

## 2011 Bishopdale Graduation Speech

During the last year Rosanne and I became grandparents – twice. Firstly, Ava was born and then Amelie. Ava’s parents, our son Mark and daughter-in-law Lara, had been married for some nine years. They were not sure they could conceive a child. It was medically unlikely. Finally they fell pregnant. Nine months of growth, tests, waiting. Then the labor. Finally the agony of birth. A time of recovery. Challenges. Sleepless nights. Fresh hopes. New fears.

Those of us engaged in theological education ought to be acutely aware that the contours of Mark and Lara’s personal story reverberate with truths concerning the shape of reality more widely. Birthing life is both delightful and agonising. Such has been the case at Laidlaw and, I expect, at Bishopdale over the past couple of years. And according to Paul’s words in Romans 8, such is the case more widely throughout the created order, within human experience and within the being of the triune God. Indeed the apostle here refers to a threefold agony, a chorus of groaning, as life is birthed. Consider portions of Romans 8.

- **The entire creation** (Romans 8:22) – the creation groans. This is not hopeless or lacking in purpose. It is certainly not despair. Here we have the pain of childbirth; “a symphony of sighs” across the entire created order. Here is both *agony* and *anticipation*. New life is being birthed. The creation “waits with eager longing” ... for what? For the revealing of the children of God. Who will be those who inhabit the finally and fully liberated creation? Who will be the glorious stewards in the glorious world to come? This is worth waiting for. There is an eager expectation. The creation stands, as it were, on tip-toes waiting, looking, longing for this future revelation. And yet there is an agony in the birthing of this renewed world.
- **God’s people** (Romans 8:23) – the created order is not alone in its agony and its expectation. God’s children also groan. We are all, as it were, pregnant with hope, with new life. We bear in our humanness the beginnings of the future. We have experienced God’s love. We are, in Christ, the first fruits of the future. And we expect so much more. We live between the ages. There is both joy and agony in our lives. We groan in harmony with the entire created order around us, longing for our own completed salvation – as Romans 8:23 puts it, “the redemption of our bodies.”
- **The Spirit of God** (Romans 8:26) – but there is a third in this symphony of sighs. It is God himself, the Spirit, who in 8:26 groans through us. In our groaning, waiting, agonised anticipation, we are weak, even speechless. The Spirit helps. He intercedes. He prays through us according to God’s will. Here is God strengthening us in our weakness as we await the promise of full freedom and life. We know joy in weakness and waiting. And God the Spirit is a participant in this weakness and waiting.

The entire creation, the people of God, the Spirit of God – groaning in pain and anticipation as new life is birthed and genuine hope realised. Here is both agony and expectation, passion and pain. These are the contours of reality understood in the light of the biblical story. And this is something entirely different to the idealised reality so often portrayed by advertisers and sometimes by preachers who have been captured by another gospel – a gospel where all one needs to be fixed up is another formula or product. For those who are young, healthy and wealthy enough, virtually nothing is beyond fixing in this deceitful, simplistic, alternative gospel. Such sanitised idealism is untrue to the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection, to Paul’s words in Romans 8 and to scripture more widely. And as those who seek to be

faithfully responsive to God's word in the Bible, we dare not pretend that one can escape from reality. There is rather the need to both work and rest well in the midst of such reality.

We would want to invite students, faculty, staff and stakeholders not to seek escape from reality rather to seek to embrace reality with courage and love. This is the invitation of the gospel of the crucified, buried and risen Lord Jesus and of the triune God whom we know through Christ.

I remember the concern in some segments of the Christian schooling movement when Nicholas Wolterstorff, a wise and respected educational leader, insisted that Christian schools needed to become places of "radical dissent", rather than safe shelters where parents sent their children to be protected. I actually don't think Wolterstorff went far enough in what he said. It is not "radical dissent" that we want from Christian schools or theological colleges or churches. It is *more than that*. It is "redemptive dissent." In other words, our dissent is not merely reactive to problems and perversions. It is rather responsive to the gospel of Christ. We do not seek to stand against the world. We are for the world in a redemptive sense. We are *in* the world, not *of* the world, but sent *into* the world. The church is raised up by Christ to be both against the world and for the world. Redemptive dissent finally moves into the world with courage and the hope of renewal. Here is the embrace of agony and expectation.

