



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Year End Thanksgiving

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Philippians 4:13

“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

Our end of year service comes as we enter December and, as is frequently the case, coincides with Advent Sunday which in point of fact is not the end, but the beginning of the Christian year. This allows us to both look back with thanksgiving, as well as anticipate the future with hope.

At year end, there is often a good deal of healthy reflection taking place. Very soon our newspapers and other social media will be crowded with events and personalities that have helped to shape the year that is drawing to a close. An authentic Christian contribution is to gather our thinking and offer it in gratitude to God. Holding these two aspects together is second nature to us at Wesley Mission. We have a past, a present and a future!

I want to use Philippians 4:10-20 as a focus and particularly draw our thinking around the note of thanksgiving that is evident throughout the passage.

It is surprising to find an elaborate and carefully worded expression of thanks, coming at the end of the letter rather than at the outset. This leads some to conclude that it may actually be another letter in its own right. Four points need to be kept in mind when reading Philippians:

- Paul is addressing a community for which he has special affection
- the Philippians supported him when others didn't
- it contains some of the most memorable of the Apostle Paul's words
- the Philippians' private struggles are compounded by opposition and suffering from outside.

Paul expresses his gratitude while making it plain he is not soliciting gifts. He even goes as far as to say he could manage without them. Kenneth Grayston suggests that this is an awkward thing to say in a letter of thanks.

Try to imagine a group of you club together to help fund a friend to do some humanitarian or Christian work in a remote part of Central Australia. After some time you get a long letter, offering you advice on how you might serve God better, with little mention of your support until the very end.

This would appear harsh, except for the fact that the final few paragraphs are replete with much to encourage and reveal the writer's deep regard for the recipients. I want to take one verse in particular, open it up and offer ways in which it might be helpful to all of us as we join our thoughts and prayers in gratitude to God at year end.

Text: Philippians 4:13

“I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”

Paul came from Tarsus, one of the chief centres of Stoic thought. Stoicism was a Greek way of thinking, which had begun about three hundred years prior to this letter and could be summed up as:

- one in which virtue is all you need for happiness
- a stoical person might be immune to misfortune or suffering.

Earlier parts of the letter could be read as informed by Stoicism, but Paul and the Stoics were so different. Paul did not believe in the intrinsic force of the human being against all outward pressure and these words underline his conviction that all human effort requires the power of Christ to help us.

This is one of the ways in which both as individuals and as a community engaged in playing a significant role in Australian life, we stand apart. Of course we:

- employ very talented people
- adopt strategic planning in relation to our mission
- take a sensible, conservative approach to finance.

But those things in themselves will not provide us with enough. We seek the blessing of God who will pour out his strength upon us and through us. What does this mean?

Strength will be given appropriate to the task

Have you ever watched a child struggle to walk for the first time? In our own family, sliding around has often seemed a better option for children and grandchildren. There can be much struggle involved in walking and, at times, even tears. Once they do walk, mark you, it is a case of moving everything to higher ground!

Everyone learns life this way, even Einstein, Churchill, Beethoven, Don Bradman and so on. Most new things begin with some sense struggle, which requires determination. It should not surprise us then in our important engagement in the community if it also involves the execution of hard work. This can be particularly true when we launch a program and perhaps even more so when new factors emerge in the delivery of the service in its unique social and welfare setting.

We often learn far more from life's problems than we do from its successes. Here we discover the real pathway to positive outcomes. In a distinctive sense, this is why the way of the cross remains our chief emblem and what unites us. There is no Christianity without referring to the full extent of God's love towards us. It is the mantle of concern which we cast over all our services alongside people in need.

I recall talking with Joni Eareckson who has spent her life as a marvellous Christian witness, bereft of most of the physical abilities we take for granted, and she writes, “Sometimes all you can do is just cry. The Bible says there is a time to weep. I would say to someone who is hurting right now, just get angry with God. Better to get angry than walk away from him. Rant and rave if you must, scream and yell.”

She concludes, “The people who are the most joyful, not just giddy or happy or silly—the people who have the most even keel about them in terms of their quiet joy, seem to be those who have suffered a great deal.”

We need both personally and as a community of Word and deed to be ready to take on the challenges that life presents, and do so knowing that there are resources to sustain us in the task and challenges that we have to address.

I read of a man in public life who broke down from fatigue, lost control of himself and went for help. Knowing that this was not the first time, for thirty years earlier he had experienced a similar episode, the doctor reminded him that the previous bitter experience had been lingering in the subconscious mind and he now was fearful it was about to play out again.

With the help of medicine and good friends, he returned to health and in time his fears began to melt away. Just when he was utterly helpless, he found a God-given supply of energy and strength.

There are times when this is true personally, but also organisationally. Just when the tank is running close to empty, we receive refreshment and renewal of strength.

- We see positive outcomes in the people we help.
- Along comes the emergence of a new program.
- We see the much larger picture of God's work.

