

**Matt Julius Reflection 'Death, 'Resurrection and the Breath of Life' 24 February 2019**

**(Bible Readings: Luke 6: 27-38; 1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50)**

*God, may my words be loving and true, and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.*

“When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.”

These words come from the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was martyred during World War II, having publicly decried the Nazi regime from the time they took power in Germany.

The *Basis of Union*, the foundational theological document of the Uniting Church in Australia, commits the Church to “the continuing witness ... of evangelist, of scholar, of prophet and of martyr.” (*BoU §11*)

The words from the martyred Bonhoeffer resonate with our readings for today from Luke 6 and 1 Corinthians 15, and they remind us of that to which we are called:

“When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.”

Today I want to explore what it might mean to come and die.

It is worth reflecting that as we gather in worship only three things happen:

We are called to come and gather in worship.

We are fed by Word and by Sacrament.

And we are sent out to participate in Christ’s mission in the world.

This rhythm of coming, feeding, and sending is the pattern of the Church’s life. It is the breathing of the Church: in -- and out -- and in -- out.

This breathing sustains the life of the Church week by week, year by year.

And yet, at the core of this life-giving breath we hear the resonance of the martyred Bonhoeffer:

“When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.”

When we gather around the table we are fed. And we remember with wine and bread the blood and body of the martyred Christ.

When we open the Scriptures together we are fed by God's living Word. And we remember the stories of the Jewish people, we recall the early reflections of early Christian communities, and we retell the story of that same martyred Christ.

In other words, as we participate in the life giving breath of the Church:  
Come -- Feed -- Go

We are fed by a story that ultimately centres on death.

Life and death sit alongside each other here.

This is the structure that holds our reflection on today's reading. Life giving breath, centred on death.

What does it mean to sit alongside life and death as we gather here?

What does it mean that Christ bids us come and die?

... and how, after *that*, are we sent to go?

In other words, if in fact we come here and die: how are the dead raised?

This is the question that Paul faces squarely in our reading from 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul is responding to questions about what it means to come and die, and then to be resurrected. But given what I've already said, it should come as no surprise that I don't think this is primarily a question of speculation: of what happens to us in the great beyond, when we are left in the faithful arms of God.

The questions Paul engages are rarely so abstract. Paul's writings respond to real conflicts that arose within the communities he founded. Paul is first and foremost a practical and pastoral theologian - even if this is hard to see 2,000 years later. This is why Paul's writings are titled in our Bibles, not as great treatises on theology. But we title Paul's writings based on where they were sent, what communities they were for, who Paul was in relationship with.

These letters were not primarily written to address our every curiosity and speculation. Rather, they were written to speak into gatherings like this: where people came, and were fed, and were sent out into the world.

This is the context in which we must read Paul's words. Not as abstract and obscure. But as grounded, as people who come, and are fed, and are sent out into the world.

In other words, we should read Paul's writings in the same way you are listening to me now: sitting, listening, wondering what these words have to do with you, wondering when he is going to get to the point ...

“What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” (1 Cor 15.36)

When you sow a seed, the seed goes into the ground and dies. The seed breaks open, and from that seed a new form, a new life grows.

What we are when we come dies. We are broken open. We are nourished. And we are sent out to grow.

Paul uses a variety of images to explain what this process means. It means we bring dishonour, and grow into glory. It means we bring weakness, and grow into power. It means we bring our bodies - aged, scarred, tired, messy - and we grow into what Paul calls a “spiritual body.”

Paul suggests here that our spiritual body does not replace our physical bodies. We will not, all of a sudden, float up into the sky, or begin to walk through walls. The physical, the earthly - the dust from which we come - must always come first. We bear the image of Adam, the man of dust, the man who is human: made of flesh and bone.

But the new life we grow into begins to inhabit our bodies in a new way. We carry not only the image of the man of dust, we begin to carry the image of the man of heaven: the image of Christ.

In other words, in our coming, and our dying, and our going out, we participate in the life-giving breath of Christ. We breathe in -- and out -- and in -- out. We are continuously called to open ourselves up and be transformed into new life. And this new life looks like Jesus.

As we come, are fed, and go out into the world our hope is that we will become more and more and more like Jesus. Our hope is that the image of God that we bear might come into greater focus: and become the image of Christ.

Paul answers the question about resurrection by pointing us to our need to become more and more and more like Jesus. It is through becoming like the resurrected Christ that we ourselves experience resurrection. And for this we have to die.

We have to open ourselves up. We have to shed the husks that keep us closed in on ourselves, unable to expand and grow and connect with the other saplings growing around us. We have to set aside our assumptions about what is important. Even when it's hard.

“When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.”

Our reading from the Gospel of Luke further clarifies the image of Christ we are called to bear, by giving us the call Christ makes to us.

Christ calls us to love. To love our enemies, and to do good even when people hate us.

Christ calls us to peacemaking. To make peace through generosity, even when we are treated unfairly.

Christ calls us to move beyond our narrow focus on ourselves and the people close to us. We are called to embrace everyone: to be merciful as God is merciful.

Here the call of Christ is clear. And simple:

“Come. Follow me.”

Follow Christ as he journeys to the cross. Follow Christ as he pours out love, though he is whipped, and beaten, and crucified. Follow Christ who offers generosity to those who treat him unfairly. Follow Christ as he offers blessings for everyone - not just his closest friends.

Here the call of Christ does is not simply a list of do's and don'ts. The call of Christ is to follow him to the cross, to death.

“When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.”

Through this coming and dying, where we open ourselves to being fed by God, we become more and more like Christ. We see more and more the reign of God's love, and peace, and generosity taking root in the world.

We see the common good promoted. Peace protected. The things that weigh us down prized from our shoulders.

In this we find the resurrection life. A new reality which inhabits our bodies and our lives like a life-giving breath.

In -- and out -- and in -- and out.

*Amen.*