

Creation Sunday, 18 October 2020

Reflection: Rising UP into a new creation

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Isaiah 65: 17b, 22b

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered ...
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.”

2 Corinthians 5: 14-17

14 For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. 15 And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.
16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

1. Is there a new creation? Really? As we face Covid-19?

Is Paul in touch with reality when he writes to the church in the city of Corinth around 55 ACE that being a follower of Jesus Christ means you live in a new world, in a new creation?

How does this speak to our situation here in Westmead, and in the world, as the challenge of Covid-19 hangs over us and keeps us distant from each other? To live in a new “anything” seems a fantasy?

As always, we need to stop and consider what Paul’ situation is, and what he means by this statement in this city of Corinth.

Paul founded this congregation in the city of Corinth, a cosmopolitan city, where Greek Gods were worshipped until the Romans destroyed it in 126 BCE. Julius Caesar began rebuilding it in 44BCE. It became a wealthy city, and by the time Paul arrives, Corinth had the largest population in Greece with Greeks, Jews and Romans occupants. The congregation is in a cosmopolitan context.

The Uniting Church New Testament scholar, Bill Loader, tells us:

The key to understanding these chapters of 2 Corinthians is to recognise that Paul faces criticism because of his ministry. It is

personal and probably also directed against his particular theology. His opponents who have infiltrated Corinth sought to undermine him at a number of points. They apparently make much of their successes. They live "victorious Christian lives", whereas Paul shows many signs of being weak and vulnerable.

2. Paul is realistic; he faces rejection and marginalisation, yet he still seeks to live in a new creation!

That answers our question: Paul is not unrealistic! In his own challenging situation, he is writing from his own experience of rejection and marginalisation. And in the midst of a very difficult situation, in faith, he seeks to live differently, even within this difficult context where everything seems against him.

From his other letters to other congregations we discern that he faces criticism from every side: As a Jewish national he challenges his Jewish culture which marginalises non-Jewish Christian people demanding they fulfil the Jewish laws; as a multicultural person he calls on all sides to accept that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, but both sides can't accept this; as a male in a patriarchal society he says there is neither male nor female, and finds male domination pushing back against this – even though he remained patriarchal in many ways -and so, and so on. And of course, from an economic perspective, there is no place for slaves, and this is unacceptable to a society whose economics is organised around slavery.

It is the "love of Christ" that drives him on to live out his faith, to celebrate the new creation God provides for us through the coming of Jesus, teaching, ministry, mission, death and resurrection. As Christ shared power, even to the death, against the religious, political and social leaders of his time, so Paul lives a life so power is shared equally by all regardless of the division of humanity into class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Again, Bill Loader puts it well when he writes:

Faith celebrates resurrection to new life where people no longer live for self-promotion, but for love. Paul understands that as living for Christ and so for God, and for what God is about, which he will explain in terms of love and reconciliation.

So, Paul constantly encourages the ancient congregations by saying, through faith *you are* in Christ, now *become* a new creation, celebrate and express your new creation.

And when Paul calls us to not regard others from the human point of view, he is not spiritualising humanity. Rather he is challenging an inadequate humanity which seeks its own power, the flesh, "sarx" in the ancient Greek, which seeks its own ends, which focusses on the sensational

in Jesus, the miracles and the resurrection, avoiding the way of the cross. So, he is affirming being human by living in love and shared power.

Paul lives out a different way of being. He views and relates to others “as if” all things are new. The way of the cross is his new being, living as Jesus lived, expressing the love that Jesus showed in his life among humanity of his time, always and even unto death.

3. How UP can we go?

What can Paul’s words mean for us today?

I want to share a film that might suggest how we can live out a new creation within the challenges of life in our own situations.

In the amazing, animated adventure, *UP*, from the Pixar company, producers of *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo* and *Monsters Inc*, and more recently *Wall-E*, two very insignificant, totally different and unlikely pair of unadventurous characters meet and are thrown into what turns out to be an audacious adventure, living in a new world, discovering a new sense of self and community.

In this film, Carl Fredricksen is a gruff 78 yr-old widower, a retired balloon salesperson.

We first meet Carl in the 1930s as a shy, introverted young schoolboy who constructs a fantasy, to be like his hero and adventurer, Charles F Muntz (Christopher Plummer) whom he sees in a newsreel. Muntz travels the world in his airship, *The Spirit of Adventure*, visiting exotic places and collecting strange animals, and disappears in search of the legendary Paradise Falls in the Andes in South America.

Carl meets his spirited childhood sweetheart, Ellie, who has the same fantasy.

Carl and Ellie marry, daydream, gaze at the clouds, suffer a terrible grief, and grow into contented old age together. But never step out into the new world.

... and it ends with Carl as a widower, stranded in ... loneliness.

And so, we find Carl, a now grouchy 78 yr-old who finds his house dwarfed by a soulless high-rise development – much like Epworth house at the moment - and about to be repossessed; he himself will soon be carted off to an aged care home.

However, Carl refuses other to imprison him in a home! This insignificant, gruff 78 yr-old widower sets out on an impossible possibility.

So, when the nurses from the aged-care home arrive to take him to a home they are shocked to watch his house lift off from the ground as hundreds of helium filled balloons rise out of the roof of his house.

In his end-years, he has started to put his latent and discarded talents, when he was a balloon salesperson, to creative use.

Yet, as the house rising up of into the clouds, powered by the many balloons, on its way to discover Paradise Falls in South America, the journey into the new world, Carl is overwhelmed with one unanticipated challenge after another.

Each challenge transforms his life.

The first surprise for Carl is a knock on his door as his house reaches the clouds. When Carl opens the door, he sees a frightened Russell on his porch, the 8 yr-old boy scout who had been annoying him during a number of visits, wanting to collect an "Assisting the Elderly" badge.

Eventually, they land in South America and have to drag their house across it in search of the Falls. They meet and befriend Dawg, a talking golden retriever and a giant multi-coloured bird of paradise, a female called Kevin.

Conclusion

In this journey, two totally different people, Carl and Russell bond on their way to Paradise Falls, and the cranky, impatient Carl discovers both the son he never had and his own youthful self by fulfilling the adventure he and former wife Ellie didn't manage.

This journey illustrates how people who are very different, are of infinite smallness and insignificance, can outrageously cultivate an expansive life. A new life, a new creation.

It demanded courage, stepping out of the known, and negotiating inner anxiety, annoyance and distrust of others, and in this to discover a new way of being alive in a new community of friends.

Add word

I want to add a word on creation spirituality, which lies quietly in Paul's writings, as in the image of the "groaning of creation" in Romans 8. And it lurks in this film *UP*, and in Bruce Cockburn's song, *If a tree falls in the forest does anybody hear? Anybody hear the forest fall?* And in the Isaiah text, "for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be", the link between the tree and human life further creates interconnectedness.

What is Bruce Cockburn trying to suggest by the impossible question, of us hearing a tree fall, say in the Amazon forest, here in Australia? It would be great to hear our ideas; here is mine for a start: That we are one creation, that we are interconnected at a deep, spiritual level, and that we do hear the groaning of creation if we empathically listen to our earth and

the trees as part of the earth. God groans, Christ and the Spirit groan, as the earth suffer, and we suffer.

Yet, even in this, God promises a new creation, and we are invited to step out and celebrate new creation in everything we do together.