

'Sorrow's gift: Christ authorises you to heal the body politic'

Can we name our sorrow?

This Thursday 22nd June marks the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of the UCA. The Synod has encouraged congregations to celebrate this 40th anniversary and so our Presbytery newsletter declared joyously, 'life begins at 40!' By coincidence, the date is also my mother's birthday. When we gather for my Mum's 96th birthday this week, we will be grateful for the long life she has enjoyed. But we will also have in mind whether this is the last birthday we will have to share with her. My mother has felt the shadow of death keenly on several occasions in the past few years, and so every birthday also brings us closer to that reality. This is a truth we share. Mum lives with the truth that death is near. And each of her four children has spoken openly with her about her life and her death. But in the Uniting Church we who are members find it difficult to speak openly about the shadow of death that falls across our declining congregations, our churches that have been sold off, or our agencies that have been closed by our Synod. On this 40th anniversary of the Uniting Church's inauguration, are we not free to feel sadness for the staff that will be made redundant, for the churches that will close their doors for the last time, and for the 22 Unitingcare agencies which will finally disappear into 'Uniting'? No, we are not free to express our sorrow at the harm done to us by our leaders.

Jesus' sorrow is named

Yet Matthew's gospel for today speaks of Jesus great sorrow after his community health survey "through all the towns and villages" (9:35) where he ministered. Jesus wanted to know how things were amongst the population. Matthew says Jesus found "all kinds of disease and sickness" (9:35). Jesus saw the darkness that robbed people of life and wholeness. Indeed, "when Jesus saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36).

Jesus sorrow that the crowds are like sheep without a shepherd draws on a familiar Old Testament image to describe what life was like in Israel under corrupt kings. Bad kings were likened to shepherds who failed to look after their sheep. So Jesus is saying that sickness in the population was due to corruption in the political/religious establishment. But it was necessary for Jesus to speak in this code language about the political/religious establishment of the puppet King Herod who was backed by the Roman emperor. To criticise either of them directly would have meant death. Neither Herod nor the Emperor was squeamish about using his power to eliminate anyone foolish enough to criticise his leadership. So the oppressive rule of the Emperor and King Herod caused ordinary people to feel harassed and dejected, and the burden of their oppression caused then disease and sickness.

Sorrow as truth and solidarity

We are worshipping in this place today because the Uniting Church's leadership used its power to force our obedience to its strategy for survival. St. George's members saw your church sold and you were forced to move here. Where I worked at CMN Unitingcare was also sold and moved against its will. Less than two years later CMN is closed and its research program into work-related injustice is dismantled. I sense that Jesus looks at our plight in sorrow, seeing that we too have been left like sheep without a shepherd. On this 40th anniversary, Jesus sorrow for his lost sheep is our truth, for we have former Board members, staff and volunteers who are sick at heart and in mind and body from the way we were treated by our Church.

But Jesus' sorrow at our plight paradoxically unites our suffering with many others, for our church's actions share a common spirit with how too many large corporations treat their workers. Jacqui is a cleaner at Westfield Doncaster who CMN surveyed for her union to better understand the pressures facing cleaners in large shopping centres. Jacqui said, 'everything goes up, but our wages don't. By the time I pay my car and my mortgage my whole week's pay is gone. ... I don't know how many years it is since I've had a holiday. It's been hard for me since my husband died ... the last seven years have been very hard.' I spoke with Gamal Babiker who is a cleaner at Chadstone. Gamal said, 'I have to do a second job to survive. So you can't look after your family, you can't look after your kids, you can't enjoy life. Without weekend shifts, I can't survive.'

Like Jesus, when I hear these workers' experience of harassment and dejection, I am united in solidarity with them through sadness at the oppression they suffer. And in the same way that Jesus knew his

people's illnesses and disease were due to constantly living in fear of the empire building of Caesar and Herod, so we know that these cleaners are burdened by the empire-building of corporations that design systems of work which drive vulnerable people into despair. The truth of this church anniversary is that too many members are similarly burdened by the Synod-designed programs to make the Uniting Church great again.

