

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 7
SUNDAY 7 JULY 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 30; Galatians 6



“A Place Full of Space”

This week, preparing for the sermon, I wondered if we all know the experience of feeling suffocated, of being ‘narrowed’ by our environment, of being limited, being pressured in some way or other and, on the other hand, the experience of growing, being liberated, finding our way out of such an environment or situation.

For myself I can remember various circumstances and situations where I felt hemmed in and found a way out to greater freedom and more space.

Growing up in a small village in the Dutch Bible belt and moving to a more urban environment on the other side of the world for instance is one such experience that has formed me and which I still carry with me. My time in high school another, where I was one of the village kids who were looked down upon by teachers and fellow students alike, not expected to go far or do well. And when I started studying theology I discovered pretty soon that female students were supposed to move into pastoral ministry straight after their bachelors and not continue with a masters, or heaven forbid, a doctorate.

In various stages, over the years, I managed to outgrow most of the limitations birth, circumstance and gender put upon me. I left the village, losing my country accent by the time I left high school and outperforming many of my peers. I did my masters, if only to prove wrong those who told me pastoral ministry was clearly what I was cut out for. I moved from the ultraconservative right wing of the Netherlands Reformed Church all the way across to the more progressive, liberal wing of that Church, and then out again, to a mix of denominations in Australia and the UK, growing and gradually changing into the person with that weird mixture of biblical, celtic, catholic, anglican, mystic, liberal, progressive spirituality I have now become.

Thinking of Paul, and the massive changes he experienced in his life, I realise that I too have grown, have been transformed and changed through what circumstance and faith have sent my way.

And I assume that this no different for most, if not all of us. As we live, we grow, we change, and transform through our experiences. We all outgrow ourselves not once, but many times over.

For most of us, most of the time, this happens gradually, with more or less smooth transitions from one stage to the next. Sometimes only realising after the event that something has happened, that change has occurred, that we are no longer, not entirely, the people we were before.

Sometimes though, a transition can be dramatic and painful. A jump, a leap, a fracture that involves what may, at the time, feel like a total reorientation of our lives. An accident, an illness, a loss, a move, or just a sudden insight or revelation about our present state can propel us into something completely different, forcing us to rethink and reorganise our lives.

As we have heard, that’s what happened to Paul. Meeting Jesus everything he knows, everything he is, past, present and future needs to be rethought, reworked, and remastered.

A traumatic experience that we, I believe, have to read behind everything Paul says. Something has happened to him that has not only liberated him, but has forced him completely out of his previous context, his history, his convictions, his tradition, his essence. The Paul that was, in the experience of a living Jesus, has died, has been crucified - and a new Paul rises, as someone who has "put on Christ", is wearing this new, Christian, identity like a garment. He discovers all that constituted his life before has become meaningless in the face of God's acceptance and love. Everything else has fallen away, with only the boundless space of God's love remaining.

It is that boundless, dizzying space Paul then, in the name of Christ, invites others into. Come he says, come and see, no limits, no boundaries, all equally welcome, nobody excluded from this new community that lives Christ.

I think it is important to realise that Paul's faith is not, first and foremost, dogmatic, systematic or conceptual. First of all it is emotional, experiential, struggling to find words - in conversation, about what it is he has found for himself and wants to share with others and he still, at times, seems to have to come to terms with. That's why he is so passionate, that's why he tends to start rambling at times, that's why the words topple over each other, that's why he contradicts himself, that's why we see him change and grow in his letters. The depth of the experience he is trying to convey, is impossible to put into words!

In the reading today we see examples of this struggling for words as he seems to be trying to cram as many admonitions and exhortations as he possibly can into the last couple of paragraphs and then, suddenly, breaks the flow and exclaims: "a new creation!"

Transgressions, temptations, gentleness towards each other, carrying each others' burdens, but without trying to offload what is ours onto someone else, teaching and being taught, sowing and reaping, working for the good of all, and, most importantly, not letting ourselves be put back in a cage of our own making. Not, for the Galatians, to be tempted to let their faith be hemmed in by the boundaries that Jewish law and custom seek to impose, because it seems safer, and may make it easier for those who feel threatened and intimidated by too much freedom, or find it difficult to let go of their old ways.

