

When Churches Picket Each Other

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13 & 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 July 2024

© LaughingBird.net

Message

God is most likely and able to work through those who accept their own weakness and don't try to forcefully assert their own power and influence.

Sermon

Three weeks ago, the assembly of the Baptist Association of NSW & ACT passed resolutions to force the expulsion of churches and pastors who are not willing to pledge opposition to same-sex marriage. This has been brewing for several years, and the anticipated need for a new home for those churches and pastors was the main trigger for the formation of the Open Baptists, a new association that our church has become a foundation member of. We still belong to the Baptist Union of Victoria too because, unlike our friends north of the river, we are not being expelled and probably aren't likely to be. There are, of course, Baptists in Victoria who would like to do what has been done in NSW, but they don't have the numbers, and the gradual tide of public opinion is probably making it harder for them to ever get them.

It is now nine years since an angry mob of unidentified Christians picketed the Collins Street Baptist Church one Sunday morning over its support for same-sex marriage, chanting loud angry slogans so as to cause as much disruption as possible to the worship service going on inside. But not only has the Collins Street Church not changed its position since then, it has been joined by a lot more churches who have come to share its view. Two years after that, when our church displayed a large sign in support of legalising same-sex marriage on our street front during the campaign leading up to the national postal vote, it didn't even get vandalised.

Conservative Christian anger over this has not gone away, but it has waxed and waned in the vehemence of its activism. There was certainly a resurgence of it during that 2017 postal vote campaign, and it seems to fire up a bit whenever some prominent Christian leader or theologian announces they have changed their mind on the subject. There are certainly sections of the church that see this as an issue on which to circle the wagons and barricade themselves and their people against the evils of the world. The recent decision by our Baptist siblings north of the river is an obvious example of that.

It is not hard to explain this as the inevitable frantic death throes of a lost cause, but these angry and frantic protesters are also our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter how much we disagree with their views or their methods, and we would do well to think more carefully and compassionately about what is going on for them and what it might be like for them, and how often we might be not much different. And of course, this is not the only issue dividing Christians and the wider community. The current deep divisions over the bloodshed in Gaza run right through the middle of the church too, and the pathway to healing involves seeking to understand what is going on for one another. I think the Bible readings we have heard tonight are quite helpful here.

One of the questions going on in our readings and in the NSW Baptist decision and in the Gaza debates is about what genuine Christian discipleship looks like. When there is a division of opinion in the church, are there signs that tell us whose side God is on? If we are among

those who are feeling incensed because our beliefs and convictions are rapidly losing ground, is there a feeling that our God is under attack and that we need to fight to recover the lost ground in order to prove that our position is blessed by God and on the winning side? Is there a feeling that the success or otherwise of our campaigns directly reflects on God? And is there a feeling that if we are not winning, perhaps our whole faith system feels like it is in danger of collapsing, for surely God's side always prevails?

These anxious questions are not confined to one side or the other. Many of our Open Baptist friends in NSW have struggled with these feelings too as they've witnessed their conservative opponents cheering their victories in achieving the expulsion from the association. Is God really with us? Wherever you sit in this debate or any other, when we feel that our position is under threat, we can easily get caught up in angry hostility towards those on the other side and begin to mirror one another.

In our reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians tonight, we heard the apostle speak of whether or not he might boast about spectacular mystical experiences he had had, or whether his "thorn in the flesh" might be more relevant to the credibility of his leadership. Behind this lies a difficult conflict in the church at Corinth and, just like in our situation, both sides were keen to prove their credibility. There is a group who are opposing Paul and who are boasting of various things such as mystical visions that they suppose give strength and credibility to their leadership and who are pointing to various things about Paul that could be seen as signs of weakness and ineffectiveness, and ridiculing his claims to be an apostle and leader.

There is nothing very surprising about this, especially when you remember how dominant stories like the ones we've been hearing recently about King David were in the mindset and worldview of the Jewish people. Tonight we heard of the consolidation of David's power. Having been the king of Judah for seven and a half years, he now becomes king over all twelve tribes of Israel, because the people are so impressed by his strong leadership and his military victories. And the reading concluded by saying that "David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him."

So for the Jewish people, much like for every other people on earth, power and success were equated with the blessing of God. Whether it is David on his throne, the boastful leaders at Corinth, Christian same-sex marriage supporters quoting stats to prove that public opinion is swinging their way, or the conservative side of the Baptist Association of NSW & ACT proving that they can still muster the numbers for a purge, we are very prone to imagining that our successes prove that we are God's chosen ones.

And even when we are not so sure about ourselves, if we chant loudly enough all in unison, or take a vote and expel the losers, we make ourselves feel powerful and a part of something bigger and stronger than ourselves. It is certainly quite intoxicating. But is it really God's way?

Not according to the Apostle Paul. He makes the point that if he chose to try to match the claims of spectacular mystical experiences, he could do it, but he sees no point in doing so. The only claim to credibility and integrity he offers up is "what is seen in me or heard from me." In other words, he is saying, "Don't judge me (or anyone) by the visions or dreams that I've seen, but by the integrity of the things I do and say." And then in response to the charges that he is a man of many obvious weaknesses, he simply smiles and says "guilty as charged"

and then points out that it is those who are not seduced by their own strength and influence who God is most able to use because they are not constantly getting in God's way by trying to do it their own way.

