

## **Year B**

### **2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1**

When Calvin Coolidge was President of the United States of America he saw dozens of people every day. Most had complaints of one kind or another. A visiting Governor once told Coolidge he didn't understand how he could see so many people. "Why, you finish with them by dinner time," the Governor remarked, "while I'm often at my desk till midnight." "Yes," said Coolidge, "But you talk back."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bits & Pieces, August, 1989

How frequently does our God come across like Calvin Coolidge - silent in the face of our requests and protests? The apostle Paul was experiencing some communication difficulties and in sharing these with the Corinthians so he offers us some comfort. There are times when we are on our knees and it seems that there are no answers.

Have you ever been thinking of someone and then the phone has rung and on picking it up there on the other end of the line is the person you have been thinking of? Have you ever woken up two minutes before the especially early alarm call that you have set

the night before? I had the good fortune to meet and to get to know Dr. Jim Swire during my time on the Isle of Skye. Dr. Swire became famous after the tragic death of his daughter Flora, who was aboard the Pan Am flight 103 that was blown up over Lockerbie in 1988. Jim has a second home near to Dunvegan and whenever he was on the island he would worship in the Parish church where I was minister. He is convinced that the facts of the terrible events that night were covered up by both the American and British governments. It was the unfortunate fate of his innocent daughter

to be caught up in it all. Soul group *The Four Tops*, having completed their European tour, had intended to catch Pan Am Flight 103 as a return flight to the United States for Christmas. However they overslept following a *Top of the Pops* performance the day before and in trying to catch up the following day decided to delay their trip until the day after. Fate or fortune? - how do we understand these things? How do we understand life itself as we apparently make decisions every day that may affect the duration and direction of our lives? Do we live as Matthew Arnold wrote:

“We do not what we ought,  
What we ought not, we do,  
And lean upon the thought  
That Chance will bring us through”?<sup>2</sup>

I believe that it was these kind of issues that lay behind the thoughts of the apostle Paul as he wrote the section of 2 Corinthians we heard read today. Paul in his early letters like 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians was living in the assumption that Christ would return imminently. In other words, Paul was not thinking about his own death because the return of Christ was going to happen

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) from *Empedocles on Etna*

first. By the time we get to the later letters of Philippians and this passage in 2 Corinthians it is very different. For now Paul is directly contemplating the implications of his own mortality and how that affects his consideration of God's plans.

Paul can be a frustrating read for a modern reader. We feel that we are always bouncing off his cultural assumptions which don't always fit comfortably with ours. Human knowledge now is far in excess of what Paul had at his disposal in the first century AD. Our scientific age has answered questions that Paul didn't even know existed. Yet, in

other ways, Paul's understanding of the fundamental philosophical issues facing humanity, is second to none. He still speaks incisively to us on the level that most matters to the believer; the level of faith. "I believed - and so I spoke", he wrote. We believe and so we hear today.

Paul's awareness of his mortality and the apparent delay in Christ's appearance led him to reflect on his present experience in relation to what would come in the future. Where is God to be found? Is he inside us or out with us? How can we fathom what he is up to and will it lead us to despair or to find

an energising hope? These are the questions that form the background to this passage. Paul was thinking out aloud and we are able to follow the progress of his thought and hopefully find some clarity through that. And he expressed it all in a way that would be familiar to a Greek speaking, philosophical culture. He used dualist concepts to work through his thinking and so we have the distinction here between the inner and the outer, the visible and the invisible, the temporary and the eternal, all expressed in this short passage. Now if we were to accept this on the surface, then it



would lead to some difficulties for us. Jesus Christ came into this world because this world is of immense value and importance to God. In Christ the outer and the inner are united; in Christ the visible and the invisible are brought together; in Christ the temporary and the eternal co-exist. There is no separation of reality, instead there is a union that is truthful and loving. The glorious culmination of the canon of Scripture in the book of Revelation described the vision of the coming together of the heavens and the earth, not its separation. So Paul's analysis in dualistic terms to

expose the human predicament is fine in breaking things down for us so that we might understand, but it will not offer us a coherent understanding of the way the world is. I think Paul showed us that he knew this. The little expression 'day by day' in verse 16 implies that continuity is important in Paul's overall thought and that would present an important check against uncritical dualism. You see, we need to know how we are going to live now in the in-between. We recognise that the creation is still out of kilter. There is so much that is far from well and yet Christ is risen from the

dead and so the new creation has already begun. That reality changes our experience through the trials of life because it brings the transforming power of God to us, now in the present. It's not a matter of gritting the teeth and hanging in there, as important as that is, it's a matter of seeing the life giving work of God's Spirit at work now, transforming the created order.

During the Second World War, Winston Churchill was forced to make a painful choice. The British secret service had broken the Nazi code and informed Churchill that the Germans were going to bomb

Coventry. He had two alternatives: he could order the evacuation of the citizens of Coventry and save hundreds of lives at the expense of indicating to the Germans that the code was broken; or he could take no action, which would kill hundreds but keep the information flowing and possibly save many more lives. Churchill had to choose and he followed the second course.<sup>3</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has brought the world into a new tension. The new is being brought to life from the old and that is not a painless

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<sup>3</sup> Snodgrass, Klyne 1990 *Between Two Truths - Living with Biblical Tensions* Zondervan Publishing House, p. 179.

experience. Like Paul we have to wrestle with the tensions and hopefully, like Paul, we are able to do so holding on to the hope of a world made new through God's transformative Spirit. Amen.