

**Reflection on the first Sunday after Pentecost,
the day after Black Lives Matter protests in Melbourne.**

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Bible reading (read this first): 2 Corinthians 4: 1-18

This has been such an emotionally demanding week!

For some that has been focused around concern and care for those we love. There has also been the continued pressure of taking great care to prevent the potential spread of Covid-19. But over all of that, the chorus of protest against systemic racism not just in America, but in Australia with respect to the experience of so many Indigenous people, has been surfaced powerfully after so many more straws have broken the camel's back.

While we might worry about the dangers of gathered protests in a potentially infectious environment, the message is clear enough and strong enough and quite right, to shake our complacency. As many other commentators have pointed out, while the rates of incarceration of black people in America are disproportionate to the size of the population, the rates in Australia are actually proportionally far worse.

We, too, despite Royal Commission recommendations, have laws which target relatively petty offenses which disproportionately affect indigenous communities; and we, too, continue to have a problem with deaths in custody, with literally hundreds of aboriginal deaths in custody in the last 3 decades, reinforcing anxieties about the police within the communities which carry hurts already, but until recently without as much attention from the general Australian public.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, is not writing about this situation.

However, following the theme of the previous chapter in his letter, this chapter starts off by talking about public truthfulness and clarity, renouncing the shameful things that people hide, not trying to falsify God's word, but being open and truthful in testimony. This resonates with what protesting for justice involves.

Paul then writes, "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." Clearly this is just one of the reasons why a President waving a Bible around is problematic. "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake."

Paul is proclaiming the reconciling action of God, who in Jesus enters this strife-torn world; calls out hypocrisy; and acts with healing and compassion to restore people to health and community; so that through his death for us and with us, and his resurrection to new life, we may be reconciled with God and know God's life at work in us. He proclaims God's love

and embrace of us, that love which is shown to be so costly, costing Jesus his life – taking on mortality and dying alongside the marginalised, such was his love for us all.

Paul carries that within him – he writes that he carries the death of Jesus within him - so *that* the life of Jesus – the resurrection life, the life of hope – may shine through him, and through all of us.

This week, I have seen people who carry the deaths of their loved ones in marginalised circumstances standing up, that some light may shine through them, for the sake of hope for others. This message resonates for us, for like Paul says, we carry the death of Jesus in us; so there is and must be a strong resonance with these protests. And in these clay jars of our mortal bodies we proclaim hope we look to the bigger realm – the promise and goal of God – for justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Paul justifies speaking in this way by quoting from a wonderful Psalm, Psalm 116. It's the Psalm that begins "I love the Lord, *for he has heard my voice...*" Paul quotes from the middle of it words that go something like: "I believed, and so I spoke." Paul spoke truth, even though he faced persecution. He spoke truth, so that others would be free, free to know Jesus, and freed to share in the grace and glory of God.

To quote just a little more from that sentence in the Psalm, the Psalmist says "I believed, and I spoke, saying 'I am greatly afflicted'." The Psalmist has enough faith to complain before God; the Psalmist has faith that it is worth voicing a complaint, voicing a protest, voicing the pain, in order to be heard, in order to call for restoration. Protesting has a solid basis in the Bible, especially in the presence of affliction and pain, looking for justice and restoration.

Paul, speaking about God's grace to us in Jesus, has of course got a particular basis for not losing heart, even as he puts his body on the line in his proclamation. Twice he says, "So we do not lose heart", because he knows that God holds us all; that within our clay jars, our frail flesh, we hold a treasure of hope in eternal living of God, so that all of these things that emotionally grip us in this week can be held up to God's care; can be voiced before God, who hears us; can be part of our yearning for God's kingdom which is so much more that we can now see.

So we stand with those who protest unnecessary deaths and ingrained cultures and social frameworks that perpetuate inequality and mistrust. We cry to God, for reconciliation for all people just as God calls through us for people to share in the love and promise of God; We cry to those politicians who have the opportunity to put aside partisan politics and take greater steps towards justice and towards a real response to the statement from the heart, from the heart of this nation.

And we do not lose heart; for we carry the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may be visible in us: – his promise of hope through the reconciling God of all.
Amen.