

## Pentecost 13B

Readings: 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14, Psalm 111, 22 Timothy 4:1-5 (my choice), Mark 6:51-58

### Pinned between Fundamentalisms

#### Introduction

Davis McCaughey was one of founding fathers of the Uniting Church in Australia and its first President. He was also a Presbyterian clergyman and biblical theologian who came from Britain to teach at Ormond Theological College at Melbourne University. He later became Governor of Victoria from 1986 to 1992. An apocryphal story about him was this: that he would frequently meet with the SCM (Student Christian Movement) on campus and his constant plea with these students many of whom became leaders in their respective professional fields was “think until your head is sore, and then think again, and again and again”. For Davis McCaughey, Christian faith was for the thinking person

In this month of stewardship, I am attempting to guide us in asking the question: what sort of world do we live in, because it is *this* world and no other, which Jesus Christ invites us to serve. Last week, we identified one fundamental mark of our modern world: *immigration and changing demographics, changing cultures, and changing ways of thinking: not least, thinking about faith*. Last week, Sonia Yoo helped us understand the basics of Korean identity and Korean Christian faith. Australia is already a very different country to the one in which most of us grew up. To serve this changing country, Christianly, requires us, as Davis McCaughey says, to think, and to think again.

Today, I want to refer to another mark of our modern world, another trait of modernity, about which we need to think again and again: *fundamentalisms*. To say we live in a fundamentalist world is obvious. Moderation has been eclipsed by break-downs in consensus, people look to extremes - simple extremes - as a way of grasping control of a world, over which they feel they have little or none. Fundamentalism conjures up images of brutal literalist Islamic movements such as IS, or Al Qaeda. But fundamentalism is not just a trait of radicalized Islam: it is a feature of other faiths, including Christianity, and more recently a feature of the secular world, where secularism claims exclusive knowledge and wisdom for itself. In a world of fundamentalism - religious and secular world views rub -up against each other, crash against each other in the struggle for supremacy.

Let me do two things this morning: first to refer to the Epistle reading from Paul’s Letter to Timothy, garnering some insights; and then secondly to apply those insights to modern Christian thought and behaviour in a fundamentalist world

**First, to the Letter to Timothy.** In this letter, the apostle Paul encourages Timothy to keep his nerve, to step-up to his role as leader of the Christian community: “preach the message” he says, “insist upon proclaiming it (whether the time is right or not), convince, reproach, and encourage, as you teach with all patience”. Behind this encouragement, stands the belief, the conviction, that the Gospel is unique: it is *the* path to salvation. In the next part of his writing, Paul then warns Timothy that he is in for a rough ride. Why? Because he has to contend with, compete with, other world-views, other philosophical constructions with which people “tickle their ears”; in other words, which people find pleasing, because such constructions suit their self-interest, their purposes. Paul refers to these world-views as fables or mythologies (*muthos*), and challenges their truthfulness when contrasted with Christian doctrine grounded in the real, historical Jesus who actually lived and died in human history. Let us make some observations about Paul’s line of reasoning!

First, Paul defends the faith from the cultural and intellectual fashions of the day, But, does his defence of the Christian faith lead him to a fundamentalist position: that Christianity stands alone, self-sufficient, independent of other currents of thought? Well, yes, Christianity does stand alone in the sense that it alone is sufficient for salvation: but no, Christianity does not stand alone, in the sense that it has all knowledge - that there is nothing left to learn.

Second, let us remember that this same Paul who does not shrink from defending the faith, also leads the faith out of the Hebrew world into the much bigger Greek world. Paul is the father of a broad thinking Church that energetically dialogues, converses with the diverse cultural and intellectual world in which it is involved. Christianity under Paul's influence, not that of James or Peter, becomes adventurous, engaging, and increasingly a leader in the ancient world.

**Let now turn to today, to our current situation today.** If I am correct: the Christian Church has become increasingly sensitive to what it experiences as a hostile secular world. If I am correct, we have become increasingly oriented to retreating behind the barricades, withdrawing to defend the faith, but in the same breath, losing confidence in our capacity to do so, and doubtful that anyone is really listening to us.

As I think about this conundrum - defending the faith but also positively engaging with the world - I think we need to take a leaf from Paul's approach. On the one hand: part of being Christian is to defend the faith, but equally, we are to engage with the world as it is, astutely looking for points of *congruence* with Christianity, not just incongruence. After all, we are not only members of the Church, we are citizens in the world.

May I end with a particular observation from the highly regarded John Habgood former Anglican archbishop of York, Great Britain during the 1980 and 90s. Habgood, a scientist and theologian by training, gets the balance right. On the one hand, he affirms the need to defend the faith, the tradition of belief in Christ: "*The essence of conservatism, as I see it*" he says "*is to treasure what is given by tradition, what is best from the past, and what has proved itself by its durability. It is to display a certain humility towards the things we have received and may not fully understand, and so conserve them as fruitful for the future*". But Habgood also suggests in the same essay, that defensive conservatism is not enough. He holds that we must also be willing to critically assess our traditional interpretations of the Bible and the faith, and to this extent, be open to liberalizing thought. "*We grow in knowledge*" he says "*only insofar as we are prepared to criticize what we think we know already. True knowledge is tested knowledge, just as true faith has to be sifted by doubt. That is why a faith that rejects liberal openness, must in the end be untrue to a gospel which promises abundant life and growth ...*"

The world in which we live is one that requires Christian service. In serving, we are called to defend the faith and to also be open to the development of the faith: enriching it and deepening it as we learn more about it and ourselves as we give.

"Think until your head is sore. Then, think again and again and again".