

Sermon by Rev Dr Max Champion at the Inauguration of the *Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia* on 13th October 2006 at Wesley Church, Sydney

Lessons: Psalm 27:1-6; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Mark 4:35-41

Jesus said to them, 'Why are you afraid?'... They were filled with awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'(Mk 4:41)

The ship has been a symbol of the Church since the earliest days, representing the tiny faith community battered by hostile pagan culture and encouraged by the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus (depicted in the mast/Cross) to speak a word of hope to her neighbours. As Mark makes clear in his parable of the Church, there is hope for cowardly disciples and for the whole of humanity.

Mark alone of the Gospels mentions *'the other boats that were with him'* (v36). Jesus brings peace and hope to the storm tossed Church and to all people who suffer *natural* affliction and tragedy or unspeakable *human* brutality and terror. The world, too, benefits from the presence of Jesus.

Therefore, no matter how vulnerable a Church or a confessing movement may be, it mustn't try to shelter from the weather. Jesus brings peace *in the midst of* the tempest! The Church's role is be a faithful witness to what God has done and is doing for our broken world in Christ. And a confessing movement only exists to remind the whole Church, including her own members, of our common responsibility to *'confess Jesus Christ'* so that the world may believe.

In order to confess, we also need to be able to read the social barometer of our day. We are living in what many commentators call a *'post Christian,' 'post modern'* or *'neo-pagan'* society which, *having turned its back on* the great traditions of Christian faith and enlightened reason, *is turning back to* ideas and practices found within nature and human nature (the self). Thus:

- The *individual* has emerged as the centre of all beliefs and values,
- *Choice* is now an absolute right,
- *Tolerance* of diversity (good and bad) is a prime virtue,
- *Compassion* has superseded goodness as the mark of true humanity and
- *Diversity* has replaced *unity* as the goal of true community.

'Nihilism with a happy face,' as Michael Novak has said, is our unspoken motto. An earlier search for truth, purpose and identity has been displaced by easy-going cynicism which believes *'no-thing'* (nihilism) and has a flippant attitude to the meaning of life. It is thought to be enough for individuals and groups to adopt beliefs and life-styles which suit their religious, sexual and aesthetic tastes. Spiritual and moral relativism now reign supreme in many of our public institutions.

The Church isn't protected from this storm damage from *outside*. Indeed, as the parable makes clear, there are also threats to her mission from *within*. The disciples do not see the storm coming. When it does they lack courage to withstand its fury.... A confessing movement must count on threats to faith and dignity which come from *outside* the Church, and from *within*.

Nowadays, there is widespread embarrassment within the UCA about the *particularity* of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, and other splendidly orthodox beliefs and practices. Thus:

- The *'life and teaching of Jesus,'* but not his death and resurrection, are regarded by the so-called *Progressive Christian Network* as one path among many to the 'realm of God.'
- *Holy Communion* is regarded as an ancient pagan meal signifying hospitality, not as the particular sign of Christ's presence with the Church.
- The death of Jesus is often treated as a case of *'divine child abuse.'*
- The rise of interest in *'spirituality'* has brought liturgies, songs and writings centred on the *'divine, timeless essence'* in Christianity rather than on its specific historical truth.
- The usefulness of *Scripture*, doctrine, creeds and hymns is determined by whether they fit my spiritual, or sexual, preferences and those of my group.

- ‘*Costly grace*’ leading to repentance has been swamped by what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called ‘*cheap grace*’ which justifies the sin, not the sinner. Love has become detached from fulfilment of righteousness.

In principle, the UCA is now committed to *diversity* of opinion, behaviour, belief and practice in most things, including matters to do with the *substance of Reformed faith*. Fine evangelical concepts of ‘*acceptance*’ and ‘*inclusiveness*’ have been torn from their moorings at the foot of the empty cross and come to rest on the sands of ‘*hyper-tolerance*.’ ... This is evident in Resolution 108 at the *Eleventh Assembly* (2006) where there is no mention of the great biblical themes of creation and redemption; no attempt to relate ‘diversity’ and ‘tolerance’ to the incarnation of Christ or to set forth the triune love of God as the foundation of our co-humanity; no word of hope for the sexually broken. The accent is on balancing the diverse feelings and experiences of individuals and groups.

All is not well in the ‘*little boat of the Church*.’ Few are aware of the hurricane *outside* or the tornado *within* – of the crumbling of Western civilization and, with it, the collapse of Western Christianity, at least within mainline Protestantism! Church and community both dislike the reformed, evangelical and orthodox faith which rejoices in the ‘*splendour of truth*’ embodied in Jesus Christ.

Church leaders desperately try to fix the hole in the boat, succeeding only in ‘*bailing out*’ – but in a manner not intended by them! Afraid of the winds of renewal, and eager to shore up their authority, the captains and senior crew of the good ship UCA have issued a number of storm warnings to passengers! ... It is cause for regret that they hadn’t warned them of the perils of allowing nihilism and relativism to blow unchecked throughout the ship for so long! Until now, they have shown little desire to gauge the wind, withstand the pressure or support the passengers in the midst of the storm. They have neither stood against the *post-Christian* tempest raging around us, nor pointed us to the one in whom there is hope for the Church and the world.

This is a serious charge. It isn’t made without recognising that all of us, like the disciples in the boat, are cowardly in the face of stiff opposition. Courage doesn’t come naturally to Christians! A confessing movement has much to ‘confess’ because it, too, is afraid to confess Jesus Christ as Lord! ... Nevertheless, there is all the difference in the world between acknowledging our common sinfulness and remaining neutral when the Church denies in practice the glorious faith of the ecumenical Church, as attested in Scripture.