He claims that God has deliberately chosen not to relieve him of one of his unidentified weaknesses, his so-called 'thorn in the flesh', in order to ensure that he didn't take himself too seriously and let his success make him less useful to God's mission. He says that when he prayed for an end to this torment, God told him "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." And so, says Paul, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." I wonder what Paul might want to say to us as we puff out our chests at one another across the dividing lines on the current marriage debates or Israel-Palestine debates.

Paul, of course, is pointing to Jesus here. He frequently uses the image of Jesus being executed as the principal example of what God can achieve through apparent weakness and failure, but he could also have pointed to the story we heard in tonight's gospel reading. Jesus is hardly a raging success when he preaches in his hometown synagogue. The locals takes exception to him. "Who does he think he is?" they start asking. "Precocious young upstart. Who does he think he is to be telling us what God wants of us?" And the gospel writer tells us that Jesus couldn't do anything much in the way of deeds of power there, because they were so unwilling to accept him. Not a big success at all. He seems to have ended up with an angry mob picketing the venue and a vote to expel him too.

And in the second part of the reading we heard of him sending out his disciples to preach and heal, and although they seem to have had some success, Jesus certainly doesn't presume that they can count on it, because he gives them explicit instructions about how to respond when any place refuses to hear them. No need for an angry violent response. No huge display of power or judgement. Just shake the dust off your feet and move on.

I think that it is quite instructive to look a bit more closely at what it was that upset the people in Nazareth when Jesus came home to preach there. The thing that upset them was that he was supposed to be one of them. You'd think that they might be thrilled at a local boy made good, and there probably is a bit of that. If he'd been playing in the finals of the All Judah and Galilee Football League, the home town folk would all have been cheering. We love our locals to hit the big time elsewhere.

But we are not nearly so comfortable when someone grows up among us and then begins shining the light of truth into the dark corners of our lives. We can take it from visitors and get excited about their power and their fiercely prophetic message. That extra distance of the visiting outsider creates a comfortable buffer for us. We can applaud and thank them for a wonderful challenge and go home secure in the knowledge that, since they don't really know us, their message is general and not really specifically directed at us.

But when someone grows up among us and knows us only too well, we imagine, rightly or wrongly, that everything is targeted directly at us and we take offence. What we want and demand from our locals, our home grown prodigies, is that they reinforce our sense of our own goodness and specialness. We want them to help us maintain our feelings of being righteous, certain and safe. We want them to join us in pointing the finger at the errors and evils of our enemies, and to highlight how much better we are than them. We want them to

play their socially prescribed role in championing “us” and “our understanding” of God and the world.

So long as the home grown prophet sticks to that, all will be well and we will politely applaud and congratulate ourselves on having produced such a talent. But when the home grown prophet is more faithful to God than to local expectations and begins genuinely preaching the radical news of the emerging culture of God, all hell breaks loose. Who do they think they are, breaking ranks and speaking to us like that?

And we are far more savage on those who are supposed to be like us than those who we know are outsiders. The zealots who moved the expulsion resolutions in the NSW assembly were not atheists or white witches or zoroastrians. They were Christians who, like the Nazarenes, are angry because their fellow Christians have broken ranks and failed to stick to the script of simply reinforcing the established position of the team. You are supposed to be one of us, they are saying. Who do you think you are, preaching something other than what we have always believed in our little corner of the world? And of course we can easily slip into responding in kind and regarding them with hostility and contempt.

Certainly, in their angry “show of strength” they do manage to intimidate people and make some of us feel weak and frightened and persecuted. But that certainly doesn’t mean that God is now on the side of the powerful protesters. If anything, it makes it all the more likely that it is the expelled ones who are walking in the humble footsteps of Jesus.

But that is a bit too easy for me to say. I’m standing up here using the “power of the pulpit” to make my own “show of strength”. I’m using my privileged position and my ability with words to present the events with the spin that favours my view of the truth. That’s actually a very powerful position, and I need to face the truth that their fear of losing the arguments to the likes of me is no less justified and perhaps no less significant than our fears of being expelled and isolated.

The challenge, whichever side of the line we are on, is to have the courage to meet one another in our vulnerability instead of puffing out our chests and trying to out-muscle one another with whatever strengths we have at our disposal. Because, we are not only more open to one another, but more open to God, when we are not hiding our weaknesses but allowing God to work in them and through them.

As the apostle Paul put it at the end of our reading, “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Jesus was tossed out of his home town, and eventually Jerusalem when the whole city, especially the religious people, turned on him and purged him from their midst. The expelled churches in NSW are in very good company, the company of our Lord.

But those who are feeling so threatened by the rising support for same-sex marriage and are feeling that their worldview and their faith are being savagely attacked are also in the company of our Lord who found himself increasingly isolated and endangered as the tide of public opinion turned against him. And if the Apostle Paul is right, it is if all of us, whatever our views on whatever controversial issue, can embrace our weakness and vulnerability and allow our risen Lord to introduce us to one another in our shared weakness that we might

discover the pathways of reconciliation and understanding and together shine the light of the gospel into the society around us.