

**Pentecost 10**  
**28/7/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Colossians 2:8-23**

**Psalm 2**

**Luke 11:1-13**

(Off RCL)

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This morning I want to speak, first, about the death and resurrection of Aslan, the great King of Narnia, then of spiritual stoichiometry – or spiritual chemistry – and finally about the kind of fear and trembling induced by crumbling church buildings and large parish budget deficits, the last of which, at least, may sound familiar to some of you.

In our house C S Lewis' stories of Narnia are much loved, as they probably are by many of you as well. These stories are a very clever and charming re-mythologising of Christian confession. As wonderful as they are, however, I want this morning to focus on one "problem" in how the story unfolds, which is the death of Aslan, a lion who serves as the Christ-figure in the stories. Edmund is one of the four siblings at the centre of the second book in the series (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*). Edmund distinguishes himself by agreeing to betray his brother and sisters to the Witch, a kind of devil-figure in the story. The Witch's designs are thwarted but she draws on the law of the "Deep Magic" to claim that Edmund's blood, as a traitor, belongs to her. Aslan, the great King, negotiates with the Witch that he will take Edmund's place. Aslan is killed by the Witch, and is seemingly lost to the cause of the good, exposing the children and all on the side of the good to certain defeat by the Witch and her hordes.

There is, however, a twist in the story: Aslan returns to life. The important thing for my purposes this morning is the reason which he gives as he explains to the two sisters what has happened:

“...there is a magic deeper still [than what the Witch knew]...If she could have looked a little further back...she would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead...Death itself would start working backwards...”

The important point here is the *necessity* of death “working backwards.” It doesn't matter for our purposes here that the Witch didn't know that magic; the point is the magic or law itself. The resurrection of Aslan *had* to happen – it was *necessary* that it happen – because this is how things have been ordered. If you do this, then that will *have to* happen. The “has to happen” matters, for it implies a kind of “formula” which, if followed, will yield the desired outcome.

It is intended that we understand Jesus' death (and resurrection) in the same way: because human beings had sinned and could not bridge the gulf between us and God, Jesus *had to* die in order for us to be reconciled. I have no idea how this could possibly make sense to anyone today, except that we simply assert it and accept it. My concern here is not whether it can make any sense to those who do not believe in Jesus, but whether it can – or *should* make any sense to those who *do* believe. For what could there possibly be that could force God's hand? What in heaven or on earth could God *have to* do, if God were truly God? For God to *have to* do something like sacrifice Jesus, God would have to cease to be free. If God is not free, then God is not

sovereign but is himself subject to something else – the “deeper magic still” which forces God’s hand, which requires the sacrifice of his Son, or whatever. And yet the freedom of God, alongside God’s faithfulness, is at the very heart of Christian faith.

The point here is simply to draw attention to the couplet of freedom and necessity: if something is *necessary*, whether something like the death of the Son or just what we must eat or mustn’t touch, then God or we are not free. God would not be God and we would not be ourselves, God’s children.

The theme of freedom and necessity is at the heart of Paul’s address to the Colossians in our text this morning. Paul does two things here. He describes, first, what has happened in the ministry of Jesus and, second, how we have benefited from this. Christ’s work has been to deal with “the legal” demands which stand against us – the “laws” which we must obey, those things which seem to impinge on us as a matter of necessity. These have been “nailed to the cross” (2.14), and so the laws themselves have been put to death: *necessity* has been put to death. Being dead, they no longer make a claim on the living. Paul then turns to the benefit we have in all this: if we have “come to fullness in him”, been “buried with Jesus in baptism” and “raised with him through faith in the power of God”, made “alive together with him” (2.10-13), we are freed from these legal demands just as he was.

What is necessary, what can compel us, appears in our text this morning as “rulers and authorities”. These “rulers and authorities” Paul then calls “the elemental spirits” or, in Greek, the “*stoicheia*” of the universe. We might, then, say that Paul is addressing the “*stoichiometry*” of the world – its basic chemistry, for those who remember balancing chemical equations in their high school science classes. Yet Paul is interested not in the physical world with its natural laws but in the social and political worlds in which we live. The stoichiometry or chemistry of these worlds are the sets of rules and regulations which specify what is *necessary* in order to achieve our right place in the grand scheme of things, or simply in our own little communities. The Colossians are hearing from other sources that, even after their becoming Christians, there are still such rules in place which they have to observe in order to align themselves properly with God, in order to be *right* with God: don’t eat this, don’t touch that, pray this way, worship that way. To this comes from Paul a resounding No: the legal demands, the things you *have* to do, those things which it is *necessary* to do, have been nailed to the cross. We are free from having to do this or that because Christ himself is the substance of our relation to God, and all the rest is a “mere shadow” (2.17). Perhaps to overstate the case but also to put it most clearly: *nothing* is *necessary* for those who have died and are hidden in Christ.