When the National Assembly again refused to reaffirm the splendid classical teaching of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church on sexuality, as attested in Scripture, it demonstrated its impatience with what Timothy calls ‘*sound teaching*’ and ‘*truth*’ and signalled its readiness to accept ‘*myths*.’

Therefore, it became absolutely clear that a Confessing Movement *within the UCA* was necessary. The *particular issue*, sexuality and leadership, could not remain unresolved, there being no substantial argument put against the proposal sponsored by *The Reforming Alliance within the UCA*, and the terms of the resolution clearly expressing theological problems which run deep in the Church and Western culture (as mentioned before). The *general weaknesses* exposed in Resolution 108 showed that the underlying *theological problem* was not confined to this single issue. The UCA had come to believe in ‘*myths*’ generated by neo-pagan culture!

It’s usually the other way around today. Strident detractors of orthodoxy, like Bishop Spong, regard the resurrection and incarnation of Jesus as ‘*mythological*,’ thus reversing the order of things in the New Testament where what is ‘true’ and ‘real,’ not mythological, is the being of God in Christ’s body. Seeing things from this angle, not taking our cue from the culture, is the way to truly confess Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of the Father.

The *Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the UCA* (ACC) is not coming into being as a single issue pressure group. It is an assembly of congregations committed to recapturing what Dorothy Sayers and GK Chesterton call the ‘*thrill and romance of orthodoxy*’ which *stretches* our

minds and hearts and wills until our life together is shaped by the awesome splendour of God displayed in *Jesus!*

The flipside of '*orthodoxy*' is '*heresy*' and '*apostasy*.' Despite what cultural elites say, and the anger aroused by the albeit careful use of '*apostasy*' in the ACC Charter, there is no truth without error. The problem with heresy, and apostasy, is, as Bishop Allison says, that they '*pander to our desire*' to make God and Jesus in our own image in order to endorse *our* life-styles. The heretic makes of Jesus Christ, as he is attested in Scripture, a projection of his/her own experiences, needs and longings. When heresy is sanctioned, not corrected by, the Church, then, regrettably, the Church is apostate.

The critical question for the UCA and the ACC concerns the truth concerning Jesus: '*Who then is this that even the wind and waves obey him?*' (v41) ... Who is in the little boat of the Church? Is he simply a '*teacher*' as disciples in both ancient and modern churches say? (v38) Is he a man of *spiritual wisdom* who transcends the limitations of history and creed? Is he the epitome of *tolerance* who accepts all without question? Is he a *security blanket* for the timid?

Who then is this ...? This is still our question as it was theirs throughout his ministry. It is central at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-33) where Peter gives the correct doctrinal answer, but doesn't seriously count on Jesus suffering, dying and being raised from the dead! And it is answered definitively by the Roman centurion after the crucifixion '*Surely, this man was the Son of God!*' (15:39)

This Son of God, Jesus Christ, is, to use the wonderful phrase of Eduard Schweizer, '*the man who fits no formula.*' Jesus doesn't fit any of our preconceived ideas about God or humanity. He isn't made in our image or fit our ideals. He doesn't endorse our cherished life-styles, beliefs or values. Jesus, as the ecumenical Church came to see, is the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord of all creation who is of one being with the God the Father Almighty. ... If it weren't for the utterly remarkable ministry of this unclassifiable man, then the Church could not possibly have invented such a character!

He accepted, included and welcomed righteous and unrighteous sinners, not by agreeing with them, but by reconciling them to God. He demanded a greater, not a lesser, righteousness, including mercy for enemies. He identified with sinners and called them to repentance. He lived and died 'for sake of the world' and was raised from the dead as the sign of God's triumph over the elements in human life and culture which threaten to swamp our lives and dampen our hopes. ...

And what about the little group in the boat who cry out in fear and stammer their awestruck question? Like us they are cowardly, self-centred and indignant! God seems absent at a time of crisis and they faint for lack of courage? They buckle at the first sign of opposition. They are no match for violent forces that buffet their little boat from *outside* and *within*. They are hardly a crew of intrepid sailors in search of adventure!

Thus Mark tells us that Jesus alone brings peace and hope to the Church and the world. Only the presence of Jesus saves them from being swamped. *Which Jesus?* The incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus! He is the fullness of God with us who brings peace and hope for the Church (little boat) and the world (the other boats) in the midst of turmoil. ...

The ACC is emboldened only by '*this real Jesus*' to remain within the UCA. Despite being misrepresented and silenced by those who pilot the little boat (Church) and the captains of the other boats (world), we are called to do what we can to see that evangelical, reformed and orthodox teaching and practice is honoured in the UCA. We are called to clearly and unambiguously reject '*myths*' which '*tickle our post Christian fancy*' in order that the Church may gladly and boldly witness before the world to the peace and hope which have come into our midst in Jesus Christ alone.

We owe it to a world in which so many people are experiencing the shipwreck of genuinely Christian humanism to remind the Church, including ourselves, that the hurricane force of nihilism and spiritual and moral relativism can only be withstood when we take courage from the one who has triumphed over evil and death for us.

It is not important, therefore, whether the Confessing Movement is small or large. What matters is that we don't retreat to a safe harbour but, despite apprehensions, continue to sail in waters which threaten to engulf our enterprise in the knowledge that, despite appearances, Christ is Lord of heaven and earth. In faith, therefore, we go forward praying that we may *'be of good courage and hold fast to that which is good.'*