

IN LOCKDOWN WITH THE GALATIANS:

PAUL'S GOOD NEWS FOR BURDENED PEOPLE

**CO-ORDINATED BY
JOHN BOTTOMLEY WITH
CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK CONGREGATION**

**INCLUDING A FOREWORD BY
SEAN WINTER
HEAD OF COLLEGE
PILGRIM THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE, MELBOURNE**

IN LOCKDOWN WITH THE GALATIANS:

PAUL'S GOOD NEWS FOR BURDENED PEOPLE

Published 2020

by

CREATIVE MINISTRIES NETWORK CONGREGATION

Uniting Church in Australia

Webpage: <http://creative.unitingchurch.org.au/>

Creative Ministries Network Congregation

ISBN 978-0-9954357-2-8

Study Coordinator: John Bottomley

Email: johnbottomley@netspace.net.au

Design and layout: David Bottomley

Photographs: Margaret Neith 'Jaffna Collection'



FOREWORD

To be honest, we aren't completely sure who the 'Galatians' were to whom Paul wrote his passionate and influential letter. 'Galatia' could refer to a region inhabited by Celtic tribes or to a larger Roman imperial province. But we do know that the Romans despised the 'Gauls' and regarded them as useful only in so far as they could be conquered, along with their territory. Recent studies of Paul's letter to the assembly of Christ-believers in the region have emphasised that in writing to a conquered people, Paul was engaged in what we now call politics. Galatians is often read as a letter about theology: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the law, and all that jazz. But, once we start to understand what life was like for colonised peoples in the ancient world, we have a chance to see how theology and politics are always intertwined. Galatians is the great letter of 'justification by faith'. But that great theological theme should never be disconnected from ideas of justice, reconciliation, peace making, and resistance to the false claims and promises of imperial power.

With that in mind, it is a delight to be able to commend these Bible study resources prepared by John Bottomley and the Creative Ministries Network. These four studies take up those insights from scholarship and place

them where they belong: into communities of faith who read Scripture in order to discern the good news of the gospel in midst of their own historical, social and political circumstances. They were developed during the 'lockdown' months of life in Melbourne in 2020. But the relevance of this way of doing Bible study extends far beyond those circumstances. The format and content of each study will help you (note: the 'you' is plural. Bible study is best done in groups) to grapple seriously with the text as well as identify the connections between Paul's world and ours. By pointing to the way this letter would have 'landed' into the lives and experience of ancient Galatians, the studies help us to see how Paul's gospel declares God's power to defeat the 'present evil age' (Gal 1:4) in all of its manifestations. If you work with the issues and questions raised, you will understand what really matters if we want to be faithful to God in the midst of struggle, oppression, and suffering. This faithfulness, that we share with Christ himself, means living somehow in a 'new creation' (Gal 6:15), one where 'faith working through love' (Gal 5:6) is what really counts. That is as true for Christians in a modern colony like Australia as it was for those in an ancient colony like Galatia.

Revd Associate Professor Sean Winter
Head of College,
Pilgrim Theological College Melbourne



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic gives people around the world the common experience of being burdened by lock down or quarantine, of being confined to your own home by government order. These studies explore the human burden of lockdown in two ways. First, we explore stories of study participants' experiences of our liberties confined and our assumptions about identity turned upside-down. These stories are not about being in lock-down, but they are all told because they provide a window into our shared experience of Melbourne's lockdown due to the global pandemic. But as our first pandemic study asserted, COVID-19 is not 'unprecedented'. Rather, it confronts us with our vulnerabilities in a way they cannot be avoided. These studies address our real life challenges brought to the surface by our need to better understand the challenges wrought by a global pandemic. Then we listen to St. Paul's gospel to the multinational gathering of Jesus' followers who live as conquered peoples under the Roman imperial governance in the province of Galatia. Here also there are real life challenges brought to the surface by a foreign invading power. Each study intends to encourage participants to struggle with what it means to be human in a community of faith burdened and

limited by the real life challenges of a global pandemic, indeed life itself.

If lockdowns are repeated due to a second or subsequent wave, the loss of liberty and widespread unemployment often causes distress and anguish. If the authorities try to deny the reality imposed by a highly infectious virus and various missteps occur, this may add confusion, anger and despair to a growing list of seemingly unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions.

For Christians, the burning question "Where is God in all of this?" is not so much unanswered, as unasked. At present, the rush to use new internet technologies to maintain traditional church forms of worship appears foremost for many congregations. These studies have also been developed to take advantage of technologies such as Zoom, which enabled the Creative Ministries Network Congregation of the Uniting Church in Australia to meet online rather than in each other's homes as we normally do. Our focus is therefore not on how to survive as a congregation, but how to endure as a faithful people of God committed to embodying Christ's healing, justice and reconciliation.

This perspective frames the questions for our congregation, questions where participants opened their hearts to God to reflect on matters of power, powerlessness and prayer.

The questions follow on from our first pandemic Bible study, *Covid19: AN UNPRECEDENTED CRISIS? Creating a Safe Space for Faith, Reflection and Hope for Small Groups and Congregations*.

<http://creative.unitingchurch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/PandemicStudies-final.pdf>

Each of the four studies in this series begins with testimony from our congregation members about a particular upheaval or challenge in their life that introduces a central human struggle that opened their hearts to their faith reflection. You may choose to read their testimony, or ask members of your study group to volunteer to prepare a testimony that speaks to the theme of the session. Our members found it helpful to prepare a draft to discuss with me a little before the study, and bring a complete script of what they would say. The members who did this each appreciated the discipline of careful preparation, and the encouragement to be clear about the disclosure they wished to share with the study group. You too are invited to open your hearts to God and to one another as you share on 'being in lockdown with the Galatians'.

Session one:

Power and (white) privilege.

Session two:

Powerlessness and agency: what does

it mean to be human when you are powerless?

Session three:

Prayer as agency: can prayer restore your humanity in times of suffering?

Session four:

Pandemic: power, powerlessness and prayer.

The study series seeks to explore our current context of being held captive by the unseen power of COVID-19 through reflections upon Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, written around 49 – 54 CE¹. When I started my theological training in 1970, studying the bible had just begun to take seriously the historical context in which each biblical text was written. More recently, understanding and interpreting biblical texts has shifted to encompass the context of the reader. This shift has accompanied emerging global challenges to traditional hegemonies of western culture: capitalism, colonialism, sexism and racism. Studying the bible today may be less about learning and regurgitating the faith answers of the past, as it is about discerning the truth of God's Good News for our current circumstances. So today, I find myself drawn to biblical scholars from marginalised backgrounds, from Asia, and women. Their voices are challenging and informative: empire-critical, postcolonial, and gender-critical frameworks for



interpretation are now most pertinent to the present conversation.

Perhaps being in lockdown during a global pandemic will bring these voices more to the fore, reforming our faith more than at any previous time in Christian history since Paul witnessed to nations which were wearied by the weight of Roman colonisation. Paul's preaching of God's gospel was a counter-claim to Roman propaganda that Rome's military power brought peace to all nations. So when Paul greets the Galatians saying, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal. 1:3a), this is the kernel of God's good news: God, not Caesar, is the giver of grace and peace, Jesus is Lord, not the Emperor, and Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed one who is to make Israel 'a light to the nations', who came to 'give himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age ...' (Gal. 1:3b).

