefulness to speak for themselves.

Which of these responses to the times – Paul or the Pastor – is the ‘truer’? Were we to ask Paul, we might find that he would read these letters in his name with disdain, or even horror. There is not much wrong with what is in the letters, but there is much missing which mattered greatly to him. And yet the letters remain – for us – Scripture.

We noted in our first reflection that, ultimately, all Scripture comes to us under a pseudonym – necessarily separated from the real people who wrote it and who feature in it. We can have no confidence that we read it with a historical correctness, in the sense that we understand what the writer might have intended. This is, in part, because we are in a different time and place. Paul may not hear himself in our reading of him. In this way, we change the author as we read.

But, perhaps more importantly, all Scripture is pseudonymous because we cannot be confident that the authors themselves quite knew what they were doing. Certainly they did not imagine that they were writing Scripture. This categorisation comes later, when the church hears something in the material which makes Jesus present again. We speak of ‘Paul’ for convenience’s sake but, for the sake of faithfulness to the gospel, it is ‘Scripture’ and not ‘Paul’ which addresses us. On the breath which is the Spirit, Scripture speaks a word which has a history in such a personage as Paul but the true orientation of which is toward making history. When the Pastor claims Paul’s authority he does what we all must finally do: he ‘becomes’ Paul, becomes scriptural authority in a new situation, even if Paul would no longer recognise himself.

To preach the word, whether in words – as from a lectern – or in actions, is to say or do what matters now. It is possible that we do this badly, but even this is difficult to recognise. Hindsight only guesses at what might been better. We know that every moment is different although we never really know properly how it is different. In every moment we must speak and act, seeing only as in a glass, darkly.

This would be to almost reason to give up the game altogether, for what is righteousness if we cannot know that it is righteousness? What could keep us in the game is the true miracle at the heart of the gospel. This is the cross – which was so central for Paul, if almost totally absent from the Pastor’s writings.

The cross is the sign that, even though every ‘now’ is different from every other ‘now’, the God who alone is present to every ‘now’ is present to claim it as his own. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing – and whatever others are doing – God claims our and their ‘now’ for God’s own live-giving purposes.

The life of Jesus himself is the life to which the Pastor calls us: the good fight of faith in righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness as the Pastor describes it (6.11). Faith holds that God was present to this life in Jesus. At the same time, the cross is the denigration of Jesus’ life and ministry. In the light of the resurrection, faith holds God present also to the crucified Jesus. Judged by us to be righteous or unrighteous, Jesus remains God’s.

Jesus becomes, then, two things at once: the ‘good life’ of one who is truly righteous, godly, faithful, loving, steadfast and gentle and, at the same time, he is the crucified and so at as great a distance from God as one can be.

What bridges that contradiction is nothing in Jesus himself but only the desire of God that Jesus be God’s in whatever situation he be found.

The Pastor’s call to the good fight of faith is not merely call that we be righteous and piety and steadfast and kind in a simple moral sense. Such things are too relative to the times in which we happen to live, and change with cultural seasons.

The good fight of faith is the struggle to allow God to be the one who is righteous and who justifies, the one who is kind and makes gentle, who endures and causes in us steadfastness. The good fight of faith is the struggle to allow God to be our only true successor – the one who follows and proves and justifies.

To let God be the God who made and still makes us is to die the death of the humble, and so to be raised to the life of the humble in righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Let this life be yours.

**All Saints**
**3/11/2019**

**1 Timothy 3:14-16; Psalm 149; Luke 6:20-26**

**God’s blessed rage for disorder**

In a sentence:The ‘piety’ of Christians always joins them to the broken world, and never separates them from that world

Working constructively with 1 Timothy in our reading over the last couple of months has proved more of a challenge than I expected – certainly more than was the case with Hosea and Ecclesiastes earlier in the year. This is partly because the Pastor – the writer of the letter – doesn’t say much I, at least, find especially interesting. With a couple of important qualifications, there is nothing wrong with the letter but that in itself doesn’t make it enlivening or even necessary.

The principal theme of the letter is summarised in our snippet from the middle of this morning’s short text: ‘how one ought to behave in the household of God’ (3.15). In this connection the letter expands on how bishops and deacons ought to conduct themselves, and women, and widows (apparently a kind of religious order), and elders and slaves, and Timothy himself. All of this is directed towards ‘a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity’ (2.2).

And who would not want this: a community carefully ordered so that all know and prosper in their station?

And yet, this might also be characterised as what a poet once called a ‘blessed rage for order’, ‘blessed’ in the ironic sense of ‘damnable’ (Wallace Stevens, ‘The idea of order at Key West’). There is a rage for order which seems to be required – which seems to be blest – but which may finally be blesséd – cursed.

