

**Transformation (Philippians 3.17 – 4.7)**

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We have been reading Paul's letter to the community at Philippi over the past few weeks, and today we reach its final exhortation. We've explored the theme of sharing or fellowship – participation in Christ's life in community; we've considered how this possibility of true communion with others and with God is connected to humility – being emptied of our tendencies to grasp at ourselves and our status, coming to rest on common ground; and last week we saw how this way of being undoes the violent zealotry of false religion and liberates in us a freedom to receive our goodness as gift as we entrust ourselves to God. Finally, Paul ends his letter by exhorting his friends to continue imitating the example of those who live in this way, standing firm in the Lord.

It's a way of living that is sourced in, made possible by the cross of Christ. In Paul's shorthand, the cross means Jesus' suffering of the violent power that purports to rule the world in such a way as to overturn that very power. For Jesus' ministry of healing, truth-telling and hospitality provoked in the civil and religious authorities a profound sense of threat and disorder. He was turning the world upside down. In the name of law and right worship, he had to be executed. He suffered, as the New Testament says, the 'sin of the world'. But in the resurrection, God showed that the power of sin was not ultimate – and that God's truth and love were stronger. That's the sense in which the cross breaks the power of sin and death over human life – they are unmasked and disarmed.

We live on the other side of this having happened – we live in a new creation. And yet, it doesn't always feel this way! Rowan Williams says, the 'new life is not

simply infused in an all-conquering fullness in a single moment'.<sup>1</sup> It does not become 'a new law, a new fixed pattern or possession' but needs to be lived into, to be realised. It is always vulnerable, because it is always possible for us to keep living in the old way – seeking security and control by the old mechanisms of rule-keeping, self-righteousness or force. And that's why, if we want to participate in this new life, we too must enter into the dynamic of cross and resurrection, we must 'imitate' Christ. We must be willing to die to self-dependence and self-protection, and to receive ourselves back as gift.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes passionately of 'the daily affliction, the daily rejection, the daily dying by which the Spirit works' to make the believer like Christ, 'transforming us "from one degree of glory to another"' (2 Cor. 3.18). And we see it in our reading too, when Paul writes of the citizenship that comes from heaven and of the way that Jesus 'will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory' (Phil. 3. 21).

All of this can sound abstract, but it means quite concrete things. Things like – telling the truth as best we can, even when no one wants to hear and we risk losing friends or even a job; giving up the need to be right in an argument, when everything in us is screaming to be justified; letting ourselves recognise the vulnerability and woundedness in another, when all we want to do is to make them wrong and deck them or write them off.

And the point is that *only* as we begin to release our reliance on the old, right, frightened, self-sufficient self – which feels (often enough) like a kind of dying – and discover a new kind of life, fellowship and freedom on the other side of this 'death', that we enter into the experience that Paul commends to the Philippians. Joy, gentleness, non-anxiousness, thanksgiving, peace – the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. These aren't simply values that we are trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1990), 18.

generate for ourselves and live up to, but they are what we find growing in us as we practice being 'in the Lord', being 'in Christ' – which means as we practice letting go, dying to self-justification, letting ourselves be loved. We yield ourselves, including our daily failure to be joyful, gentle, non-anxious and thankful, in humble and trustful acknowledgement of our need, and the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness interceding (as Paul says in Romans) 'with sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8.26).

This afternoon, we have discussed the next steps in the life of our community. The formation and the life of a Christian community is a delicate thing – there are the relationships that comprise it – and the need for them to be sourced 'in the Lord' so that, as for Euodia and Syntyche, differences can be worked through in the light of the new possibilities for human life given by the gospel. That's not easy – I know – when we have been hurt. And there is the question of discerning God's call on the lives of each member of this community and our community as a whole. Our becoming an incorporated association, with a particular legal identity, offers an opportunity for us to listen again for what we are being called to – individually and together.

I wanted to let you know that there are groups in Melbourne and Hobart, that are currently exploring Benedictus as a model for new contemplative, worshipping communities in those cities. I also wanted to let you know that I am arranging my work and other commitments next year so as to have more time to give to Benedictus each week, and to nurturing what we have begun together. Benedictus is something – I believe – and now is the time to give myself more fully to it, to allow it to unfold. I am so thankful about this, excited – and unknowing! What is needed next for and among us? What are we called to?

I don't know the specifics but I am guided by one overarching commitment. That is that the point of our existence is that we witness to and enable the journey of transformation, the journey through cross and resurrection. It is not enough that we be a community of the spiritually like-minded, who contemplate (from more or less

safe distances) the riches of our religious tradition and enjoy fellowship once a week. I do not suggest that is what we are – we *are* making the journey. Yet, we are always called to go deeper and to more radical commitment – St Benedict’s Rule speaks of the necessity for continuous conversion. John Main reminds us that it is distressingly easy for us to talk about prayer and the spiritual journey with great verve and energy, all the while failing to notice that we have not taken a single step on the path. I know it for myself. But this is not enough. If we are really to give our time and energy, all of us, to participating in Benedictus – then we need to be serious about being on the way. This doesn’t mean being serious all the time (quite the contrary) and nor does it mean lots more *activities* – they can be a mask as easily as anything else – but I do invite your reflections about what you discern would contribute to us continuing to grow as a community radically committed to and available for the Spirit’s work of transformation in us and in our world.

One thought I have had is that next year, for those who wish, we might begin something like a ‘daily practice group’. Those who would like to commit to a regular daily practice of meditation, as well as seeking to develop perhaps a simple rule of life to support their spiritual journey, might gather once a month to support each other in this intentional commitment. This is just one thought, and I would love to hear from you what you would wish for Benedictus next year – what would enable your deepening journey, your fuller and freer engagement with your vocation in the world, and our shared witness to the gospel.

And as we give thanks for one another, let us be encouraged by St Paul, writing to the young community at Philippi: ‘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’.