So can we hear Paul's greeting to the gathering of conquered peoples in Galatia speaking to us in pandemic lockdown today? Can we hear Paul speaking to those life challenges that weigh us down or change our understanding of God's purposes? If understanding our faith is shaped by

the context of our lives as we read Paul in the midst of lockdown and the limitations imposed by the global pandemic, then I trust you may engage with this study with an open-heart and an imaginative mind for the sake of Christ's new creation.

Our Congregation decided to publish this study because our prayerful discussions became for us the horizon of God's promised grace and peace for our lives. We pray that your work together may be faithful to Christ's calling, and that your prayer and faith sharing may set you free from our present age of crisis and despair so that you may find solidarity with the one we came to know with Paul as the Lord Jesus Christ.

John Bottomley
Program Coordinator
Creative Ministries Network Congregation
November 2020.

¹B. Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: a commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians* Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, pp. 8-13.

STUDY ONE:

POWER AND (WHITE) PRIVILEGE

WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

This study has a particular challenge for non-Indigenous Australians. It calls us to reflect on our identity, and the extent to which our individual identity is tied up with our personal power and (white) privilege as non-Indigenous people. In this study:

- We will listen to a story of a man's reflection on the experience of being humbled, where he realised his sense of power and privilege had been upended. We will hear how he felt about that time in his life, and what he learned from that experience that is important to him today.
- You will be invited to recall any experience of your own where your power and privilege was humbled, and what you have learned from that experience. Then we will reflect on any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have felt similarly.
- We will read Galatians 1: 11-24, and consider a commentary that suggests Paul experienced a major humbling to his identity as a powerful leader in the Jewish community, and began on a new path to be in solidarity with all those suffering under Roman imperial power as colonised people. We will discuss how this may inform our self-understanding of our power, and what God may be calling us to when our power is under-mined or humbled.
- Finally we will reflect on how you feel about limitations on your power and privilege caused by this pandemic. What awareness might God be calling non-Indigenous (white) people to through this pandemic about our power relations with Indigenous people burdened by the imposition of colonial power on their lives since colonisation?
- We conclude with a shared prayer of confession adapted from Indigenous theologian Garry Worete Deverell.

OUR CONTEXT

Read this story, 'The gift of Demetrlo Aspiras' from a CMN congregation member who shares an experience where his sense of power and privilege was humbled.

Everything in life is a gift ... Things and time, ability and the power to make decisions, are all gifts, and gifts are essentially for opening life out and for making friends and for serving those in need, not for closing life in, for defending and protecting oneself. (Thomas Cullinan)

Manila, September 1977.

I had been in The Philippines for three weeks with thirteen other Australians, all of whom were involved with development assistance and development education agencies back in Australia. We were participating in an Asian exposure program organised by Australian Catholic Relief and its partner agency in Manila.


Jose Aspiras, the driver who had been taking us around for the last three weeks, had just picked me up to return to our base. He said we were close to his family home, and asked whether I would like to make a short detour and meet his family. I quickly agreed, glad that he saw me as more than just a tourist.

The house was a simple timber place built right to the edge of the road. I met Jose's father Demetrio, his mother, his wife and daughter, and his sister-in-law and niece. I was given a comfortable chair and a glass of iced coke in a sparsely furnished room, and we talked about who I had met and what I had learned about life in the Philippines. Jose's parents did not speak English, so Jose translated what I said into Tagalog.

In the corner of the room I noticed an old valve amplifier sitting alongside an old-fashioned turntable. When I asked the father about it, he became quite animated and told me how it came into his possession. He then asked: would I like to hear a record?

He selected a Hammond organ record from under the turntable, and we sat back to listen. I was surprised at how good this relic of the electronics industry sounded, and told him so. He obviously got great pleasure from the music and was pleased that I also enjoyed it.

One year later my wife, Jenni, visited The Philippines on a similar program organised by the same agency. Before she left I gave her five of my records to pass on to Jose's father. They were all in good condition, and I felt sure he would enjoy that type of music. Most of them I didn't play much, but I did tape one before sending it off. I wrote him a letter sending good wishes to him and his



family, and asked a friend of mine, a former missionary in The Philippines, to translate the letter into Tagalog.

Jenni returned home with a letter of thanks from Demetrio. It was not so much the records that he was grateful for, but the fact that I had remembered him and his family after such a long time.

Carefully wrapped up with the note was his gift to me – a record, the same one he had played to me twelve months before!

I was embarrassed. That man had given me his favourite record! And his total collection would have amounted to no more than a dozen.

He had given me a precious gift. In one simple act, he had stripped away my wealth and privilege and taught me something about how to turn a gift into something sacred. He had reversed the situation. He was the provider, me the recipient.

His generous act has continued to influence my attitudes ever since.

Barry Mitchell

First published in Action for World Development, Victorian Newsletter, April 1979. Updated August 2020

Silent reflection for three minutes

Recall the main feelings you experienced as you read of Barry's experience. Then recall a time when you experienced your status or privileged position being humbled, and how you felt. Reflect on what you took away from that experience.

Members share their response without interruption, comment or questions.

Silent reflection

Recall any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when like Barry, you believed you received an unexpected gift that had something of a sacred quality for you.


Group members share their responses.

Our text: Paul's letter to the Galatians 1: 11 – 24

One person reads the text.

“For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in



Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me."

NOTES ABOUT THE TEXT


Group members read a paragraph in turn.

The Epistle to the Galatians begins with the battle-lines of conflict sharply drawn. A group in the assemblies of Galatia have been sowing the seed of another gospel in opposition to Paul's preaching. They are undermining

Paul's work, which is to reshape the boundary of Judaism so that *all* true followers of Jesus will be included in the new community of Christ. The word 'Christ' is a Greek translation of 'messiah', meaning 'God's anointed'. Paul's message is that through faith in Christ's resurrected life, *God's messianic community is for all nations*. It is not confined to a privileged ethnic/religious community. However, there are some in leadership of the Jewish community for whom this is heresy.

Paul asserts his difference from his opponents: he is not preaching from self-interest, or political ideology. His message is a direct revelation from Jesus the Messiah/Christ of God. Then he mentions his Damascus road experience, but we need to hear it differently from the traditional Sunday School version that portrayed the Damascus road event as Paul's conversion from Judaism to Christianity. Rather, it can be understood as Paul's *calling away from a position of privileged power in the Jewish community, and into a ministry of solidarity with all those powerless under colonial rule*.

Under Roman colonial rule, Jewish leaders had reached an accommodation with the Romans about maintaining order amongst their people in return for some extra freedoms for their leadership. Paul confessed he had earlier fitted in with this political



bargain and was licensed to persecute Jews who threaten the status quo. Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus because their claim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah threatened to put the whole Jewish community at risk of Roman persecution for treason. The Jewish leadership could not afford to have a faction in their midst who worshipped Jesus as God's anointed, when *that was the very claim the Emperor Caesar made for himself*. It was treasonous for the Jewish community to appear to be undermining the Emperor's claim to be anointed by the gods.

Whatever critical event that happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, it is not of concern to him. His only testimony is that he was dramatically encountered by the God of Israel who revealed the crucified Jesus to him as the Messiah of the Jews. Paul rejoices that *this humbling event was a blessing, which called him to a new task*. He was to preach God's good news that Jesus' messianic purpose as a Jew crucified by the Roman state was to bring God's freedom and peace to the Gentiles, that is, all peoples conquered and colonised by the Roman Empire. God's messiah was in solidarity with all oppressed peoples.

