

In Christ we are made new

*Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 16 June 24
2 Corinthians 5: 6–10, 14–17, Mark 4: 26–34*

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If you have the eyes to see it, today's readings have an underlying theme of new life from God. Our Old Testament reading recounts the story of Samuel anointing David, the young, musical shepherd boy as the second king of Israel. Certainly, this was a most unexpected, new beginning both for the boy and for Israel. Our psalm spoke of God's salvation for his anointed one. "Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will call on the name of the Lord our God", cries the psalmist. (Psalm 20:7)

Our epistle reading urges us to have confidence in God as we walk by faith, and not by sight. The love of Christ urges us on, writes Paul, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died. Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. So, says Paul, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!

And our gospel reading speaks of the wonder of growing seeds, which Jesus likened to the Kingdom of God. Just as we do not comprehend the miracle of the growth of seeds into fully ripened crops, so we cannot comprehend the growth of God's Kingdom from small beginnings to a great kingdom. From something as small as a mustard seed, grows a shrub that can provide a home and shade for the birds. Jesus says this is what the Kingdom of God is like.

Our readings proclaim that God gives and sustains life. God blesses. God brings growth. In Christ there is a new beginning. The old has gone, the new has come.

If this is true, why is there so much hardship and trouble in the world? Why do we Christians find ourselves facing hardship, trouble and pain?

The question of why bad things happen to good people is one that I have been asked often. As Christians we believe in a loving, compassionate God who wants the best for us, yet bad things happen to Christians probably as often as they happen to non-Christians. Theists and atheists, rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated, all experience bad things happening to them at some point or points in their life.

Life has its challenges. Sickness, accidents, natural disasters, the deaths of very young people in the prime of their life, mental illness, financial ruin, the list of 'bad things' is probably endless.

In the last three months I have enjoyed meeting with many of you and getting to know you better. Several of you have shared with me your own challenges. I suspect that each of us could recount things that have happened or are happening in our lives that we would classify as 'bad'. How can we maintain our Christian faith in a God of love in the face of these challenges? Does God really bring new life and hope?

There are certain groups of people in the world who call themselves Christian who preach a gospel of perfection. In their view, we should always be smiling, rejoicing, happy. Sadness should know no part of our Christian life, they say. Such a view causes more damage than we can imagine, because life just isn't like that, nor is this what Jesus promised for us.

Look at the life of Jesus himself. You could hardly say that he wasn't faced with evil and difficulties. He was falsely accused of disobeying God. The miraculous deeds that he did were ascribed to the devil. The religious leaders of his day were out to kill him and succeeded in the end. He was whipped, beaten, struck with rods, spat on and publicly humiliated as he was taken to the place of his crucifixion where he hung naked before his mother, brothers and sisters, and his followers, along with the crowds who had followed them for the spectacle of the crucifixion. Certainly, bad things happened to *him*, and he was the Son of God.

Or look at St Paul, arguably one of the greatest Christians who has ever lived. Today we read from his second epistle to the Corinthians. If you read on in this epistle to Chapter 11, Paul recounts some of his life since living as a Christian. He wrote:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? (2 Corinthians 11: 24–29)

My goodness me, and we thought we had it bad.

Bad things certainly happened to Paul. Why? Because life is like that. I thank God that despite the bad things that have happened in my life, I have never had to experience all that Paul had to endure.

How do we reconcile such hardships with Paul's words in our epistle reading this morning when he wrote:

So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5: 17)

I think that, firstly, we need to remind ourselves that the new creation of which Paul speaks is the new life that is found in Christ. It is that spiritual ‘birth from above’ that Jesus spoke of with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3. The ‘old things’ that have passed away are those things related to the sinful life, and the ‘newness’ is the glorious ‘fresh beginning’ that is given to all who put their faith in Christ.

Paul referred to these things earlier in the epistle. Just prior to today’s epistle passage, Paul explained that even though we have received the Holy Spirit through baptism, even though we have received God’s grace, we hold these gifts in what Paul calls ‘clay jars’ so that it may be made clear that the extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us. The difficulties of life do not cease. The difference is that we now have a spiritual treasure that transforms our innermost being – the ‘meness’ of me. We are a new creation spiritually, even though for the time we hold this creation in jars of clay.

In chapter 4, verse 8, Paul wrote:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. (2 Corinthians 8–11)

During the trials of this world, we shine with the light of Christ in the way that we deal with the bad things that happen to us, knowing that Jesus walks with us, having promised never to leave us or forsake us.

A little later in his letter Paul says:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 16–18)

Our final victory comes in heaven. Right now, we are in an earthly tent, which is vulnerable and temporary. Then, we shall be in the glorious presence of the saviour. Thus, Paul says, we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5: 7). Our faith is in salvation in Christ, and in the world to come. God’s love for us urges us on to that heavenly goal where the ‘bad things’ in life are no more, and everything is made new.

Amen.