

## The Potent Folly of the Cross

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 26 January 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the third Sunday after the Epiphany were Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and St Matthew 4:12-23*

“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”.

These words, from the end of our second reading, shock us. They confront us with an appalling contrast. On the one hand, the values and aspirations of the world. On the other, a man hanging, broken, on a cross. On one side, what everyone knows to be wise, right, worthwhile, successful, sensible. On the other, what seems nothing more than a story of error, loss, failure, folly.

Here we have an understanding of the Christian faith that is profoundly counter-cultural. It upsets the world's assumptions about strength and weakness, success and failure. It challenges all our ways of thinking and acting.

What started St Paul down this track was the scandal of division in the Church. The Corinth congregation was splitting into factions. Note Paul's reaction. He might have pointed out the negative consequences of schism: how it would weaken the fragile new Christian movement, how the Church's credibility would be diminished in the eyes of others. Quite validly, he might have drawn their attention to such practicalities. But he didn't.

He went deeper. Your divisions, he says, actually deny the gospel. Your behavior is flatly incompatible with the reconciling love of God in Christ. Thus Paul recalls them to basics, to refocus on the history-bending symbol of the cross. Not just the bits of wood but all they represent. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself”: that's our message, says Paul, so for God's sake live it.

The visible disunity of the Church is never just an administrative inconvenience. It is a denial of the gospel, a denial moreover that lingers stubbornly long after the initial fracture takes place. These past 20 centuries have demonstrated, again and again, how perilously easy it is to split churches, how damnably difficult to put the bits back together.

In the United States, Presbyterianism ruptured in 1861 during the American Civil War. It took over a century to bring the two parts back together.

Church union here in Australia occupied us for more than 70 years -- even without a civil war to slow things down!

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. He was seeking to clean up the Church, not divide it. Five centuries later the reform he sought has taken place, indeed during the past half century the Catholic Church has overtaken most others in its quest for renewal. Protestantism, having achieved its goal, has passed its use-by date. Old antagonisms have gone. Theological differences, most of them, have been resolved. Divisions that were never wanted are now no longer justified. But, unsurprisingly, they remain in place.

Soon, on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2017, Christians will be marking five centuries since the reform started. What an appropriate moment it would be for post-Reformation churches like our own to go beyond general statements favouring unity and say, quite explicitly, that we seek restored communion with the Bishop of Rome as the universal pastor of all the churches and we will work quite intentionally to find a way forward to that goal. The way won't be easy. The process won't be fast. But a clear statement of that intention would be a fitting way to remember the events of five hundred years ago.

Foolishness? Some would say so. But the folly of the cross, the reconciling power of God's costly, unconditional love, presses constantly upon even the most stubborn realities of our existence. Including our ecclesiastical existence. Including the streak in us that causes division, that tolerates division, that sometimes – God help us -- even takes pride in the denominational identities we establish as a consequence of division.

The folly of the cross presses upon all this and more. Not only within the walls of the Church. Also far beyond them.

Which brings us to Australia Day.

National days are probably good things. Most countries seem to have one. The date of ours is unfortunate: 26<sup>th</sup> January marks both the arrival of European colonizers and the dispossession of those they colonized. A more appropriate, unifying date must be found.

But for the time being, 26<sup>th</sup> January it is. Today, under the waving flags, many things will be said about this country. We'll hear speeches by our leaders, comments by our TV personalities, utterances by friends and neighbours. Some of what is said will be significant. Much, if we run true to form, will be vacuous.

What should we be bringing to this day, we who seek to walk the strange way of the cross? Three things: gratitude, wariness and love of country.

First, *gratitude* because, notwithstanding all its failures, including what Bishop Bruce Wilson has called Australia's "original sin" -- its mistreatment of the indigenous people -- this country has so much for which to be thankful. Sometimes, walking up from Circular Quay, I pause at that little obelisk at the corner of Hunter and Bligh Streets marking the site of Australia's first act of Christian worship. It was 7<sup>th</sup> February 1788. They had been here only a few days. Life in the new colony was tough. It promised to get tougher yet. Their situation was grim. And the preacher's text? It was Psalm 116:12 -- "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" Simple gratitude.

Australians love complaining. We complain about the weather, traffic, politicians, trains, buses, hospitals, the economy, parking meters, everything. We are great gripers. We're not such great thanks-givers. We should listen more carefully to people who have arrived recently from overseas. Often they see positive things about Australia that the rest of us miss. Gratitude for God's goodness, here and now, is one of the things Christians, among others, should bring to the national day.

Second, *wariness*, because national days and what they stand for can be misused. Gratitude can decay into complacency. Pride in country can degenerate into arrogance. Patriotism can become a device used by governments to silence whistleblowers and discourage dissent.

We have discovered the dangers the hard way. Years past have shown us how perilously easy it is to be conned when governments play the patriot card, when media voices pump up aggressive nationalism, when intelligence agencies equate dissent with treason, when people's capacity to think critically about political issues is anaesthetized and the mob mentality of the crowd takes over.

"My country, right or wrong!" we have cried so glibly. Only to discover later that my country was very wrong indeed and we failed to see it.

Faith in Christ entails recognizing a loyalty transcending our cultures and ethnic groups, an authority more binding than that of governments, a power beyond that of the state. The cross – the foolish cross -- standing at the front of this church is a symbol more potent, for us, than any flag.

Gratitude. Wariness. The third thing we as Christians bring to this day is *love of country*. Which means a way of seeing, thinking and acting, not just a warm fuzzy feeling.

An authentic love of country looks not to the interests of one group or another. Its vision embraces the wellbeing of all, especially those struggling on the margins. It looks not only to the Australia of today. It includes the nation as it will be for coming generations as well – think policies that address effectively the prospect of global warming. Love of country cannot stop dead at the national border. It yearns for a nation acting responsibly towards neighbouring countries and the wider human community. It seeks an Australia that respects the rule of law, not only domestic law but also international law and the covenants to which this country is party.

In other words, love of country is not about sentiment. Its implications are very practical. Very personal too.

Years ago, when I was a student at Sydney University, one of my friends in the Student Christian Movement hailed from Indonesia. He had done well in his engineering course and had been offered an opportunity to go on to a higher degree. "No," he said, "I can't". Why not, I asked. You have the qualifications to tackle doctoral work. You would love a career as a university teacher. The White

Australia policy, thank God, was on the way out. “No,” he said again, “I must go back to Indonesia”. Why? “Because my country needs engineers,” he explained, “and it needs them now”.

“My people need me. They have an important claim on my life.” Now that’s the kind of patriotism we can all drink to.

Not the kind that blusters against others, that rants about “my country right or wrong,” that becomes the unthinking agent of aggressive nationalism, that uses slogans of loyalty as political weapons to coerce or exclude. But the kind that says I owe something to the human family. I want to give myself to the nation of which I’m part. I yearn to be a good steward of the skills God has given me. I want to put myself at the service of others.

In that way of thinking there are authentic echoes of the man of Nazareth. Yes, I know, some people mock the whole idea of caring about others: the community, the nation, the human family, whoever. Some ridicule “do-gooders” in any shape or form. But we beg to differ.

For we believe that in the cross – the seemingly weak, failed and foolish cross – there is a power the world can neither see nor overcome. The power of unconditional, unlimited, unconquerable love. The power we dare to call ... God.

To whom be praise and glory, now and ever and to ages of ages.

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