Paul undergoes a fundamental change of heart, believing he has been called to abandon the privilege and power of his participation in the imperial Roman


power structure. He moves to a powerless position of solidarity with all oppressed nations/Gentiles. *This call becomes the heart of Paul's new life and purpose in Christ*.

INTEGRATION

- *Underline any phrases or sentences that you connect with our earlier conversation. Share with the study group, and why the phrase connected with the earlier conversation. When all have shared, reflect on common themes.*
- *Then discuss: How is it that having privileged power can be a barrier to relationships with others, and that being in solidarity with powerless others can have what Barry described as a quality of sacredness or blessing?*
- *During this pandemic, have you experienced any times of sacred quality, or receiving a blessing? Have you been aware of God's presence during the pandemic?*

WHITE PRIVILEGE

An Indigenous person has reflected that being in lockdown for COVID-19 gave non-Indigenous Australians a sense of what it is like for Indigenous people to live their whole lives under colonial rule. What do you sense God may be calling non-Indigenous Australians to in our (white) privileged



power relation with Indigenous people through this pandemic? *For discussion.*

A PRAYER OF CONFESSION FOR USE BY THE SETTLER CHURCHES

Group members read a sentence each.

God of Jesus Christ we come to you because there is no-where else to turn.

There is a sickness in our land, a sickness with regard to living and telling the truth.

We confess that we invaded this land and enslaved its peoples, the people who have cared for this country and its waterways for thousands upon thousands of years.

We confess that we have wilfully ignored the wisdom of the First Peoples, wisdom about how to live in this country in a way that honours and preserves all life, that we have trampled their knowledge underfoot and treated it with contempt.

We confess that we have treated the land itself with contempt, and its seas and waterways also.

We have not cared for it as we ought to have done. Instead we have exploited and raped it to feed our selfish appetites.

Now the land is sick, and the created order has turned against us. The land weeps and cries out in pain, and the natural order has turned against us. Plants and animals, the rich tapestry of its eco-systems, are burning up for lack of nourishment and care, and a deadly virus devours human lives here and across the world. And it is our fault.

Teach us, O God, to amend both our lives and the political and economic systems in which they are embedded. Teach us to treasure the First Nations of this land and their wisdom about how to live here with respect and sensitivity. Teach us to treasure the country and waterways on which we depend, its cycles and seasons, its plants and animals, its fragile and beautiful ecosystems. Teach us to call our political and religious leaders to account. Teach us, O God, to live and tell the truth.

God of Jesus Christ, we come to you because there is no-where else to turn. Have mercy on us and free us from our sins. Amen.

Adapted from a prayer offered to the settler churches by Garry Worete Deverell, a Trawlolway man and Anglican priest from Trouwerner (Tasmania, Australia).





STUDY TWO:

POWERLESSNESS AND AGENCY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN WHEN YOU ARE POWERLESS?

WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

In the first study, we explored how our sense of privilege and power can be humbled and a gift of grace emerged. The apostle Paul believed that being humbled from his powerful position as a persecutor of Jesus' followers was the call of Christ. We learned Paul moved from a position of power to a position of powerlessness to be in solidarity with the many diverse ethnic groups conquered by the Roman Empire in colonised Galatia. Then we reflected on times when power had become a barrier to our relationships, and how in accepting being humbled we experienced the sacred quality of being in solidarity with powerless others. We looked at what Paul's preaching means for non-Indigenous people in the midst of limitations on our power and privileges imposed by COVID-19, and for our relationship with Indigenous

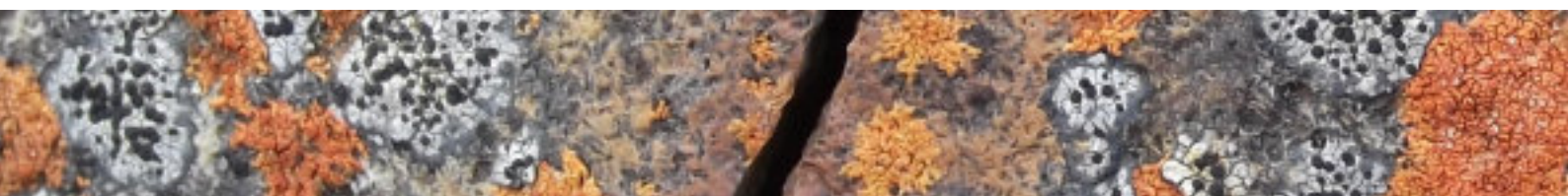
Australians still suffering today the effects of colonisation.

IN OUR SECOND STUDY:

We enter more deeply into our experiences of powerlessness as we listen to a story of Jamie's reflection on his own powerlessness and deteriorating mental health and what he discovered about his humanity.

You will be invited to recall any experience of your own where you experienced powerlessness, and what you learned about your humanity from that experience. Then we will reflect on any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when we have felt similarly.

We will read Galatians 2: 11-20, and examine a commentary on how Paul understands faith in Jesus Christ as the death of his old life and the gift of a new life in the power of God's love. How does this inform the experience of our current powerlessness in lockdown, and what may our faith may be calling us to through this global pandemic?



We conclude with a shared prayer.

OUR CONTEXT

Listen to this story from Jamie who shares the experience of powerlessness (helplessness) and deteriorating mental health in his life, and what he discovered about the wholeness of his humanity.

JAMIE'S STORY

I was working as a swim coach at two different venues under two different bosses, when under the stresses my world began to fall apart. The experience with one of those guys was especially unpleasant, where I felt increasingly powerless.

I was coaching young swimmers, and was told by my boss he had been watching me from a room above the pool deck, and that I wasn't coaching how he expected me to. Contrary to tradition of allowing coaches a high degree of autonomy, he became very specific and directive about what he wanted me to do. I felt under extreme pressure as he was pressuring me to push kids way past their comfort zone. I resisted as he became even more insistent, sending me emails detailing what I had to do. These directions were interspersed with accusations that I was a terrible coach. It was distressing to me.

Over time I began to lose confidence and competency. Things that were normally easy became harder. My worsening performance and lack of confidence carried over to my other workplace as well. I felt quite humiliated there, as it was a fairly public venue. Also I felt I was being watched intently by my employers. To an extent this was true, but also I was becoming paranoid. The fears and anxieties that went with this were extremely distressing.

As all this was going on, I was doing a number of things you would think would help my mental health. Swimming regularly, going for walks, Tai Chi, meditation and prayer. In fact I was putting more effort into all these things, hoping they would help, as I was getting increasingly desperate, including feeling quite trapped. There came a point where the actual experience of doing these activities changed to the negative. With Tai Chi, I lost my sense of balance and coordination. This was incredibly disheartening, as I had worked hard to improve my Tai Chi over a couple of years, and had become quite good. Similar problems happened with swimming. I even became fearful of the unknowns of meditation.

In both work and the self-help activities, my answer was to just keep going, "try harder", even as I felt myself slipping. Things got worse and worse.



I eventually allowed myself to be terminated by both these employers. I stopped leaving the house. I stopped looking after myself in any way. And I completely stopped all the helpful activities.

My family would visit and bring food. They lobbied health services to do something. After quite a long time of sitting in my flat doing nothing, the health services made me an involuntary patient, and I was taken to a locked ward of hospital. At one level this was demeaning and humiliating. It was also terrifying, as I feared that eventually they may give me ECT. Another part of me just relaxed and got used to being there.

