

Philippians 3:4b-14

Psalm 126

John 12:1-8

Have in you the mind of Christ...

Sermon preached by Andrew Gador-Whyte

I don't need to remind you that we are living in a fairly grim time for political discourse. There have always been political shouting matches and claims to moral superiority. But what's somewhat different at present is the *degree* to which political voices are pursuing moral certainty over and against the other, and the violence we have witnessed in that. It's the level of *incommensurability* of our political identities. Incommensurable, that is to say, unable to be at the same table.

Nothing is gained by engaging in platitudes, by telling each other to grow up and start talking. We're in deeper mire than that, we are living from different premises, we are locked in something we cannot get ourselves out of by our own efforts.

We in the church are implicated in this seeming disintegration of a common language. And yet, we are the Body of Christ. That is, we are people belonging to this world whose life together is to be a sign of God's kingdom coming into being in exactly this kind of world. A world that has been pursuing a righteousness of its own at the expense of trust. And a world in need of a joy that can only be created in it by confrontation with the Other. In confrontation with One who suffers at its hands and in solidarity with it.

In Philippians, Paul is encouraging his community at a time of their suffering and his imprisonment. Others might see these things as a sign of failure. But for Paul, it's *even* possible to see their suffering and his imprisonment as a sign of their belonging in the Body of Christ, their fidelity to their vocation, and their solidarity with the Crucified one.

And through imitation of Jesus Christ, through solidarity with him, and by means of his love that the Spirit creates in us, it is even possible that their lives may come to be marked by joy – a joy that not even imprisonment or state-sanctioned violence can take from them.

The joy Paul is speaking about is the fruit of relationships and consciences ordered towards self-giving, the fruit of minds formed by the serving logic of the Crucified.

Life in community as the Body of Christ means having our faculties of reason and logic radically reoriented by confrontation with the Crucified God. Paul has described this as the Mind of Christ, something that is to characterise the community as a whole. And by grace, and through our relationships, we are enabled to grow in virtue – in purity of intentions, in responsibility to our neighbour, in absolute commitment to the world Christ has redeemed.

In Philippians, some in the community seem to be seeking circumcision. In a predominantly Gentile community in a Roman colony, it might have been about seeking the legal protections afforded to Judaism in the Empire.

Whatever the reason, for Paul, Gentiles seeking circumcision represents a kind of failure of trust. It seems to represent a search for moral certainty and moral achievement. And

for Paul, this confidence in our own moral security is *at the expense of* learning to live with confidence in Jesus Christ.

Paul contrasts seeking this confidence in the flesh, this 'righteousness of my own', with a confidence in our belonging in Christ. This is our confidence that the Crucified continues to identify with us in his resurrection life.

What we strive for, like the athlete in Paul's metaphor, is a life of knowing Jesus and imitating Jesus. Because we trust God has been adopted us, we no longer need to try to prove our worth: to ourselves, to our neighbour, to God.

Whenever we try to prove our moral worth, there are always vertical and horizontal implications. From a vertical point of view I am failing to trust God's unconditioned desire to accept us. From a horizontal point of view, because I have set up a standard of right I need to prove to myself, I also end up judging or excluding my neighbour.

To know Christ is to accept my neighbour *as accepted by Christ*, not because of her moral goodness. To know Christ is to accept myself *as one* incorporated into this community despite my moral failing.

To *strive towards this goal* is to seek a renewed life of obedience and holiness, a life of serving the Crucified One in the world, in our neighbour. But there is no longer anything '*behind*' our strivings. What we strive for is to know Christ in eternity: the prize is only Christ.

Life in the Body of Christ is a growing into solidarity with the suffering Christ, whom we also recognise in the suffering of our neighbour. Our baptised life together is a life of learning to trace the way to Golgotha liturgically with our own steps. And we do so always in the knowledge that our fidelity can become a hospitality to the stranger. God enables our lives to be an invitation to the stranger to *join in* to that liturgical procession.

The motivation we are all in the process of *unlearning* is the desire for moral security over and against our neighbour. The motivation we are all beginning to learn, in imitation of Christ and one another, is joy.

Joy is the simplicity of acting in response to an encounter with the living Christ. Joy is living in the knowledge that the Crucified one has returned to us in forgiveness. There is no absolute *moral certainty* to be found here, no certainty that we have acted rightly and not been found wanting. The joy that animates our life together is only the certainty of faith, the certainty that Christ is in our midst and does not refuse to eat with us.

Joy is being confronted by the forgiving victim who calls us by name. It is the joy of first being forgiven, and that forgiveness then illuminates how we have spent a lot of our lives trying 'to be right'.

When Mary anoints Jesus' feet, she does so out of joy in the unconditioned love of God, who in Jesus has borne her sorrow at her brother's death and raised her brother to life. In reply to Judas' outrage, Jesus doesn't provide a moral justification at all. What Jesus recognises in her is an authoritative response of joy, a joy that has been created in her by the Other's love. The logic of her action is not moral, but rather, liturgical.

As the Body of Christ, we are given as bread for a hungry world, and what this means is that our life together can be a hospitality to a world that does not always recognise its hunger. We are invited to be formed in a life of service, unselfish prayer and discipline, action in solidarity with Christ in the world. And we take up that invitation, in order that our life together may begin to create space for those outside also to be pierced by an encounter with the risen Crucified One.

We strive to know Christ, *in order that* our life together may reveal to others that they are invited into the freedom of trusting Jesus, and reveal to them how much they too have been living out of a desire to be right.

And our city, our culture is in dire need of this kind of joy. We have to be willing to offer this city and this world that kind of hospitality. The Eucharist places us in a new solidarity with those with whom we simply cannot agree to disagree. Our ordinary refusal to divide the table despite our conflicts can be an *example*, an *invitation*, and an *act of hospitality* to this kind of world.

At this table we can trust Christ to mediate between us, to make us audible to one another. Here Jesus places us in solidarity with the stranger, even the enemy, the peace we cannot create for ourselves. Here we can become the kind of people who anoint the feet of our ideological enemies, the kind of people who welcome the other as though welcoming Jesus Christ. And Christ enables this difficult solidarity to be an act of solidarity with him in his sufferings, and a sign of his resurrection life in our midst. Amen.