"A new creation!" Nothing is as it was before, nothing should be as it was before. A different world, a different life, a different way, a different community is coming to birth and nothing should be allowed to interfere with that process, to slow it down, hem it in, limit it, constrict it, repress it.

Anybody who has been forced through a traumatic change of track in their lives will know why some of the Galatians may have found that difficult. It is incredibly frightening to have to make the life adjustments someone like Paul made, and human nature is to avoid it if at all possible.

What didn't help for the Galatians is that their life may have been on the line. Jews had special religious privileges in the Roman Empire which Christians didn't have at the time, and which most probably made it much easier to be a Christian Jew than a Christian. And apart from that, with being Jewish, with remaining Jewish, and adhering to the rules and customs of the Jewish faith, came being part of a bigger structure, an already formed community, a family of faith with customs and traditions, meeting places, sacred sites, and a long, distinguished history to be proud of.

Paul moves out of that, leaves the security of family, faith and recognised ethnicity for something that is not yet defined, has no clear boundaries or identity, and is described by vague categories like "clothed with Christ", "a new creation", "a body with many members", "resurrection", "new life". Pointing towards a community where traditional boundaries between gender, status and ethnicity fall away. A community based on as alien a concept as there could possibly be in his day and age where the whole of society, and not only his native Judaism, was structured around these selfsame boundaries.

Just imagine: all those changes and transformations you have grown through during your life all happening at once, and then leaving family, friends, faith, church and country behind for something as nebulous as "a

new creation"! Would you do it? Or would you want to hold on to at least a remnant of security and familiarity?

As someone who has moved internationally several times, and burned many bridges in the process, I can tell you what Paul asks from these Galatians is nigh impossible. Of course we want to hold on to something, to keep some of our core, our essence, of what we were, intact, and safe. Crucified, says Paul, all of that, was crucified, and only then did I find myself free to live Christ.

It reminded me of living in Sydney in rented accommodation, with rented furniture and only two suitcases of clothes and toys when our children were very small. It was such a relief, such a feeling of freedom not to be carrying stuff we had accumulated over the years with us! But - we knew our stuff was still in Holland, safe in storage, ready to be re-appropriated when we wanted it. It wasn't forever and it wasn't for real.

What Paul asks of the Galatians, of us, is exceedingly difficult. To die, to let all we are, all we were, all we hoped to be, to be crucified and put on Christ. To become a community of people no longer bound by what constitutes our identity in the world, be it gender, ethnicity, status or even faith, but to dare let our lives be defined only by Christ and by the love of God for one another.

It's like being asked to become trapeze artists of faith, of letting go of the safety of what we know and trust into the hands of God, not sure what we'll be heading for next, apart from "a new creation".

With a towering debt, with buildings and old familiar structures under threat, with declining numbers and an increasingly worrying age profile it would probably do us good to hear this message and take it to heart as a Church. Faith is not about the old, about how we've always done things, how it's always been. It is about the new, about a life that lets itself be transformed without any reservation, trusting that God's loving hands will carry our existence even if we can't see how or where.

In our personal life, growing from one phase into another, challenged to let go of what has been familiar and safe, it invites us to look forward with confidence, assuming that the God who travelled with us so far, will find a different way of traveling with us as our circumstances change. That loss, illness or even death cannot take that away from us.

That that is not an easy life or an easy thing to do may be clear. It is a life marked by the wounds of letting go and choosing an existence where being in Christ has priority over everything. Paul tells us from his own experience, that only then will we find the dizzying fullness of love and freedom in Christ God offers, and will we be able to create a community filled with infinite space. A place where all are welcome at the table, open and welcoming to each other, friend and stranger, like and unlike, and a bite of bread and a sip of wine is enough to conjure up what we are called to be – "a new creation!" Amen.