Eventually, after having fought against it, I was given ECT. After a relatively long period of time in hospital I eventually recovered. I cleaned myself up, and started looking for work and found a part-time job swim coaching. Something else very positive happened. I was allotted a community mental health support worker, who I visited weekly or fortnightly. For a time I discounted that there was any point in this interaction. She was young enough to be my daughter. How on earth could she know anything, and be of any help? On the contrary, she was wonderful. She was supportive, caring, and wise. There was one example of an incident early on in my new job, where I was being

given a hard time by a Committee member. This young community worker patiently and methodically talked me through my options, and what the steps were to take whichever choice I made. This helped me get through what was happening, and it was a crucial breakthrough, as it was my first major challenge in a new job.

What have I learned about my humanity from this? Firstly there is a conundrum for me. Unsurprisingly, I am interested to nail down what would I do if I get into the same situation again. I often amuse myself by saying that my advice to anyone going through a similar experience is, "don't do what I did". Don't stop all those positive activities of exercise, meditation, Tai Chi prayer, etc. However the conundrum is that they didn't work when I did them.

When I talked to a friend about this, he challenged my thinking on this - pointing out how my approach to something not working had been to just try harder. With the work situation, I didn't know who to turn to - who to talk to - where to get help, so I just put my head down and tried harder. My thoughts are that it wasn't necessarily that in my self-help activities I was doing the wrong thing, but it was my attitude that was the problem. I was working desperately to survive in the bad situation I was in. I didn't want to transform my



worldview or situation; I just wanted to keep doing the same thing and be able to cope.

I think part of the discovery of my humanity was being forced to allow and accept others to do things for me, to support me; this included the persistent and determined support of my family, for which at the time I showed no appreciation or gratitude. And the faith and hope of friends and family who kept coming to see me. Whilst I had given up on myself, others didn't.

I've never had much faith in mental health workers, and my views are still fairly sceptical. However, I found through this whole experience they were incredibly patient and caring. Eventually they took things out of my hands, especially at the treatment level. I have to admit and accept that eventually the methods they used possibly, or even probably, contributed to my recovery. Again, the young woman from the Community Mental Health service was wonderful.

There are still some unanswered questions: where does exercise, meditation, etc. fit in - surely it has a place? Returning to something I mentioned earlier. Maybe it is in the purpose or reason you have in doing them. Rather than as a way of steeling myself against the pain of the world, they can be used to open yourself more, to the world, other people, and God.

Silent reflection

Recall your main feelings when listening to Jamie's experience. Then recall an experience where you experienced powerlessness and helplessness, be aware of what transformed that experience or brought it to a resolution, and how you felt at different times as the experience unfolded.

The leader then asks members to share their response with the whole group. It is important for each person to speak without interruption or comment.

Invite participants to then reflect on what connections they had with other members' shared reflections.

After a brief time shared in silent reflection, invite individual comments on what they connected with and why it resonated with them.

Next, recall any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have experienced your mental health slipping, and you felt more anxious, depressed, or stressed than previously.

After shared responses, discuss:

What is it in your experience of lockdown that is similar to/differs from other experiences of feeling your mental wellbeing was at risk?



Our text: Galatians 2: 11 – 20

One person reads the text. Take a moment to underline any phrases or thoughts that catch your attention.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I

have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Group members read a paragraph in turn.

Paul is at odds with Peter/(Cephas) about Jewish identity. Remember that Jesus was a Jew, and Paul believed Jesus as God’s Messiah (anointed) had fulfilled God’s promise to Israel (the Jews). So Paul and all the first followers of the risen Christ were still members of the Jewish community, which was growing mainly through new members who were Gentile converts. But Jewish community leaders were becoming anxious about the growing number of converts because the growing community of Jesus followers was drawing the Romans’ attention due to their worship of Jesus as their Lord, rather than Caesar. This was treasonous and a crime against the Roman state, punishable by crucifixion.

So a number of Jesus’ followers within the Jewish community were pushing for Gentile converts to be circumcised, thus taking on a well-recognised marker of male Jewish identity. “If he looks like a Jew, worships with Jews, he must be a Jew.” This line of thinking was designed to remove any anxiety



that the growing Jewish community still held to the Jewish leaders' agreement for some favours by not openly challenging the divine status of the Emperor. This faction of Jesus' followers was advocating 'softening' the gospel so the Jesus followers appeared to fit in with the Jewish leaders' accommodation with the Roman Empire, which needed to maintain the perception Jews were loyal to the rule of the divine Caesar.

Earlier, Peter had welcomed Paul's work amongst the Gentiles (2:1-10) without requiring the converts to be circumcised, but under pressure from the 'Judaisers' faction (v.12), Peter had separated himself from fellowship with the converts (2:11-12). Paul doesn't mince his words, accusing Peter 'to his face' (v.11) and reproaching Peter's circle of hypocrisy. Their hypocrisy is denying 'the truth of the gospel' (v.14). Paul accuses this faction of trying to justify themselves by 'works of the law', that is, trying to put things right before God by their own efforts, while secretly bowing to civic religion and order by insisting on Gentile converts to be circumcised.

Against this belief, Paul says only faith in Jesus Christ puts our lives right. Faith in Christ justifies or puts right all relationships. Faith may be better understood as 'trust', that is, we are called to trust that God's Son loves us, even while we are sinners. This strange language declares we cannot save

ourselves by our own efforts, even when our hard work involves religious observances. What Paul once believed to be self-righteous work or effort - maintaining the purity of Jewish observances - he now declares he is dead to this way of thinking and being. Recall that when Paul was assiduously carrying out the violence and self-righteous letter of the religious requirements of the law, he was confronted by its destructive spirit. On the Damascus road, his world and beliefs came to an end.

Paul understands the severity of the judgement against him. It is a death sentence on his life to that point. So complete and final is the end of his former life that Paul describes it as a crucifixion: degrading, humiliating, violent. Yet Paul has come to see that in this traumatic Damascus road incident, he has been crucified with Christ. This says to me that no matter how shameful this time in Paul's life was, he came to understand he was not alone, and that in some mysterious way, the crucified Christ was present in solidarity with him. I suggest it is this experience of God's solidarity with him in Christ that overturns Paul's understanding of what it means for him to be a Jew. God is a God who desires to liberate people from oppression to demonic powers, and does this through the power of love. This is not the God Paul had been worshipping, a God who supported



those in power and maintained the status quo by violent means.

Christ's presence opened Paul's heart and mind to the mystery of God's grace: he was given a new life as a gift of God's forgiveness and love. This new life was not his old life spruced up, but was the resurrected life of Christ alive in him. Paul trusts the life that is in him is the same gift of God's love that animates the resurrected Christ. Faith for Paul is trust that God's power of life-giving love puts relationships right with God and with the 'other' (i.e., the Gentiles) in service of God's desire for justice, reconciliation, healing and peace. It is a 180 degree change of direction for Paul, and a new way of living and being.