For alongside the Pastor’s encouragements we have texts like today’s beatitudes (or ‘blessed-s’) from Luke. Luke’s beatitudes differ starkly from Matthew’s, in that they seem to allow a stark identification of the groups blessed or threatened by God, according to economic and social categories: the poor, the sad and the powerless, over against the rich, the happy, the powerful.

But we’ll allow Luke his own take on things and notice instead the contrast between the order of the world in Luke and that of the Pastor.

While the Pastor is right that there is a virtue in good order, his rage for such order must be held in tension with the blesséd disordering which is the work of God Godself.

Where the Pastor will have it that a woman will not speak in the orderly Christian assembly, Luke allows for a God who disorders and makes her the means by which God will be heard. Where the Pastor will have it that the upright bishop or deacon will be all good things to all good people, Luke allows for a God who does not need such good order, a God through whom even poverty or grief or brokenness might yet be blessed.

The kind of life to which the Pastor calls us is a good one, and rightly commended. Yet such life always carries the potential of the error of the morally and religiously upright. We heard of this last week, when Jesus contrasted a Pharisee and a tax collector together in the temple. There the self-contained and orderly religious hero poured scorn on the one whose righteousness, or order, could only come from God.

Against this, Luke’s beatitudes present the righteousness which can only come from God. This is not foreign to the Pastor although he doesn’t make much of it (perhaps apart from the biography of Paul himself [1.12-17]). At the end of our short text today we heard again doxology which has been part of our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving over the last 5 or 6 weeks.

The translation is not straightforward. We heard ‘great is the mystery of our religion’. In fact ‘our’ is not in the Greek, and ‘religion’ can also be translated ‘piety’: great is the mystery – or great is the ‘secret’ – of piety. This mystery or secret is Christ (or God – also unclear in the Greek) ‘manifest in flesh’. The secret of piety is God in the messy midst of ‘flesh’ – God in our messiness.

At the heart of Christian confession is this rage for a new order out of disorder, even ‘in’ disorder. The holy life is not simply ‘in the household of God’, as if holiness could limited only to that place. The life of holiness is ‘in the flesh.’

Among ‘the saints’ the temptation is great to separate themselves –those who are saved from those who are not, those predestined from those not, those who know from those who do not, those who have from those who do not. This temptation, of course, is not merely a Christian one. The same rage for the same kind of order is heard each day in school-yard bullying, on talk-back radio, across the chambers of parliament, in the bombs rained down on distant enemies or carried into their midst in backpacks. This is a purity which atomises and isolates, the purity of ‘holier than thou’.

But a piety which begins with God manifest ‘in the flesh’ disrupts the order of the pure and separated. It is no ‘holier than thou’ but ‘holy for thee’. This is a holiness which makes holy, which brings ‘value’ to other things, other persons. Such value – true holiness – is only ever received; holiness is always gift.

The holy, saintly life is certainly one of action, and so is properly about ‘how to behave in the household of God’. Yet it is always first an activated life, activated by the God who would be manifest even in our unholy lives.

‘Unholiness’, then – ‘unsaintliness’ – is that attitude or orientation which will not receive or give such ‘value’, which will not be disrupted or disrupt orderings which seek to constrain God.

Jesus himself was both an ordered life such as the Pastor describes and the presence of God’s own blessed disorder. Blessedness is turned on its head – or not; when this God is the source of holiness, we can never know quite how orderly we are. We can only know that, in the end, it will have been God who has set us straight.

To worship this God is to give thanks that God meets us wherever we are, for, in the end, the household of God is the whole wide world.

To worship this God is to be willing to be drawn forward from where we are to a new and better place, and to be willing to call and draw others there with us.

So, saints of God, lift up your hearts, and see what God does with you.

**Pentecost 22**
**10/11/2019**

**1 Timothy 6:1-5; Psalm 145; Luke 20:27-38**

**Of fanaticism**

In a sentenceThe fanatic knows and mis‑takes; the believer is known and finds peace in this

One of my all-time favourite little quips by a theologian is from Gerhard Ebeling: “Theology is necessary because [the human being] is by nature a fanatic.” This little remark has exercised me somewhat recently.

Ebeling is almost certainly right here. Yet, correct – and cute – as the comment is, in the hands of fanatics themselves it quickly becomes something like ‘we’ need theology because you are fanatics. The ‘we’ is intentionally inclusive – for theology must ‘include’ – but the ‘you’ is quite exclusive: you are fanatics and this theology will tell you why.

