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To Those Who Are Perishing (1 Corinthians 1: 18-25)

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We gathered for our final service before Christmas last year, many of you will remember, on a stinking hot Saturday night, as fires raged across our land, an eerie orange light and choking pall of smoke suffusing the air. We gather for our first service this year, on a stinking hot Saturday night, as fires continue to rage across our land and now very close to home, the smoke ... And in between, a January like nothing any of us have known – much of the month here in Canberra spent amidst the smoke, anxious about people and much loved places, horrified at the loss of bird, animal and insect life, of forest, habitat, homes and livelihoods – and perhaps above all at the realisation that summer itself has changed. Could it be forever?

For decades now, scientists, activists, ecologists and serious policy makers have been warning of the dangers posed by global heating, not only to our ‘way of life’ but to the future of life itself on planet earth. But like the warnings of the prophets of Israel, their words have been too often disregarded or minimised, anomalies explained away, the growing body of evidence obscured or ‘spun’ by those with limited imaginations and a vested interest in the status quo.

This summer, however, it’s as though the issue has at last been truly joined. Despite the continued denial of a deranged minority, it’s no longer possible to accommodate what’s unfolding on the map of ‘normal’; it’s clear that our situation is indeed unprecedented and critical, and that what humankind does or fails to do in the next few months and years will – literally – make all the difference in (and for) the world.

I know you know this. In our different spheres, we are already profoundly engaged, involved, seeking the world’s good – members of Benedictus are volunteer fire-fighters and disaster recovery specialists; we are vets caring for injured wildlife, psychologists and pastoral carers working with those suffering trauma; teachers

caring for the hurting souls of our children, friends offering hospitality to evacuees and supporting those who've lost everything; we are policy makers, academics and public servants, activists and writers advocating passionately for truthful engagement; and we are simply fellow human beings donating large quantities of rakes, wheelbarrows, cleaning equipment and hand tools to those who've suffered most directly in this particular calamity, turning up at rally after rally to add our voices to the cry of the earth and her peoples. In the midst of all the other challenges and commitments of our lives, we're in it. We're seeking to strengthen the good that is in the world and stand for the possibility of its healing even now, demanding that our leaders play their part too.

And as we meet here tonight, as we begin another year in community, I am wondering what is going to sustain in this work of love? What's going to hold us in the passage we must make through death – the death of creatures and eco-systems, the death of some of our fellow human beings, the death of a way of life we've taken for granted? How are we to live in the difficult times ahead, without collapsing or going to sleep or giving up under the burden of uncertainty, fear and grief? And what resources might a community like ours offer for sustaining and strengthening others?

Our faith tradition has a view about this. It says that we are sustained in the passage through death because in Christ we have already died. As Christians, the life we now live is no longer ours – it's not self-possessed but is received as gift and for giving away. And this means (in theory at least) we need never fear death, or avoid it, for we live now with death behind us, its power broken.

This is the significance of the passage we just heard from Paul's letter to the early Christians at Corinth. The community itself is riven by faction and rivalry, but Paul is reminding them that the whole point of their faith is that they're liberated from the need to compete for or secure themselves in being. By his willingness to die shamefully, Jesus has proved that nothing – not dishonour nor even death itself – can separate us from the love and life of God. This is why, Paul says, we *proclaim* Christ crucified: we don't just tolerate it, we celebrate it. For what looks like failure,

despair, the cruel end of every hope is actually the ground of a radically new form of life. This is the foolishness and weakness that's brought to nothing the supposed wisdom and power of this world. It's what empowers those who trust this revelation to live out of a whole new freedom, courage and solidarity.

But how does this vision apply to our situation? In the case of the Corinthians, their problem was communal division, selfishness, strain. It's easy to see how, in this case, the call to die to self, to let go ego-ic self-defence and justification, is the way to a renewed, compassionate and sustainable life together. But what about us? There are parallels. Like the Corinthians, the health of our society demands that we let go selfishness, rivalry, division so as to transform our common life. But our problem has got even bigger – because our failure to do this, at the level of our political economy, has led us to a place where what we're confronting looks at times like it might be the death of everything. As we face this overwhelmingly painful reality, how does *our* supposedly 'having died in Christ', *our* living with death behind us help anything??
Does it help at all?

Well, not if it remains simply an idea, an orthodoxy we say we believe. But if it comes to be a living faith, something that truly animates our being, then – actually – yes, I think it does help. As you'd expect, prayer is the heart of it. Our silent prayer in which we consent week by week, day by day, to give ourselves to God so as to find ourselves, often very slowly, imperceptibly, being healed of ego-ic attachments and wounds, and so recreated and awakened for life, for service. This is the dynamic of death and resurrection in us. And through faithful practice, we can *experience* it as the undergirding reality of our lives. We can more and more know what it means to say, as do the saints, 'My me is God, neither do I know myself except in God'.

What does this make possible? Well – it makes us then not above the world, indifferent to it, but more and more identified with God's own extravagant love for the world. For make no mistake, God is about *life* in all its fullness. The Source of reality, the loving Ground of all being, longs for the healing, the flourishing, of all things. The whole point of Jesus coming is to overcome our resistance to and fear of

life; it's to liberate us from self-concern and self-defence, so as to know our communion with all creation. The more this happens in us, the more we become as Jesus was. Humble, handed over in life's service; *and* powerful, telling it straight, standing without flinching for God's justice and truth.

How does our having died in Christ, our living with death behind us help anything in the real world? It empowers us to stand for the truth – despite our fear and in the face of pressure in some of our workplaces or communities to collude with lies. It liberates the heart of compassion in us to join in solidarity with all who love and serve life. It makes us unafraid to mourn, to grieve and to create contexts where others may grieve – for beneath our sorrow we have touched the reality of God's vulnerable, unkillable love, leading us on. And despite the temptation to despair or lose heart, it keeps us open to the possibility of possibility, living as listeners (as Thomas Merton put it), expecting God.

This message about the cross, Paul readily admits, looks like foolishness – it looks like capitulation to oppression, acquiescing in weakness; but the opposite is true. It is our access to participating in the power of God. It feels to me as though this is a big year ... a necessary turning point. In our different spheres, and with our different gifts, we are each called to offer our lives, our energy, our service, for the life of the world. It will matter that we are rooted in prayer, joined in fellowship, and broken open to the love in which all that lives is sustained in being. May we be for one another and for our wider community a space where this prayer and fellowship and love is made available, a pool of silence in our thirsty land.