INTEGRATION

Underline any phrases or sentences that you connect with our earlier conversation about what it means to be human when you are powerless and your mental health feels at risk. Share with the study group the phrase/sentence with which you connected. Consider how you may bring the part you connected with to the discussion of the two following questions. Sometimes a connection may be:

- *A feeling in the text or commentary that connects with a feeling evoked by the discussion question.*

- *A word or phrase that in the text or commentary that brings to mind a thought sparked by the discussion question.*
- *Either of the above, but it is disconnection or contradictory feeling or phrase between the text or commentary and the discussion question.*

Then discuss:

- Paul believes it is futile to think we have been justified (put right with God and neighbour) by our own work. What does this bring to your understanding of your experiences of being powerless, anxious and of keeping things that trouble you to yourself? Are there times during lockdown when you felt your mental health slipping but you believed you shouldn't burden anyone?
- Have you experienced a moment of grace or the gift of another's love or concern in your life during a time of powerlessness, depression or anxiety? Has this happened to you during lockdown? How did that affect your relationship with God or Christ?



CLOSING PRAYER

*One member reads the words in plain type.
The study group respond with the words in
bold type.*

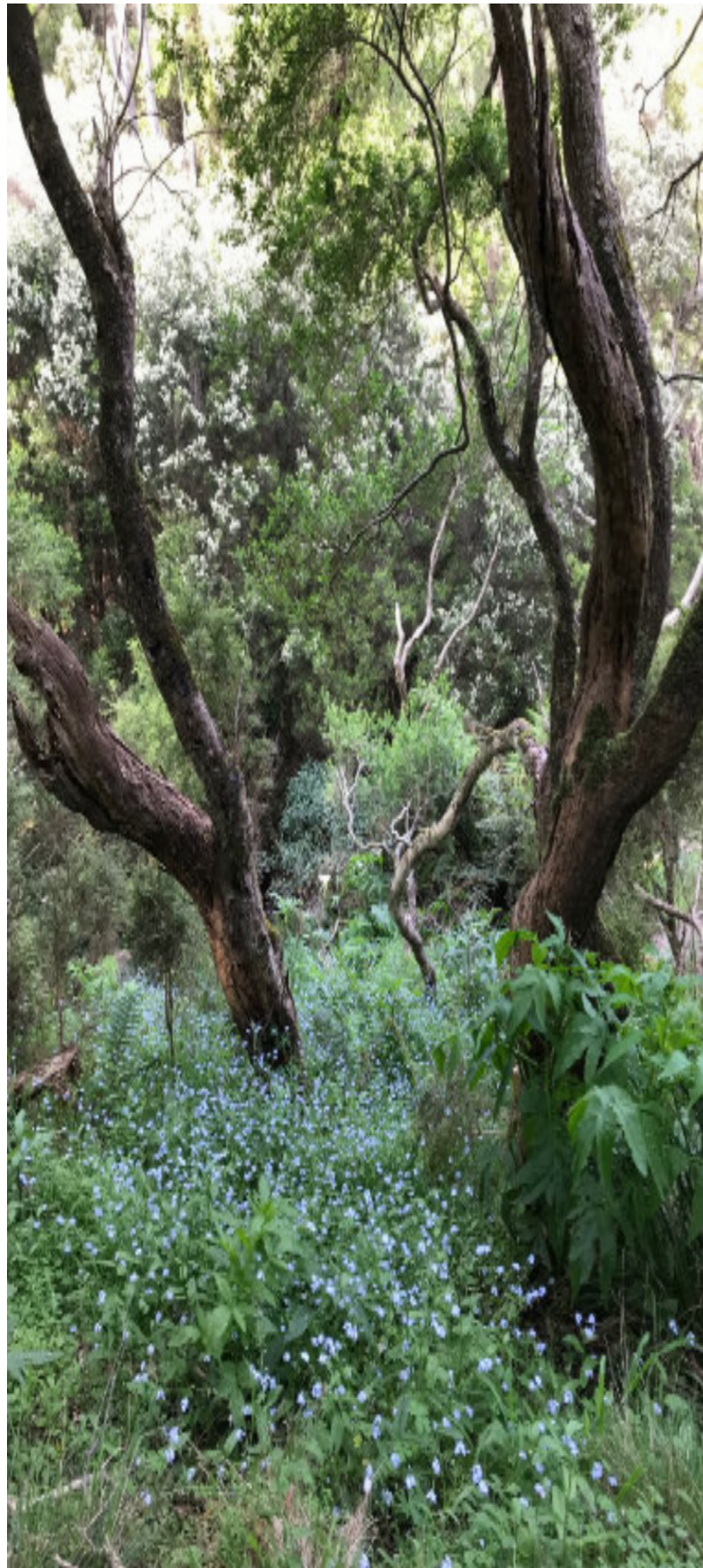
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be
clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter
than snow.** Let me hear joy and
gladness; let the bones that you have
crushed rejoice. **Hide your face from
my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.**

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put
a new and right spirit within me.
**Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.**
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
**Then I will teach transgressors your
ways, and sinners will return to you.**
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation, and my tongue
will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will
declare your praise.

**For you have no delight in sacrifice; if
I were to give a burnt-offering,
you would not be pleased.**
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a
broken spirit; a broken and contrite
heart, O God, you will not despise.

Amen.

Psalm 51:6-17





STUDY THREE:

PRAYER AS AGENCY: THE STRUGGLE TO BE WHOLE IN PERSON AND COMMUNITY.

WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (*insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians*), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

In our second study we heard Jamie's story of being powerless, experiencing deteriorating mental health, and the lessons in life and faith he gained from the experience. Then members shared their own experiences, beginning from where Jamie's story touched them. We reflected how in Galatians 2:11-20 Paul reacted strongly against Peter and others who appeared to have weakened their faith in God so that they could claim a 'safer' Jewish identity. Paul declared we cannot save ourselves by our own efforts even when our hard work involves religious observances. We talked together to better apprehend that for Paul, faith in Christ Jesus meant the death of his old life of fitting in with religious observances designed to accommodate the Roman idolatry of Caesar. For Paul, the gift of a new life as a follower of the Messiah Jesus is received through believing God's love

is the only power worth trusting. Members recalled moments of grace or insight in our lives during a time of being powerless, and shared times during lockdown when our mental health was being compromised. We concluded by praying a psalm responsively.

IN THIS STUDY:

- We enter more deeply into our experiences of powerlessness, life challenges, and struggle as we listen to Susan and Sam's stories reflecting on their experiences of prayer/meditation and movement towards inner peace and peace around us.
- You will be invited to recall any experience of your own where you experienced life as anxious, challenging and/or requiring you to face a difficult circumstance, and what you learned through your struggle that led you to a place of inner peace and reconciled relationships. Then we will reflect on any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have felt similarly.

- We will read Galatians 3: 23-29 and explore a commentary on how Paul understands faith in Jesus Christ as an inheritance of relationship with God, and baptism into a new community of reconciled relationships. We will discuss how this may inform our current challenges to experience interior and public peace in lockdown, and what our faith may be calling us to through this global pandemic.
- We conclude with prayer.

OUR CONTEXT

Listen to these stories from Susan and Sam, who share their experiences of prayer/meditation in times of powerlessness, challenge and struggle in their lives, and what they discovered about being whole in person and community.

SUSAN

I'm going to talk about a time in my life where I made a big life-changing decision. The decision was about imagining (for a start) of going to Australia to study film. I was 26-28. I had been living in Wellington for a few years before I went travelling. I then lived in London for a year and then China for about a year too.