Jesus' sorrow named, claimed and aimed: the decisive turning point

Yet Jesus' solidarity in sorrow with dejected and harassed people marks a decisive turning point. Jesus' compassion leads to divinely inspired action. He tells his disciples that it is God's desire that the people's needs for healing and justice must be met. But there is a 'but'. 'There's plenty of harvest to be had, but not many workers' (9:37). And why are there not many workers able to meet the people's needs? Because if you want to tackle the sickness and disease caused by the corrupt powers that afflict the people, you will soon run up against Herod, who thought nothing of killing all the boys in Bethlehem when Jesus was born to eliminate any competition to his throne. In the face of people's fear of political violence, it's no wonder that Jesus commands his disciples to pray to God 'the Master of the harvest, to send more workers to harvest his fields' (9:38). Faced by the massive risk of violent opposition, Jesus commands his disciples to pray. Faced by the massive risk of financial debt, the Synod called in secular consultants – finance experts! But only Jesus' command to pray will make a decisive turning point for our hoped for future.

The disciples' prayer for God to send more workers was answered in a totally unexpected way. Because Jesus then called them to himself, and 'gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every sickness (10:1). Suddenly, the disciples are Jesus' frontline to take on the demonic oppression wrought by the coalition of Caesar and Herod! This is the new thing Christ is setting up. So we too may hear Jesus commanding us to pray that God will equip more people to meet the needs of retrenched workers, injured workers, migrant workers, women workers, shift workers, underpaid and over-worked workers, workers with mental illness or disabilities. You too may hear Jesus' calling you to his new mission of transforming the demonic oppression suffered by those suffering from unjust systems of work.

Sorrow's gift: authorising and empowering a new creation

When Christ calls you to his healing mission, he also equips you for the task. Jesus gives his disciples authority over the unclean spirits at the heart of the Roman Empire that so oppress Jesus' people. Pay attention to the careful order of Jesus commissioning of his disciples for their mission. Jesus 'gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to heal every disease and every sickness.' (10:1) First, cast out the unclean spirits of violence and fear that sustain the Empire, and then your ministry can heal every disease and every sickness. 'As you go,' Jesus says, 'declare publicly that the kingdom of heaven is arriving' (10:7). It is 'game on' as to what foundation the world needs to secure justice and healing for all.

Jesus emphasises that God's powerful rule of love will sustain and guide the disciples in the face of the power of empire. It is a bold assertion that the power of God's love is greater than the love of power of those who wish to retain their privileged positions. Jesus proclaims a new era in which the establishment's absolute priority for power and control will be resisted and then transformed. Indeed, it calls you to trust that this new reality that Christ has begun on earth is based on the pattern of life in heaven – the sick will be healed, those whose life is dead will be renewed, lepers will be restored to wholeness to the community, and the demons of injustice will be cast out (10:8). This is what life is like in God's kingdom coming on earth.

Holding fast to a promise made by our Church

In 2011, the Synod Moderator launched CMN's research for the cleaners' union. She said, 'the CMN has been working for many years on issues for vulnerable workers ... I am so pleased ... that we have put together this important publication that starts with the voice of a cleaner, Jacqui The UCA seeks to work ... to augment the voice of those who strive for justice in their working lives.'" (p. 3, *Cutting Corners*) Yet today, as we survey with Jesus the plight of workers cleaning our schools, working for Coles, for Commisure (the Commonwealth Bank's insurer), for 7/11 stores, construction workers, the unemployed

and under-employed, we too are deeply sorry for these women and men, 'because they (are) ... distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.' (9:36)

The Moderator promised that our church would sustain a mission of justice to working people. So we at the CMN Congregation are seeking to support our members in their work, and to reach out to workers through our Mission to Work Committee. Now as our Lord commands, let us pray that we may be further equipped to harvest the desire for healing and justice of those too long burdened by oppression and injustice in their working lives. Let us open our hearts to a prayerful conversation together as members of St. Georges and CMN congregations, that the darkness which has blinded our church to our mission will be cast out. And let us take hold of the authority Christ has given to us to cast out those unclean spirits of corporate Australia from within our midst, so that our lives may be renewed in health and wholeness for Christ's ministry of healing, justice and reconciliation.

John Bottomley
St. Georges
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