Challenges will be normative

In eight years of ministry and leadership at Wesley Mission, there have been times when I have come to a raised plateau after some of the challenges we have faced together and I have thought to myself—it's now going to be good to be able to have a time of great stability, with little change and a smooth future. Every time I have felt or said that, the next challenge has appeared—for example, as I reflect:

- Changes in the statutory care of children
- Changes in the way that governments at both State and Commonwealth level deal with services
- Changes in the aged care sector—which is going to be increasingly in the community and less about bricks and mortar
- Changes in our national responses to disability and the emerging NDIS
- Changes in the way that supported accommodation is addressed and the steadily growing numbers who are homeless
- Changes in mental health care and the development of our hospitals—integrated support of patients
- The Incorporation of our community services and the maintenance of our Word and deed ministry
- The challenges of an increasingly secular framework in which we as a Christian organisation must operate.

The list could go on and the challenges would continue to grow.

As the future opens up before us, we recognise that we are living through multiple layers of change and challenge. They approach us on all fronts. We know as well as anyone that we have to do more with less, we have to pick up responsibilities that were once held by governments and our accountability needs to be reflected in ever-tighter governance structures. The risks are being pushed out to providers!

We live in a parlous world where kindness can be in short supply. There is the amusing and powerful story of the couple who went to see their bank manager for a loan. After he had taken their particulars, he said, "By rights I should refuse your request, but I will give you a

sporting chance. Now, one of my eyes is made of glass. If you can tell me which one it is, I will grant you the loan.”

The pair looked at each other intently for a few moments and then said, “It’s your right eye.”

The bank manager said, “That’s correct. How did you guess?”

“Well,” said the husband, “it’s the one with kindness and sympathy.”

We are living in times when moral steel is rarely seen and where human life too easily is viewed as cheap:

- We see people in boats used as a political footballs
- We observe that a young man is ‘king-hit’ and dies on our streets in Sydney—and the offender just gets a four year sentence!

We observe the vastly different ways that situations are addressed and dealt with:

- We saw the wonderful way in which our fire-fighters were able to deal with our bushfires, but
- We observe the devastation in the Philippines at this time and the difficulties of handling a natural disaster of such magnitude

I suspect living with challenge is going to remain normative in our work and we need agility as an organisation and conviction as a Christian community to bear our witness effectively.

We can always discern opportunities for growth

With one part of our vision, we scan the past to understand how we are where we are today—and with the other, we look into the future, knowing that there will always be a degree of uncertainty. But Christian stability allows us to face the future, knowing that God will meet us at each gate of change.

We need to have strength and power to live as Wesley Mission and this will enable us to take on challenges, to be afraid of no-one or anything, save the fear of failing to do what is consistent with God’s love.

As we met as a Senior Leadership Team in November, we were joined by thirteen of our Senior Executives and I struck a note of growth—for during this past year we have begun to see indicators which point to more than merely green shoots.

As we consider our work with children and families and new, imaginative and as yet untried work with Mums with mental health issues and their very young children, we have been encouraged by the government’s confidence in our ability to deliver services. In addition, we have seen huge growth in our Out of Home Care.

I have asked our General Managers to look carefully at this whole area of growth and, in doing so, to continue the conversation we began in November. It will be important to hear their responses to the questions we put on the table:

- What will growth look like?—this may vary across the organisation, but it is certainly important to capture what it looks like in our different areas
- What are the opportunities for growth as we see them from our own perspective of operational service delivery?
- What are the capacity, capability and perceived caution from each of our perspectives?

When I looked back in my files to see when I last preached on this theme, it was at a school close of year service. There were many changes taking place, including the departure of the Head who had asked me to speak, and the School Chaplain, important in a large independent school.

I shared with them some words of Charles Dickens, written as an advert for a school in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

“At Mr Wackford Squeers’ Academy, Dotheboys Hall, at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, furnished with pocket-money, provided with all the necessaries, instructed in all languages living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry, the use of the globes, algebra, single stick (if required), writing, arithmetic, fortification and every other branch of classical literature. Terms, 20 guineas per annum. No extras, no vacations, and diet unparalleled.”

The single stick caused some of the young men to take breath. I said to the young people that God was no ogre, standing above us to correct us and what he offers to us may not be certain, but we can be sure we will not be left alone. We will be equipped for a new age and grow into the future.

Twice a year, I have one question put to me that exposes all my inadequacies and inconsistencies. It happens when a man very close up asks me the question, ‘And have we been flossing every day?’

As he fiddles around in my mouth, I try to construct new excuses for why I haven’t every morning and evening spent time with this marvellous waxed string to improve my dental health.

Similarly, we are confronted at the end of a year with a note of challenge that we cannot avoid.

Paul said to the church at Philippi that God would give them the strength they needed as they faced life’s challenge. The same promise is ours today.

Tonight we have honoured some of our people who have shared with us on our journey for many years. Now is not the time for drawing back from challenge, for mere consolidation—but rather to begin to turn growth potential into reality. We have both the confidence and ability to do just that.

We remind ourselves that we “can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”