The feelings I had around this decision were a long time coming. They were a whole mix of things. I'd not done anything about this earlier in my life because I wasn't ready - because I felt I probably wasn't good enough to get in to the film course (what did I know?), I felt too naive, young and inexperienced, (I remember knowing often that I didn't really have opinions on things) and I just wasn't brave enough to even try.

But after the travelling and working I had gathered together more confidence and life experience and knew I could cope with certain things. The imagining of going to Australia to study film (animation specifically) felt like a very burning and right choice to make. It was tinged/loaded with fear (at making such a big change to my life - leaving NZ, moving to a city where I only knew 2 people - my cousin and a friend), but I felt if I didn't try for this then I would have fallen into a great depression - like I would have been wasting my life and really, what else could I do if I didn't do this? - this is exactly what I wanted to do...(felt I needed to do).

This has happened a couple of times in my life where it felt most clear and palpable that this was the way I needed to go. By even trying for it, by making the motion to do this, was placating some truth/deep (perhaps a) more knowing part of myself.



So the feeling I have, when I've had to make VERY big decisions like this for my life, is that I'm almost on a conveyer belt and all the steps in the process went as best as they could. In this example (when I applied to come to Melbourne to study animation); I felt like the idea and the feelings were all absolutely aligned and right, there was no internal resistance to the idea or doubt - there were nerves and anxiety (because of the big life change) - but I knew it was right.

The steps therefore were like so: The ideas came generously for the application process - it flowed, was fun even. I was offered interviews at the two places I applied and I got accepted at both the places. I almost knew it was going to happen (without being arrogant at all, it just was this strong palpable, almost out of my control feeling). At the time (there is no way) I would have thought this was God - I may have thought the universe is aligned or some such (although somewhere deeper - I would have let a glimmer of a thought say it was God) but I wouldn't have used those words back then, vocalised that or said the thought clearly to myself.

Also, more recently I have been questioning my purpose and have seen a life coach person off-and-on this year. This has tied in with my trying a new Christian meditation method (and also meditating more generally) and

learning/trying to just leave a space, an openness for uncertainties/questions to be in...to be considered, not by me even, by something bigger, that pure sacred space, by God...(?)

SAM

My son Graeme has been an inpatient in hospital on eight occasions since 2014. This doesn't include all the times that he has had hospital appointments as an outpatient. Last year he was admitted to a Melbourne Hospital diagnosed with first episode psychosis. He has been hospitalized four times since then - including two weeks as a resident at a Youth Mental Health Service, and then Graeme spent six weeks at a Preventative and Recovery Centre for people with a mental illness.

How did I cope during this time? Maybe it comes from the traditional style of masculinity that I grew up with. I believed I could take control and fix it for my son (make Graeme better). However, this approach to Graeme's illness - and anything that I tried - did not appear to make that much difference. I felt helpless and powerless because there wasn't anything that I could do to make Graeme better.

I felt helpless, exhausted and very anxious. Since late last year, Graeme (after a time in hospital) would recover to the extent that he was discharged home, and then unfortunately after a

few weeks would relapse again and be back in hospital. Where was God in my experience of being helpless and powerless? I felt like I couldn't keep my head above water - it felt like I was drowning. I prayed and reflected on the scripture reading for that week, which was Matthew 14:22-33, where Jesus walks on the water.

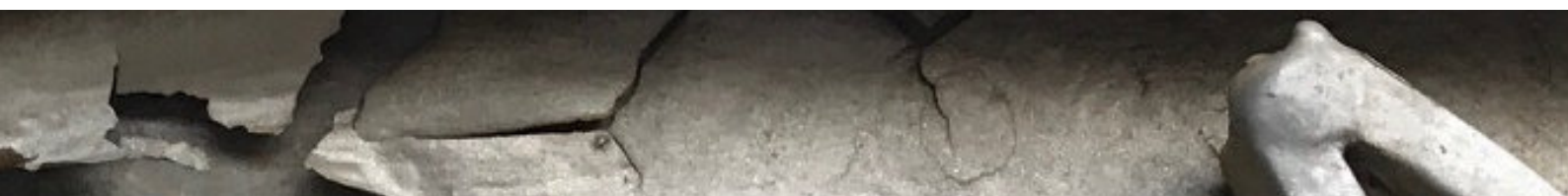
In my prayer as I sat with my feelings of powerlessness, I had an image of myself in the water struggling to stay afloat. And then as I struggled - I knew that my struggle was in vain - I decided to "let go". As I did this I felt myself slowly falling and drowning. It actually felt quite peaceful because I was no longer struggling. Then a large hand entered the water and pulled me out and into a boat. The large hand I saw as the hand of Jesus. It lifted me into the boat (it was a small speed boat - a motorised boat - so certainly not identified as a first century Hebrew boat).

Once in the boat and in the presence of Jesus I felt comforted and relieved to be out of the water. I was very thankful to be alive. I reflected that when I let go and realised that I couldn't stay afloat through my own efforts - that is when God came to me. However, I did experience some anxiety as the boat was travelling towards land. It was travelling back to the reality of my life and the day-to-day reality of all the joys and struggles that my life entails.

What has stayed with me since the prayer is that I now believe the best way for me to support Graeme is not trying to fix him, or to fix things, but just to be present to him. I can listen and step back a bit before I respond. Hopefully I can take a deep breath so I don't respond out of my own anxiety, but respond to what is important to Graeme. Therefore I feel that my day-to-day conversations with Graeme now have had a sense of joy and less anxiety. Graeme has the awareness to let me know what he needs, which often involves playing and listening to music.

I am not sure if the image of the hand/boat is still as relevant for me. The image of the helping hand has an element of being a heroic image of Jesus/God saving me from drowning in the murky waters. However, while the image does not hold as much power for me, it still holds some comfort and reassurance. At times I may feel overwhelmed and exhausted, but I don't feel like I am drowning.

Supporting Graeme by being there and not trying to fix him has been very helpful, and it does make me feel more relaxed and comfortable to enjoy our father/son relationship. However, every day is still a struggle; I am relieved that Graeme is recovering well. This is promising. COVID-19 has also made it tough.



Silent reflection

Recall the main feelings you experienced as you listened to Sue and Sam's experiences of prayer. Then recall a time where you experienced a sense of wholeness and peace following a time of struggle. Be aware of what shifted within you to bring your struggle/challenge to resolution, and how you felt at different times as the experience unfolded.

The leader then asks members to share their response with the whole group. It is important for each person to speak without interruption or comment.

After all have shared as they are able, invite participants to then reflect on what connections they had with the shared reflections of others in the group.

After a brief time shared in silent reflection, invite individual comments on what they connected with and why it was a connection for them.

Next, recall any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have experienced your normal way of life being called to change. Recall how you felt facing a new future.

After shared responses, discuss:

What is it in your experience of lockdown that is similar to/ differs from other experiences of feeling your

normal way of life needed to change? What has been important for you about the discussion to this point?

Our text: Galatians 3: 23 – 29

A member of the group reads the text.

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Group members read a paragraph in turn. Take a moment to underline any phrases or thoughts that catch your attention.

These verses conclude Paul's argument in chapter 3 about how important Abraham's faith is for Paul's new community of Jesus-followers. Abraham's story dates from 2,000 BC approximately, a good 500 years before

the Moses exodus story from Egypt. Paul recalls that Abraham left the country of his birth, its security and the gods of his birthplace to follow God's call. Paul argues that God's blessing promised to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, so that followers of Jesus from all nations need to be recognised as children of God because they too are legitimate inheritors of God's promised blessing to Abraham.

