

Colossians 2:6-19

Psalm 138

Luke 11:1-13

Enduring through the changes of history

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of Christ's completed work.” (*Basis of Union* §5)

These words come from the *Basis of Union*, the foundational theological statement of the Uniting Church. They point to a task to which the Church must always be attentive. To listen, discern, and hear the address of Christ coming to speak to us. It is only by being attentive to the continuing address of Christ that we are able to continue being the Church.

We can, after all, manage our significant property portfolio in smart ways to sustain much of our institutional life. We can sell property, and invest the proceeds to generate revenue streams capable of outliving the habitability of this planet. Mindful that much of the church's wealth derives from claims on stolen land during colonisation, the Church may even find an appropriate regime of reparations. We may continue to fund local and in some cases quite large community service programs and organisations. And through all this ensure that the institution of the Church will live on in perpetuity.

And by no means do I think these are altogether bad things. After all, to whom much has been given, much is to be expected. Many of the smart ways the Church is seeking to use its resources, and reorganise its life are responsible and wise stewardship of the legacy we have received. Two large conversations about this work are currently underway within the Uniting Church: the Act2 project at a national level; and the Faithful Futures project across our Synod of Victoria & Tasmania.

And yet, it is not at all clear that responsible asset management is what the *Basis of Union* had in mind when it spoke of Christ coming, addressing and dealing with people through the news of Christ's completed work.

What, then, might it mean to hear the address of Christ anew today? Not simply as the Uniting Church, but as the Church of Jesus Christ, and as a people who live for the sake of the world for which Christ died.

In the letter to the Colossians we get some clues. It is worth setting our reading today from Colossians 2 into context. In the previous chapter we were offered a hymn of Christ. Which speaks of Christ as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn among creation, the one through whom all things are held together.

Colossians, a letter written to a particular community at a particular time and place with their own issues to manage — presumably balancing the risk exposure of their own share portfolio between sheep and olive equities. And yet, for all the particularity of their challenges they do not receive a letter about the minutiae of church governance, but about the cosmic vision of a world in which a crucified Lord reigns. A cosmic

vision in which all things are held together by the peace wrought by a bloodied cross, where even among the gallows God is pleased to dwell with our humanity.

If the church does not have a story of a God who loves the world even beyond death, then we have nothing at all. If we do not live by the story of the fullness of God going with us to the darkest of places to reconcile and redeem, then we have nothing at all. If we do not have Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, then we have nothing at all. If we do not have a vision for a just and reconciled world for all, then we have nothing at all.

It is from this cosmic story that Colossians is able to get its hands dirty to speak into the particular situation of the community at Colossae.

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith … abounding in thanksgiving.” (*Col. 2:6-7*)

As we have received Christ Jesus the Lord — and we might say the Lord of all creation — we must live by what we have received. Let us be clear, we have not simply received a set of moral teachings. Rather, we have received an account of God and a story of the world in which all things are being woven together towards an inclusive, connected and just future for all. We have received the way of Jesus Christ, who lived a life of mercy, who served the poor and fed the hungry, who proclaimed justice, and died in solidarity with the suffering of the world. This is what we have received.

It is interesting here that the warning which follows in our reading is not to become captive to philosophy, human tradition, and the “elemental principles of the world.” (*Col. 2:8*)

Commentators vary about what on Earth the “elemental principles of the world” actually refer to. Perhaps what is intended is the elemental spirits which swirl around the world shaping the goings on of things, to the ancient mind. Perhaps this is about the Colossians thinking that history is unfolding as a necessary series of things, with Christ's death and resurrection as one mere event within a chain, and their task within history is to find the fullness of God somewhere altogether new.

Whatever the case, the warning is to remind the church in Colossae as much as the church in Parkville that to live in Christ is not to live in the world as humanity is wont to see it. To live in Christ is to live in a world transformed. Where the lives that matter are the poor and the disregarded, the homeless and the sheltering, the devastated and the bombed, the grieving and the abandoned. Do not become captive to the ways of a world which puts profit over people, or self-interested politics above the lives of innocent children. Do not become captive to the human traditions which see precious lives as expendable.

Rather, remember that the fullness of God — the fullness of God is nowhere if not in the person of Jesus. Among the messy lives of those whom Jesus served, among the nameless millions whose deaths seem never to matter. There the fullness of God is found. That is where sacred things are to be sought.

If we remain in Christ, then we remain in the kind of community that opens itself, and expands its heart, to embrace all people in their vulnerability and fragility. If we remain in Christ, then we truly become a baptised people. A people who share in Christ's journey among the suffering and dead. We become incorporated in Christ's body as “one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy,” as the *Basis of Union* expresses it. This is the task of the Church, to be this kind of body. Not the body of Christ because we add to Christ's work, but the body of Christ who are the benefactors of Christ grace, and so co-labourers with Christ in solidarity with and service to the world.

We must cultivate our capacity of living in this world as if the crucified one reigns. As if those who cry out in their need are the most holy and important of all. As if the one condemned in fact declares our unjust innocence. As if the powers of Empire, who put a man to death, are in fact subservient to the Lord of love and life.

We live as if these things are true, because our faith is that they are. That despite our own captivity to a world averse to risk, of seeking eternal life through technocratic mastery, of retreat into our self-enclosed community. Despite all of this ...

We proclaim the triumph of a crucified Lord. That what is going on in the world is not merely the callousness we see each day, or the disregard with which people are treated. What is truer than all the ways the world seems to be, what is more real than what seems most real, is that this is a loved world that God has not abandoned. This is a loved world where God dwells fully. This world is not abandoned, but served by Jesus Christ who calls us to receive his grace and becomes his body for the world which he so loves. Let us then, abounding in thanksgiving, heed Christ's address and proclaim with joy the news of Christ's completed work for the sake of the world.

Amen.
