

“Fruitfulness in Brokenness”

(Romans 9.1-5 and Matthew 14.13-21)

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Paul’s Grief (Romans 9.1-5)

“You need to know that I carry with me at all times a huge sorrow. It’s an enormous pain within me, and I’m never free of it.”

It’s Paul grieving for his people, the Jews, because they won’t accept Jesus as the Christ. It’s breaking his heart...

Do you know the back-story to this? Most Christians don’t...

Jesus was executed in the midst of a turbulent contest between a number of different parties competing for the heart and soul of Judaism – the Temple, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Jesus Movement... and more – all claiming to be the true expression of the faith of Israel. The contest didn’t end with Jesus’ crucifixion – far from it. And inspired by the resurrection, the Jesus Movement didn’t disappear. They stayed front and centre pressing their claim – that Jesus was the long expected Messiah – with great energy. Most of us have a vague memory of the early persecutions of the Jesus followers, particularly in Jerusalem – all part of this conflict between the warring parties... violence in which Paul himself played a leading role. But most of us don’t recognise that through all this early period described in Acts and the Letters, Jesus-followers still regarded themselves as Jews, and worshipped in their local synagogue... throughout Judea and wherever Jews had spread through the Roman Empire.

And there was actually a chance that ‘we’ might have won the day – that Jesus *would* be accepted as Lord in the Jewish faith? That was the hope of the apostles – the leadership of Peter, James and co. in Jerusalem. Some historians say it was a close thing!

And you can hear it was a hope dear to Paul’s heart too – hence his grief and sorrow. Because by the time he writes this letter to the Roman church, he’s decided the Jews will never accept Jesus. That’s how he reads the evidence of what he sees and hears... and he becomes convinced the Spirit is calling the Jesus-followers in a new and different direction. There was angry disagreement over this. The head apostles, the official leadership in Jerusalem, accuse Paul of spoiling their chances –

that if only he would go more quietly, be less radical, and not so lenient on the Gentiles (the non-Jews), they might still win the day.

But by the time he writes *Romans*, Paul knows this is wishful thinking – *that* hope, *that* dream is dead... Paul is putting all his energy into what he discerned as the new movement of God's Spirit – the new church, the new religion that came to be known as Christian. He feels the grief terribly – it breaks his heart – but he won't look back now. No matter how unpopular it made him with the leaders, the Spirit was calling him to build new churches... and they were not Jewish.

This was a huge and bitter fight in the early church. But history proved Paul right... After the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, it was the Pharisee party that emerged from the ashes as the new orthodoxy of Judaism... and the Jesus-followers were finally and completely expelled from the synagogues as heretics. It was a bitter split... and by the end of the first century, Judaism and Christianity were two distinct and separate religions.¹

Thank God for Paul! Because of his honesty... his willingness to face the pain of what was happening... there was a new church structure ready, indeed thriving, when that final break came.

The Dying Church

You need to know that *I* carry within me... all the time... a huge sorrow. It's grief, a pain deep within me... and *I'm* never free of it. I grieve for all that is dying in the church... the church I've loved and served since childhood. Almost everywhere I look I see our brokenness – we're so small and fragile now... and the decline is quickening and intensifying. I use the word *grief*, because to me it does look and feel like a death.

I don't talk about it much in public because people don't like it. But Paul's lured me out of the closet today... and it is good to be honest.

It's not a problem of faith... nor is it a lack of hope. God is God and all will be well. Christ Jesus is Lord of the Church. The Spirit is at work and She will bring all things to fulfilment. The Christian faith is not under threat of extinction. A new way of being church will emerge, resurrection-like,

¹ This is a simplification of a complex and messy process, but it will suffice for a sermon.

from the ashes of what once was. I have unwavering faith in all this, and I'm ready and willing to be part of whatever future the Spirit brings forth.

But if we're talking honestly, I feel our brokenness terribly. I know many of you do too. And it's more than OK to be honest – it's *good* to be. For the faith teaches us that there is unexpected fruitfulness in brokenness... indeed it's where new life begins.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14.13-21)

Today's Gospel, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, is a well-known story... and one that can be explored in many different ways. But in the church's reflection on it over 2,000 years, our attention has often been drawn to Christ's central action – he takes the bread and he *breaks* it!² It is in the *breaking* that the 'miracle of abundance' is released. It is this action of breaking... and *being* broken... that brings forth the fruitfulness of thousands being fed... and satisfied!

This metaphor of *brokenness* is central to Christ's understanding of his own sacrifice – he is broken on the cross in order that God's grace may flow out over the whole creation. As a church we believe that what is true of Christ, becomes our vocation too. We are to be the *broken ones* through whom God will feed the world. (You'll find this metaphor dotted through the Eucharist we share this morning.)

Brokenness

The experience of being *broken* is indeed painful but it's not negative – it's *life-beginning* not *life-ending*. In our personal world it is the ordinary experience of living that breaks us. We begin with this sense of our selves as the centre of everything – potent, powerful, able to take charge of our destiny, able to have things on our terms. But suffering, loss, pain, disappointment, failure... all these ordinary things break down the illusion of the ego... and we realise we're not like that at all. It is the false constructed self that is broken... and when it dies... shatters... the true self can emerge from the debris. And as with today's gospel, that's when we become unexpectedly and miraculously fruitful... and that wonderful abundance of life (as Christ envisioned in The Kingdom) flows freely...

² Just as he does at the Last Supper.

most particularly in love! In our marriages, with our children and grandchildren, our friends and community... it is the experience of brokenness that opens us up to love. Forget the illusion of potency and power... and pay attention to weakness, vulnerability and 'littleness' instead... and watch what is released in that new space.

Exactly the same is true for the church. We³ got lost in our own self-importance, our power and potency through the many years of Christian ascendancy – it didn't do us, or the proclamation of the faith, any good. Now we're being broken. It's painful... and to feel grief at what we've lost is entirely healthy... but *the breaking* is necessary... and new life will be released in this. Indeed following the lead of St Paul, it's good to be honest in this. For the very worst thing we could do now is to hold onto a dream of the 'good old days' coming back again. (Clearly the Spirit is not interested in that.) Nor should we, in my opinion, be too quick to push the pain aside and throw ourselves into a frenzy of activity and positive thinking. We need to face the pain, and learn what is essential in this experience of being broken... because Jesus Christ and the faith that has formed around him, has always taught... that it's embracing the brokenness that releases God's abundant fruitfulness.

"Jesus blessed and broke the loaves... and the disciples gave them to the crowd. All ate and were satisfied; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."

³ In western society.