Is it any wonder that many of us find participation in theological education thoroughly unsettling. It is that – but of course it is much more. It is also thoroughly renewing as we are invited into redemptive *engagement* with reality rather than either *dissent* or *escape*. This must be the stance of a theological college that is for the church in the world, not of the world, but going into the world with the gospel of grace and renewal.

Over the past years, I have often drawn strength from the story of Hans and Sophie Scholl, brother and sister who were students in Munich during the Nazi rule in the 1940's. They had formed the White Rose group in 1942 and began pamphleteering against the Nazis government. Leaflets were at first sent anonymously to people all over Germany. Members then began leaving piles of leaflets in public places, phone booths, park benches, railway stations and particularly on university campuses.

On 18<sup>th</sup> February 1943, the Scholls distributed the sixth leaflet produced by the White Rose group. Jakob Schmidt, a member of the Nazi Party, saw them at the University of Munich, throwing leaflets from a window of the third floor into the courtyard below. They were arrested by the Gestapo and on the 20<sup>th</sup> February appeared before the People's Court judge, Roland Friesler. Found guilty of sedition Hans and Sophie Scholl were executed by guillotine a few hours later. On 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1941, Hans Scholl had written the following letter to his friend Rose Naegele. Speaking of Germany, he wrote:

Even though May came in accompanied by rain, all the fields were bright with the loveliest green imaginable. A sunbeam pierced a little gap in the dark sea of cloud, and the world laughed and glittered in the light of heaven. I stood there marveling and thought, Does God take us for fools, that he should light up the world for us with such consummate beauty in the radiance of his glory, in his honor? And nothing, on the other hand, but rapine and murder?

Where does the truth lie? Should one go off and build a little house with flowers outside the windows and a garden outside the door and extol and thank God and turn

one's back on the world and its filth? Isn't seclusion a form of treachery – of desertion? ... I'm weak and puny, but I want to do what is right.

Do you see the struggle into which Hans Scholl entered? The tension he had embraced. At the time there was widespread consensus that German culture was decaying. At a meeting in 1942, someone ventured the opinion that the way to cope with the situation – the Nazis – was not through protest but simply by hanging on and waiting out the nightmare. Apparently a dark and scowling Hans Scholl interjected: “Why don't we rent ourselves an island in the Aegean and offer courses on worldviews?” (Garber, p. 168) “We are Christians, and we are Germans; therefore we are responsible for Germany,” Scholl insisted.

Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra asserts that:

The biblical narrative reveals a God who is deeply entangled with his world, who immerses himself in our tragic history, who embraces our humanity with all its vulnerability, pain and confusion, including our evil and our death. Here is a God who comes to us not as master but as a servant, who stoops to wash the feet of his disciples and to suffer brutalization and dehumanization at the hands of his creatures. On the cross, God in Christ bears the indignity of all whose human dignity has been violated. In identifying with us in our broken humanity he draws the human into his own divine life. So what this means is that the closer we get to God, the more human we become, not less. This is a unique vision, there is nothing comparable in any of the world's literature or philosophies. (p. 103)

So, what should a theological college do? What sorts of students do we pray will graduate from this college? What is God's invitation?

We might say, students who love well and who grieve well. We would want to add, students who live in ways that are incisive, intelligent, courageous and sacrificial; students equipped to make connections between the Bible and theology to their areas of interest – church, family, counselling, education etc; students who are *for* the church *for* the world as agents of the kingdom of God; students who embrace truth, goodness and beauty individually and in community; students who live in such a way that they celebrate, critique and confront all things with grace; students who are people of character, conviction, courage and compassion.

Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983, p. 22) has written the following:

The Word of the Lord and the cries of the people join in calling us to do more than count our blessings, more than shape our inwardness, more than reform our thoughts. They call us to struggle for a new society in the hope and expectation that the goal of our struggle will ultimately be granted us.

That is our commitment at both Laidlaw and Bishopdale. We invite all of you to pray for us in this endeavor. Herein is the groaning, the agony and the expectation for all who seek to be faithful to the Lord.