But the Jews of Paul's day believed God's promise to Abraham was exclusively for them because of their obedience to the (later) laws of Moses. Against such exclusivism, Paul's gospel extends Abraham's promise to all nations *for all* who have faith in Christ. On this basis, faith means unity amongst God's people. This argument undermined the Jewish leaders claim to be an exclusive community that justified them receiving exceptional treatment from the Roman Empire. Paul calls this out as idolatry: you can't claim to worship the one true God while turning a blind eye to Caesar's claim to be divine, and in fact living like slaves of the colonising Romans.

While the Mosaic law had served as a guide to following God's purposes, the promise to Abraham precedes Moses by perhaps 500 years. Paul says faith in Christ is a game-changer for what it means to Jewish. The many nations that comprise Galatia are members of Abraham's one multinational people as

children of God. All humankind may be children of God through faith. This claim directly challenges the Roman foundational myth that had posited a genealogy for the unity of nations under the one 'fatherhood' of the divine Caesar. But the Father of Jesus Christ has established an alternative genealogy through Abraham that promises peace for all through God's grace.

To understand why all those of Jesus' new community (both Jews and Gentile converts, slaves and free, male and female) are heirs of Abraham's promise, consider the importance of creation myths in Australia. The predominant story is that Australia was 'discovered' by Captain James Cook (1770) and a colony was established under Governor Arthur Philip (1788). However, Indigenous Australians' stories begin with their dreaming myths, and these truths endure and are the cultural foundation for Indigenous people today. The story of the colonisers hides the violence of their conquest, and seeks to wipe out (or forget) the Indigenous story. Similarly to Indigenous creation stories, Paul recalls an event from time immemorial for Jewish people to remind them their God's purpose from the beginning was to be a blessing for all people.

Paul asserts a person is an heir of Abraham and child of God through 'baptism into Christ'. Belonging in



Jesus' community becomes a matter of faith rather than the privilege of blood ties, and faith in Jesus is made public through baptism. Dying and rising in baptism is imagined to be a transformative personal and political dynamic. Perhaps the personal dynamic of baptism could be likened to the dying of one's ego? For Paul, baptism into Christ also marked the end of his enslavement to the fear and violence of the imperial world and the beginning of his life's work renewed in the power of God's love in solidarity with the one people of God.

So baptism is no individualised spirituality. All the divisions and enmities of the imperial world order are transformed. There is to be a new creation: a union of people from conquered nations who receive the blessing of God promised to Abraham. Perhaps today there could be in Paul's gospel echoes of what we call peer support, which is 'a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility and mutual agreement of what is helpful'² amongst people with similar experiences. Peer support can help people to better understand their

situation in ways that heal their wounds and transform the social and political factors that contributed to their experience of injustice and suffering. Peer support is intensely personal, but it also gives voice to the suffering experienced by victims of injustice, speaking truth to power about the need for relationships and institutions of care that meet their needs.³

INTEGRATION

Underline any phrases or sentences that you connect with our earlier conversation about prayer as human agency and our struggle to be whole in person and in community. Share with the study group the phrase/sentence with which you connected. Consider how you may bring the part you connected with to the discussion of the four following questions. Sometimes a connection may be:

- *A feeling in the text or commentary that connects with a feeling evoked by the discussion question.*
- *A word or phrase that in the text or commentary that brings to mind a thought sparked by the discussion question.*

²Shery Mead, David Hilton, and Laurie Curtis, 'Peer Support: a theoretical perspective', *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 25, (2001): 135.

³John Bottomley, 'The transformative journey to sustainability for Australia's compensation systems: how peer support and restorative justice interventions are creating a new inclusive narrative', in Beth Crisp and Anne Taket (2020), *Sustaining Social Inclusion*. Palgrave. 2020..

- *Either of the above, but it is disconnection or contradictory feeling or phrase between the text or commentary and the discussion question.*

Then discuss one or more of the following:

- How does Paul's view of Abraham's blessing through Christ inform your understanding of Sue's conviction that she should strike out on her own to embrace a new future? Have you had a similar experience?
- How does Paul's view of the transformation of relations between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female inform your understanding of Sam's awareness of the importance of being in solidarity with his son, or a similar experience of your own?
- What does it mean for your congregation to be like a peer support community to all people for your personal and/or community wholeness during this pandemic?
- If you accept that through Christ you are a child of Abraham, how does that inform your understanding of the alternative creation myths for being an Australian?

Closing prayer

Participants are invited to name in a word or sentence any whose concerns are close to their heart. When all who wish have offered their prayer, conclude with the Lord's Prayer.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be
your name, your kingdom come, your
will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those
who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and
deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the
glory are yours now and for ever.

Amen.







STUDY FOUR:

INTERGRATION: PRIVILEGE, POWERLESSNESS AND PRAYER.

WELCOME:

We acknowledge the (insert the name of the local Indigenous custodians), the first inhabitants of this place. We honour them for their custodianship of the land, on which we gather today.

In the third study, we listened to Sue and Sam's story of challenge and prayer and the lessons in life and faith they gained from their experiences. Group members then shared their own experiences, responding to where something from either story touched them. We reflected how in Galatians 3:23-29, Paul continued to build an inclusive congregation that resembled a peer support program for vulnerable people. We talked together to better understand Paul's metaphor for faith in Christ Jesus as baptism, a radical transformation of life from the old imperial order of violence and fear to a life in solidarity with a new community of unity, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. We concluded with free prayer for those close to our hearts and with the Lord's Prayer.

IN THIS STUDY:

We seek to integrate our experiences of privilege, powerlessness and the struggle of prayer as we listen to a story reflecting on the unmaking of the spirit of violence embedded in western capitalism's patriarchal culture.

You will be invited to recall any experience of your own where a characteristic you grew up with and valued turned out to be a barrier to your human wholeness, and find out where that led you. Then we will reflect on any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have felt similarly.

We will read Galatians 4:12-20 and consider Paul's recollections of being cared for by the Galatians when he was vulnerable, which highlight the importance of mutual love and respect for birthing Christlike solidarity in a violent world. We will discuss how this may inform our current need for greater community solidarity in lockdown, and what Paul's gospel of solidarity may be calling us to through this global pandemic.

We conclude with prayer.

OUR CONTEXT

Listen to the story from John, as he shares his experience of personal vulnerability, and what he discovered about the transformation of his identity in solidarity with God's grace.

At my annual heart health review in December last year, my cardiologist told me the echocardiograph had identified an aneurysm in the aorta. This was a swelling in the main artery pumping blood from the heart which if not treated, would bubble and burst, ending my life. I was booked for surgery at the earliest opportunity, the end of January 2020.

After my surgery, and while in ICU, I suffered several frightening, vividly coloured nightmares, where in several hallucinations I was a witness to criminal violence, and in another, I watched sand falling on my coffin at my own burial. This was unsettling to the point that I became too frightened to sleep in case the nightmares recurred. Also, as I was confined to my bed by the wires pacing my weakened heart and other devices, I felt helpless and sometimes hopeless. One night I wondered if I would be better off dead. I was sick of being sick. This was my 'long night of the soul'. It is a painful place, if for no other reason than the painful truths it revealed to me.