There are doubtless a lot of footnotes to be added at this point, but footnotes are the more business of discussion groups and not sermons. To remind you again: our concern in a sermon is not foremost that it be right but that it be interesting. And is it not interesting that nothing might be required of us in order to stand justified before God, that Christ himself and not our efforts might sum us up?

To tease this out, let’s move to the question of application: what does this radical freedom from necessity mean for us, here and now, as a parish?

Reflecting now on a whole four weeks’ experience of this congregation(!), it seems to me that we are at something of a turning point in our history. The disaster and tragedy of the fraud will now slowly begin to fade from view, if not yet from memory. The parish has been restructured, so that we are rather more “on our own” than we have

previously been. Although we are not quite a local congregation, the local community is undergoing a significant demographic shift. The church building requires urgent attention, at great expense. That great expense impacts upon an already seriously overstretched budget, such that failing to attend to matters would not only be negligent but financially disastrous for the congregation and Hotham Mission. This is taking shape in the context of a radical decline of wider community interest in the gospel, and with the Synod itself teetering financially and looking with great interest at those congregations which have property and investment portfolios like ours. And of course, for better or worse, there is a new upstart who dares to answer the phone as “the minister” of the congregation.

In this situation of threat and opportunity, what is *necessary* to do? What is the Deep Magic to be summoned to answer such “interesting times”? At the risk of once more over-stating the case, there is no Deep Magic; *nothing* is necessary here. That is not to say that we should do *no*-thing in response to all these challenges, but that no *particular* thing is necessary. There is no theological formula we can discover which will tell us what we must do. And so, we cannot force God’s hand to yield our desired outcomes and, not having written any Deep Magic, neither does God seek to force ours.

But I suspect that this is not how many of us experience our situation. We worry. We worry, in part, because of the threat of loss. We love what we have and we don’t want to lose it. For this reason grief is a significant part of the Uniting Church’s psychology.

My concern this morning, however, is not so much the fear of loss as that other fear inextricably tangled up with it: the fear of judgement. This is the anxiety we have about getting it wrong, about standing before some judgement seat and being found to have failed, to have read the signs of the times incorrectly, to have squandered the resources, or not given enough of them away. How *do* we weigh up, how do we get it *right*?

Yet, the very asking of the question in this way draws us back into the captivity from which God in Christ would save us: the anxiety that *we* have to get it right, in order for us ourselves to be OK, for us to be justified before God. This motivating fear manifests itself in worry, in anger, and then in division along “party lines” not a little because we feel that our *own* justification is caught up in what is decided by the community. How can I associate myself with people who want to spend nearly four million dollars on bricks and mortar? Have they not heard the call: sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus (Mark 10.21)? Or, how can I associate myself with people who would rather abandon such a marvellous sacrament to the presence of God in the world as a church building like ours can be? Have they not heard that we will always have the poor with us (John 12.8, Mark 14.7)? What will people think, what will God think, if we do not do what is “necessary”, if we don’t get the “formula” right?

Whichever way we swing, all of this is to fall back into the idea that God will judge us according to what we do, rather than according to what Christ has done. But there is no theology of church budgets or mission strategies which will calculate for us what we need to do. What is important is not this or that particular decision, but the ethic according to which it is taken. Some hard decisions lay ahead of us, and we will doubtless have more than a little in the way of passionate debate. There is nothing wrong with that. Only, as we come out of our respective corners, God says to us: I

want a good, *clean* fight. Any other way of struggling with each other puts the winning above the call we have in common to be the children of *this* God: *free* to love and to be loved regardless of how prodigal others, or we, have been with the good things God has given.

But the freedom of the children of God is a confounding thing. For it is not just my freedom, but yours. And you will almost certainly not exercise it properly. And because there is, in fact, no Deep Magic to which we can both refer, I will not be able to show you that you've not done what is necessary. It might even come to the point that it is necessary to crucify you. Then God, at least, would see that *I* understood what was required, if you didn't.

It is the free life which gets Jesus killed, and the call to freedom which constitutes the way of the cross as a call issued to us. Paul cries: for *freedom* you were set free, and not to fall back into another slavery to a new set of rules (Galatians 5.1). There is nothing necessary but that necessity itself be taken captive and displayed for the poor shadow of life which it is (2.15,17,22f).

If, with Christ, we have *died* to these necessities, rulers, and authorities, then we are free of them. And so we can deal differently with each other, for our dealings can then be less about ourselves and more about the mystery of our faith: the God who calls things into being out of nothing, who raises the dead, who bothers even with such sinners as us.

Whatever the challenges facing us personally or as a community, let our fear and trembling not be because we might not get it right, not because we might not do what is necessary. Let our fear and trembling be because we can't ever know that we have got it right, and do not need to know. Let our fear and trembling be on account of this extraordinary thing: that not needing to know that we have got it right is God's gift to us. In Christ, we cannot but be the very children of God.

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