

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 9 OCTOBER 2011

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Exodus 32: 1-14; Philippians 4: 1-9

“Come, Make Gods for Us...”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

What a lovely, upbeat, Christian message Paul gives us here! Exactly the stuff we like to hear on a Sunday. Full of optimism, encouragement and assurance. Paul at his best: passionate, positive, supportive and full of faith. And if you then realise Paul was probably in prison when he was writing this, it is even more impressive in its steadfast, rock solid witness to his faith. And it doesn't stop there:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Again words of encouragement, of support, urging the congregation to keep to the right track and continue to live a Christian life.

And then something slightly cryptic follows where Paul shows us just a little bit of the personal stress he is under and how important it is to him that this community keeps living out the Christian message they received through him:

“I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

It looks like Paul had not heard from them for a while, nor they from him. And although he maintains his faith has maintained him through that time, he is still relieved and grateful to know they were concerned for him. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me”, he says, indicating that his faith has not wavered. But still... It is good to know the community at Philippi has not lapsed, but they are still true to the faith he left them with when he visited them some while back.

What we have here is a sneak peek behind the scenes of one of the first Christian congregations and their relationship to their founder. A personal letter that leaves quite a lot implicit, because it is not necessary to go into great detail among friends. A letter full of encouragement and reference to a shared journey and shared friends. A letter reflecting a fellowship of faith at-a-distance as it can be and as it should be. Even where the communication gets cut off for quite a while in between it is full of mutual encouragement, support, care and trust in God's providing.

What we find in Exodus is quite the opposite. Communications with Moses have been cut off for a while. After the revelation of God's power and glory at Mount Sinai, Moses has been gone for a long time now. Back then God's presence proved too much for the people and they asked Moses to go and talk to God for them. "You go and talk, we'll wait..."

But now after 40 days, or in biblical speak a long time has passed, they start to lose faith and confidence in their God and their leader. Where is Moses? And what is taking him so long? And where is God? They haven't heard anything from that quarter for a while either!

Weeks, months, and to bring the message home to the readers of the book, eight chapters of suspense are wedged in between the initial, glorious personal encounter between God and the people of Israel and this moment. On the mountain Moses is taking down minute detail about the tabernacle, it's court, the people who are to make it and those who are to look after it. God wants to be with his people, God wants to live amongst them, make interaction possible. And after that first scary encounter, God is now in the process of trying to create a place and space where this can take place. God is prepared and preparing to come down from the mountain, prepared and preparing to get up close and personal, but this time without frightening the living daylights out of his people. Carefully, caring, with a few layers of cloth between God's glory and mortals approaching the tent. With people who may serve as go-betweens, with certain practices that will make it easier for everyone.

And then, in mid-sentence, adultery!

From verse 7 you can hear God's heart break. Pain, rage, despair, misunderstanding, unbelief, following each other in the rapid succession someone who has ever counselled someone who found out they had been betrayed by a partner will recognise. NO! This can't be happening, this can't be true, this isn't true, I'll KILL them, how do I deserve this? Tell me! What did I do?

Because it is such a graphic and anthropomorphic description it is hard not to feel for this God. Hard not to agree with what he feels.

But, well, you see, uhm.....

There are always excuses, aren't there? Because while God and Moses are discussing how to best give shape to the future of the relationship, the clock has been ticking. After all they have been through we can understand how this eerie silence could have unnerved them. How they've been holding their breath and probably begin to long for some kind of release.

Aaron usually gets a bad press with Christian interpreters. A weak leader who should have stood up to peer pressure. Someone who gave in too easily to the demands of the mob. Jewish interpreters are less severe. They say: Aaron tried to keep the peace, he tried to stay with his people and listen to their needs, and isn't that what a priest, a pastor, should do? He tried to guide them, but in the end they chose to go another way. And in the end that is their responsibility and not his. They point out that although Aaron gets a severe talking to, he and his family will still become the priests that serve as go-betweens between the people and God in worship. It is the people who are punished severely later on. Not the leader who caved in to their demands.

"Make us gods" they demand and the god that "progresses" out of their gold and silver is Apis, the bull calf who was worshipped in Egypt as the god of new beginnings, youth, success and strength. There is a voluntary return to the yoke of Egypt and its gods that takes place here months after their

liberation and miles from the threat and power of Pharaoh. And that stings. That voluntary, casual, joyful return to the worshipping of gods who stand for oppression, injustice and exploitation of others and the celebration of the values that underpin their structures of inequality, suffering and pain.

Moses, the inspirational leader figure, has disappeared. And the presence of God is no longer felt.

The glory days are gone, and it's kind of empty and their hearts are starting to fill up with anxiety and questions. They find themselves in limbo. Leaderless, godless, rudderless. And wherever people start to feel like that, doing something always seems a good option. It fills the void, it gets the adrenaline pumping, it gives new direction, something to celebrate, something to be positive about, it will ward off the insecurity for a while.

We see it happening in the Church all around us. The place is buzzing with action, we've got more agencies and outreach programs than we can manage. But in the meantime, underneath all that activity there is a great sense of bewilderment and loss. There is a cry for good strong leaders, "like there used to be". There is the quest for a "new faith", a "new understanding of god", indicating all too clearly that somewhere along the line we've lost the connection with what once was faith and God. "We're waiting" some said at Synod, "we're lost" others said, or "we're in limbo". "I don't know where we are" said someone else, "but it sure isn't a good place for God or for us". "Something has gone missing, and we don't seem to know how to retrieve it, how to reconnect..."

"Rejoice!" said Paul, "and again I will say: Rejoice! The peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." We lost contact for a bit, and that was hard for you and for me. Either of us could have lost courage in that time, lost contact, lost the connection with each other and the faith that connects us. But, rejoice! That didn't happen. We're still here. We've managed the waiting and we can be proud of our strength and perseverance.

Sometimes we don't hear from God. Sometimes we don't hear from God for a long while. Sometimes we may feel we're lost, left with no one to go before us. Sometimes our faith encounters a void, a time of emptiness and disorientation, a time that calls on our strength and determination to wait, to trust, to have faith that God is preparing a way to be with us in a way that may be even better and deeper than before.

Or maybe God is there all along. Maybe it is just that we are looking in all the wrong places and hell bent on worshipping what fits our conceptions of what a god should be like, rather than what God actually is. "In Christ Jesus" says Paul. That's where the key to the peace beyond understanding lies. In a God who is prepared to become vulnerable, to be hurt, to bear pain, for our sake. And who never gives up trying to come as near to us as we will allow.

Amen.