If course, this won’t work because it indicates what we already know: that fanaticism just as much springs from theology as it might be treated by theology. The word ‘fanatic’ springs from a Latin word for ‘temple’; the fanatic is en‑thusiastic, filled with God (from the Greek en theos – ‘in God, God within’). Ebeling, then, is correct but uselessly so. The problem is not the absence or presence of thought about God but the quality of that thought. And the quality of our thoughts about God is always hidden from us. This is signified by a crucified Christ: ‘oops’…

Some of my thinking about Ebeling’s remark has been in relation to the fanatics the Pastor deals with in the letter to Timothy, of whom we have heard a little this morning. Yet, their particular mistakes aren’t so important here as the fact that the Pastor does not offer much good argument over against them. His approach is narrowly credal: here is the true faith, asserted without engagement. Orthodoxy agrees that the Pastor is correct but his failure to engage with his opponents leaves him himself open to the charge of fanaticism, and illustrates the problem with Ebeling’s explanation of the need for (good) theology: all theology borders on the fanatical.

In our gospel reading today we hear something rather more engaging, if we are not distracted by the form of the question put to Jesus. That form is a challenge about marriage and resurrection, put to trip Jesus up. If a person is legally married multiple times before death – which is common enough – to whom is she married in the resurrection?

Jesus’ response is first clever and then rather shocking: marriage doesn’t really matter much in eternal life. The life lived in God’s restored kingdom is oriented toward God and not toward the history which has led up to it.

This is surely troubling. The argument for life after death is won at the expense of the life we might have valued before death and look forward to continuing in eternal life. And it cannot only be marriage that is affected here. What Jesus says affects also parent-child relationships and friendships and even enmities. It affects our greatest achievements, and our worst. This doesn’t make such life experiences unimportant but it does relativise them, and starkly.

In fact, Jesus’ point is less about marriage or resurrection than it is about how the things of the world are related to the things of God. Marriage is a part of our present experience of time. Yet our experience of time and God’s experience of time are as radically different as if it were the case that the bonds of marriage could be broken. Or to put it differently, the difference between our experience of the world and God’s experience of the world is the difference between life and death.

What has this got to do with fanaticism – whether explicitly theological or in its more ‘secular’ forms?

The fanatic gets hung up on marriage, or resurrection, or life, or death, or the nation, or race, or youth, or health, or money or any other thing we value, as things in themselves. The Sadducees separate both marriage and resurrection from the reality of God. Marriage is ‘a thing’, and resurrection is a thing and God, too, is a thing, each in themselves. Against this, Jesus refuses our division of ourselves into parts with their own intrinsic value. Everything is finally relative to – oriented towards – God.

The fanatic requires that our experience becomes God’s experience. From here, my faithfulness – as I understand it – becomes God’s obligation to honour me. And so I know what God’s future looks like, or can’t look like. For the Sadducees, the divinely sanctioned series of marriages of their highly tragic serial widow means there cannot be a resurrection.

The fanatic requires that our experience becomes God’s experience. It’s part of what we do in gathering in this place to suspect that we all might be fanatics of this sort.

What hope do we have if we must believe and act and yet know also that we might find good reason later to repent of our creeds and actions? How do we both know ourselves to be right and know ourselves to be wrong?

While the fanatic requires that our experience becomes God’s experience, hope is found in the promise of the reverse: that God’s experience might become ours. This promise is the word of peace brought by the risen Jesus.

God’s experience is quintessentially the impossible mismatch of the source of all life dying on a worldly cross. Here good and evil coincide, the Word marries flesh. But God’s experience is also that the cross is God’s own, and not only worldly. The cross, then, becomes a lively place, despite all appearances. It was set up by us as a final word, yet God makes of it the beginning of a conversation.

That conversation runs something like this:

“Here is your final word,
be it your marriage or your divorce or your singleness;
be it your pride or humility;
be it your greed or generosity;
be it your fear or confidence;
be it your grief or happiness;
be it your life or your death.

“And here am I, God, taking those things and making them my own.
And when I make them my own, I fill them with life.

And I give them back to you, that I might be all in all, and that you might know the peace which passes all understanding.”

The fanatic knows that he understands, and expects peace to drop out of understanding’s equation. My future with God can be calculated.

The true child of God knows only that she is understood – comprehended – and loved nonetheless. It is a mystery how this could be so, but peace is peace, even when we do not understand it.

There is much to comprehend, much to argue, much to fight for, much to testify to, much to grieve over… We wed ourselves to many things and make them our own.

And yet, the argument and the struggle and the testimony and the grief are finally God’s, and God will overcome. This is the mystery, the secret, of our lives.

In the resurrection, whose wife shall the much harried and fanatically married church be? She will be Christ’s wife: peace beyond all understanding.