

**Amos 8:1-12**

**Psalm 52**

**Colossians 1:15-28**

**Luke 10:38-42**

**Colossians: filling up the sufferings of Christ**

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Politics and religion were in the news this week. On Wednesday's 7.30 Report you may have seen the story of Peter Costello, the Federal Treasurer, speaking to Hillsong Church in the Western Suburbs of Sydney. Hillsong is a mega church which, over 20 years, has grown to the point that each Sunday over 17,000 people worship in its Stadium like building. Compare that with the state of Western Australia in which there are 16,000 people who claim to be Uniting Church, no more than half of whom would be found in church on any given Sunday! Hillsong is located in the "aspirational" suburbs of Sydney: people have nice houses, are working hard and, in the material sense, are upwardly mobile. The philosophy of Hillsong fits these values very well: it offers a doctrine of prosperity. Jesus promised more and being with him means being blessed with more: more wealth, better health and a better marriage. No mention of more suffering, or the losses many of us will have experienced in one or more of these areas of success.

The programme offered some analysis. The ABC's David Milliken suggested that Hillsong was the religious version of current political values: that in effect it functions as a Chaplain to these cultural values, offering them blessing and support, while advancing little critical reflection on the social context. No wonder politicians are interested in fostering such connections! The success of Hillsong made me wonder whether the church Father who said: thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee got it right about human aspirations. Perhaps our real aspirations are to be safe, secure, successful and happy, in the material sense, and where God is made to fit into those things, people go for God. The imp in me wondered if, when counseling new people in the faith, Hillsong immediately recommended financial planners, on the basis that the more Bill Gates there are the more Christian the world will be!

With this picture of the beliefs of Hillsong in mind (and we only have the TV report to go on) it is intriguing to hear the writer of the letter to the Colossians say: I am now rejoicing in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body... the church. These words have been taken up in the Basis of Union, Paragraph 4. The church lives and endures in history because: Christ addresses it... reaches out to awaken faith... [and] calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings.

We are not sure who wrote the letter to the Colossians but its thoughts cohere with those of Paul. The writer was responding to a threat of false teaching in the church at Colossae, which had come to life in a diverse religious environment. Although we don't know much of the detail, there seems to have been a strong tradition of Jewish theology combined with Hellenistic and oriental philosophy; some would say, Gnosticism - a vague form of religious wisdom offering special knowledge of the path to

enlightenment and release. Colossae was a town interested in religion and people there did not receive the Gospel with religiously blank minds. Many welcomed Christian ideas, found them interesting and suggestive, and made use of them on their own terms. They added Jesus to their pantheon, offering in return information about angelic powers in the universe, and techniques for spiritual advancement. The writer of the Letter to the Colossians was very artful. He entered the idiom of this audience and employed terms familiar to them: fulness, mystery and new humanity, but refused to accept their terms. Instead he gives these a Christ centred focus. He does not allow the Colossians to make Christ one of their religious hierarchy, but makes a bold statement in favour of his pre-eminence and uniqueness. Christ is the key to fulness, mystery and new humanity.

We are familiar with the Hymn to Christ in Philippians 2. The first part of our reading is such a Hymn which celebrates God's new creative work in Christ. God was fully operative in him, re-establishing humanity's being on a new foundation - not on knowledge, or esoteric wisdom - but on Christ, in whom the whole of the world is revealed as being embraced by God. What is asserted is that in the incarnation and suffering of Christ, God the Creator of the world also redeemed the cosmos; creation, and all its people. The fulness of the mystery of Christ and the shape of his new humanity is made known in his body, the church. Through him we are shown the grace in which we stand - which allows us to live with faith, hope and love. Because of what God has done for us in Christ, the past is gone, the present world in which we live is no longer bondage from which we must free ourselves through spiritual exercises - it is a place in which we worship and serve in Christ's name, and the future is a dominion in which nothing can separate us from God. When you think about it, this is not just about more, it is about things we might otherwise never have had: freedom from the past, liberation from bondage in the present, hope for the future. This is compatible with life in the aspirational suburbs of any city. But how are we to understand the fellowship of suffering that Colossians and the Basis of Union identifies as part of the church's ongoing life in Christ?

We have to understand this in connection with the now and the not yet, the thought that we live in between the commencement of God's finished work for us in Christ, and its fulfilment at the end time. When the writer of Colossians says [I am]: rejoicing in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of... the church he does not mean he is adding to Christ's work. Christ has gone before us and we travel towards where he is. But while history lasts, and the renewal of creation is incomplete, the treasure of the knowledge of God is held in the imperfect earthen vessel of the church, which seeks to make the word of God known. Suffering is connected with living a Christlike life in the in between time. In his writings Paul took pleasure in weakness, injuries, persecutions and insults because these were a hallmark of Apostleship, a sure sign that there was a correlation between his life and what happened to Christ. It meant God's work was going forward into the world. Martyrdom was exalted in the early church, and suffering became one of the marks of the church. There is suffering that is not chosen, and there is suffering that comes as a direct result of our faith in Christ. The church that is itself engaged with the Gospel, and seeks to engage others with it, will endure suffering, because there is a gap between where God is taking us to be and where we now are. Being involved in the fellowship of sufferings may seem as though God has caused us loss, not gain. More suffering, not more prosperity! But Paul, and the writer of the letter to the Colossians would exhort us to take heart because this is a sign the congregation we are part of is indeed a concrete arena in which the Gospel is coming to birth. There may be no suffering in heaven, but

in the meantime the bottom line is that just as grain is crushed to make flour for a loaf, and just as grapes are pressed to make wine, suffering is a sign the incarnation is present amongst us and we should rejoice because our ordinary life has become a vehicle for the life of God.