

**A New People For A New Age**  
**Advent 2, Year C**  
**Philippians 1: 3-6, 8-11**  
**6 December 2009**

For those of us trained in classical counselling techniques the Dr Phil television show is a shock. His hapless guests are seated on high chairs that make them look like naughty children, a brief clip is shown of their dysfunctional behaviour at home, and then Dr Phil hoes in to them, telling them in no uncertain terms what they are doing wrong, and what they must do to sort their lives out. Whatever happened to non- directive listening, and letting the clients come up with their own solutions, one wants to shout at the television screen. But the public love Dr Phil's approach. People are queuing up to reveal their humiliating personal failings to a potential viewing audience of over 200 million Americans. And his guests seem to really appreciate being told exactly what to do!

This isn't the only change that has been going on in the therapy world. The in doctrine now is cognitive behavioural therapy. It is a pragmatic, problem solving approach, in which you take a long, hard, common sense look at the client's affairs of daily living, and come up with strategies that will result in small confidence building gains. The important thing is to get runs on the board, so that the client feels that they are more in charge of their lives.

Again, this approach can scandalise those trained in classical counselling techniques. CBT practitioners aren't interested in the unhappy childhoods and deep motivational patterns of their clients. The focus is relentlessly on the here and now, on breaking out of defeatist thought patterns, by means of rational strategies that fix what is not going well in the client's daily lives. That way the client stops thinking of themselves as the passive victims of an unhappy fate. They learn how to plan and to problem solve. What is more the therapy isn't allowed to go on and on the way it often used to. The national mental health standards claim that 12 sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy, plus the usual medication, is as much as you need to deal with depression.

When we bring a professional befriender in to our life, and that is what a counsellor really is, we are about the business of learning how to live wisely. There are all sorts of knowledge and wisdom around in the world. Each of us will be interested in learning different sorts of things. What we all need to acquire is practical wisdom. By that I mean a kind of basic emotional literacy, a useful amount of self knowledge, that protects us in certain vulnerable situations, and that helps us to get on with other people. Hopefully we learn over a lifetime how to see ourselves as others see us, about what we need to

do on a day off to make ourselves feel refreshed, and what helps us to cope when dealing with a stressful situation like conflict.

Practical wisdom in daily living is on the mind of St Paul this morning, as he writes to the Philippians. Except this is more what you might call sanctified common sense. When he prays that they will, “never stop improving your knowledge and deepening perception so that you can always recognise what is best,” he isn’t recommending 101 self-help tips for successful living. What he has got in mind is the art of acquiring a distinctive Christian life style that marks you out from what is going on around you. It is about getting in to the way of what one New Testament commentator has called, “beautiful living.”

Paul and the Philippians are working to a different time scale compared to their contemporaries. They assume that the present age, with all its demands on their affairs of daily living, is in fact wearing out and wearing thin. It is an era of human existence marked out by sin, and suffering, and death. In our time we talk about the heat death of the universe, because we know that in the end the stars will cool, and all life forms will cease throughout the galaxies. These first Christians have an accelerated sense of that. This old world is running out of steam, soon its battery will be flat. Sometimes there are almost demonic surges of cruel energy, but overall this is a world running out of oomph.

Yet emerging out of this tired world is a new reality. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has generated a fresh dimension of existence that has taken root in these small gospel communities scattered across the Mediterranean world. Wherever the good news is lived out in a group of Christians, who are serious about making the message a reality in their life together, a new way of being human emerges. These are people marching to the beat of a different drum. Their eyes are fixed on the horizon of a future that is being shaped in the heavenly realms. That is the place and space where Christians expect to find their destiny fulfilled in an expanded personal reality, as the junior brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

This new world is not yet, but the first stirrings of it are known here. There are hints and glimmerings and anticipations of it as believers sit at table with the risen Lord in his Eucharist. And as the Spirit of Jesus works away like an enzyme in the lives of those whom he entered at baptism, a process of behaviour change gets under way. This Holy Spirit inspires and insists on a different approach to living. It leads out a fresh perspective on the decisions required in daily living. There are situations to be avoided. As Bishop Victoria puts it, “If you can’t imagine Jesus Christ accompanying you into that place why are you there?” There are reconciliations to be attempted. The Spirit tends not to rest content with broken relationships, and reservoirs of ill feelings from past slights and fallings out. There are

responsibilities to be tackled with a generous heart and with imaginative new beginnings.

What is novel about the Spirit's style of character change initiatives is that it takes the lead, and gives the resources to do what it requires. Believers aren't just left to face their responsibilities unaided, and to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The movement towards gospel inspired beautiful living comes about by being drawn to the attractiveness of what is on offer – the life that really is life. And the Holy Spirit pours in new energy to the believer's life, and yes at times joy!

So these fragile gospel communities, such as the Church at Philippi, are the vehicles of Christ's resurrection energy, abroad in the world. And the Spirit's presence isn't just about an individual believers groovy feelings or spiritual successes. Above all it is what makes the Church work as an effective community, as an operational entity, and as healthy, happy network of well functioning relationships. Good administration, the ability to get on with difficult people, sound financial acumen, prudent leadership decisions, and well-run meetings – these too are signs that the Spirit is with us.

As one world wears out, and another world grows through it, we see that God is in the business of creating a new people for a new age. We are the trainee citizens of heaven. The point of Spirit conferred practical wisdom is that we learn the art of beautiful living, which will be our style of life when God's future comes along in its fully developed form. Since this is the future that is coming to meet us we can, with Paul, “ be quite certain that the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished when the Day of Jesus Christ comes.