During one very long night, I allowed myself to reflect upon my nightmares and remembered that after my previous open-heart surgery in 1993, I had been troubled by the realisation that my heart had been actually held in human hands. It bothered me that none of the doctors had mentioned this beforehand, and it somehow felt like I had been complicit in a violation of the divine order. Now, this feeling had returned even more strongly. But as I endured my long night, it came to me that this time I had knowingly and fully consented to the violence of open-heart surgery. I was both a silent witness to and complicit participant in an act of violence against the Creator of all life and death. In my nightmare I was a witness to my own death, but I had chosen to put off death. In this long night of the soul, I accepted the truth of my feeling broken and guilty of violating the God-given integrity of my body and soul. My yearning to prolong my life brought me face to face with my capacity for self-justifying violence – I had consented to my surgeon carrying out surgery, which I realised involved me in a violent invasion of my body and a transgression against the Creator and giver of life. The sum of all that I had consented to and was complicit in was truly traumatic.

This shocking truth about my self-image as a 'nice man' and a 'good man' led me to question whether my consent



to the violence of open-heart surgery was forgivable. After wrestling with this question for a time, I sensed God would forgive me my complicity in my violence against both self and God: this act of taking control of my life and making the decision to knowingly give my heart again to be held by human hands for my life's sake. But still it did not sit well with me, and I asked for a visit from the hospital pastoral care team.

A lay chaplain came on my final morning in ICU. After the briefest of introductions, I poured out my heart to him for about 15 minutes. He only spoke a few words, but every word showed a deep understanding of my shame at my resort to violence against God and myself to preserve my life. I dissolved into tears of relief and release: balm for my wounded soul.

The illusion of my personal autonomy and masculine power to determine my life evaporated in front of me. I knew the gift of my dependence on God's forgiveness for my complicity in an act of violence, and the gift of the acceptance of others for the wholeness of my life. I later took the time to discuss this with my surgeon, and he acknowledged that other patients had expressed similar thoughts. Again, his understanding of my grief evoked a profound sense of trust between us, and I left the hospital at peace. However, the panic attacks going to sleep

continued for about two weeks, and only gradually resolved as I shared my story with Marg and a ministry colleague, who comforted me with practical and spiritual care.

My prayer is that others may know what it means to be dependent on the grace of another's love for the gift of holistic justice and the treasure of human dignity.

John Bottomley

Silent reflection

Recall the main feelings you experienced as you listened to John's assumptions about his privileged male identity being broken open as he was plunged into powerlessness and despair, followed by his long night of struggle in prayer. Note any feelings evoked by his encounter with God, a pastoral care staff person and his ministry colleague. Then recall a time where you experienced any of these feelings in your own life. Be aware of what it was like for you to hear another person's feelings that resonated with your own struggles.

The leader then asks members to share their response with the whole group. It is important for each person to speak without interruption or comment.

After all have shared if they wish, invite participants to reflect on what

connections they had with the shared thoughts of others in the group.

After a brief time in silent reflection, invite individual comments on what they connected with and why it resonated.

Next, recall any times during the COVID-19 lockdown when you have experienced your vulnerability and/or mortality. Recall any moments of grace you have experienced over the four sessions of this study program.

After shared responses, discuss:

What is it in your experience of lockdown that is similar to/differs from other experiences of feeling vulnerable or awareness of your mortality? What has been important for you about moments of solidarity during COVID-19?

Our text: Galatians 4: 12 – 20

A member of the group reads the text.

Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the good will you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given

them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Group members read a paragraph in turn. Take a moment to underline any phrases or thoughts that catch your attention.

In these verses, Paul seeks to humanise a conflicted situation. He reminds the Galatians that when he was vulnerable, they cared for him. This is the new order for the messianic community of Jesus: we are all neighbours to each other in our vulnerability. In fact, when we welcome those who are vulnerable and/or despised, we welcome an angel of God, indeed Christ Jesus. How could this goodwill disappear?

Paul is puzzled and frustrated that the solidarity he enjoyed on his first visit with the Galatians seems to have been



replaced by a divisive spirit. Most likely this is due to the push by a Jewish faction to impose the need for circumcision on Gentile converts who have become followers of Jesus. For Paul, imposing circumcision on the Galatians is self-serving for the faction that wants to fit in with Rome's civic religion, because it will either force conformity to Jewish law on the converts or push them out of the community. This shapes up as a political problem because it enslaves the Jewish community in idolatrous obedience to the 'divine' Emperor, fosters division in the messianic community of Jesus' followers, and causes violence to male Gentiles.

Paul then compares himself to a woman in the pain of childbirth, bringing to birth the spirit of Christ in the hearts of the Galatians. This is a striking image of self-humiliation for a male with a previously proud reputation of fame and notoriety in Roman patriarchal society, where women had no rights. Females were the property of their father and then their husband. Married as young as twelve, their main duty was to produce children. They gave birth to four or five children, and many women died in childbirth before reaching the age of 20. Here, Paul completes the transformation of who he is called to be in solidarity with: as Jew he is in solidarity with Gentiles; as a free citizen of Rome he is in solidarity with slaves;

and as a male formed in patriarchy he seeks to be in solidarity with subservient, objectified females.

Paul is labouring to bring the Galatians back into conformity with the one who died as a despised and broken person in solidarity with all who are oppressed, and to wean them away from conformity to the violent politics of domination. Paul's gospel proclaims an uncompromising solidarity with the 'other', that is, those different from his former self and marginalised from power, and to that extent, imagines himself doing female labour in a violently patriarchal world. Paul describes his efforts to form the Galatians with a Christlike spirit in terms of 'mothering', addressing his congregation as 'my little children' and giving birth to their new and life-affirming identity.

INTEGRATION

Underline any phrases or sentences that you connect with our earlier conversation about the pain of unmaking a culturally conditioned identity and integrating your new identity as a transformed and transforming follower of Christ. Share with the study group the phrase/sentence to which you connected. Consider how you may bring the part you connected with to the discussion of the three following questions. Sometimes a connection may be:

- A feeling in the text or commentary that connects with a feeling evoked by the discussion question.
- A word or phrase in the text or commentary that brings to mind a thought sparked by the discussion question.
- Either of the above, but it is disconnection or contradictory feeling or phrase between the text or commentary and the discussion question.

Then discuss one or more of the following:

- What is the importance of human vulnerability in Paul's gospel? How does your answer inform your response to living with this global pandemic?
- How could men look at Paul's willingness to identify with female realities to understand the importance of unmaking the spirit of violence in patriarchal culture?
- What may your congregation do to encourage men to embrace and contribute to understanding how men may grow into a Christlike identity at home and in their workplace? Have you experienced anything

similar during this pandemic study?

To conclude: what has been the most helpful part of this study - from the perspective of both your personal experiences and Paul's gospel for the Galatians - in supporting you to live with the many challenges of COVID-19?

Closing prayer

Participants are invited to express in a word or sentence your gratitude for gifts of God's grace. When all who wish have offered their prayer, conclude with the following prayer.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will, So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy when Your kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Amen

Based on a prayer of Reinhold Neibuhr.



FOR FURTHER READING

Elliot, N. *Liberating Paul: the justice of God and the politics of the Apostle*. (Great Britain, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995)

Kahl, B., *Galatians Re-imagined: reading with the eyes of the vanquished*. (Minneapolis Fortress Press 2014).

Lopez, D., *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008)

Witherington III, B., *Grace in Galatia: a commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998)

