

Strength Through Weakness  
vi. New Creation  
2 Corinthians 5:16,17

Alistair Sparks depicted our transition to democracy and beyond in two books: 'Tomorrow is Another Country' and 'Beyond the Miracle'. Hindsight has taught us that we did not miraculously change overnight and 'another country' has morphed into something very different than that envisaged by our founding fathers who drafted our constitution. So how do we address the creeping cynicism in our hearts fueled by factionalism and populist rhetoric? I would suggest that the answer lies in an ancient letter written by Paul to the church at Corinth.

Corinth was a relatively new city, some 80 years old, when Paul first visited it in the early 50's AD. He spent some 18 months there and found it brash, bold and competitive. Style trumped substance. Patronage was rife. People were evaluated in terms of power and status. The values of the day were reflected in the church. The cult of personality prevailed. Rich and poor were divided. They fought over worship. Believers took believers to court. The church had ceased to be counter-cultural rather a pale reflection of the prevailing culture.

So Paul addresses the human face of the church by pointing them (and us) to the face of Christ. "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." (v16). Some of us have a romantic view of the early church. Corinth removes any illusion in this regard. However, Paul is undaunted. He is not a disillusioned idealist, rather a spiritual realist who believes in a supernatural God: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here" (v17). The original has no article underscoring the miraculous as in original creation from nothing.

Paul's hope for the Corinthians was no wishful thinking based on human potential and effort. His hope was based on the promise of the future invading the present through the presence and power of God. The winter of this tired world had given way to the prospect of Spring. Unlike C.S. Lewis' depiction of Narnia under the spell of the white witch, 'always winter, never Christmas'; the believers at Corinth had a future bright with promise because Christ is the resurrection and the life. They were secure in Christ because He himself has borne their judgement against sin. They could know the truth and be free because He is the way the truth and life.

What was true for them is true for us. The two words "In Christ" are the key that opens the door to the heart of God and enables us to walk into his arms and hear the words "Welcome Home". This new creation, this revolution of the heart is no mere renovation, rather something totally new – "the old has gone, the new has come!" Like the Israelites returning from exile, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter our tongues with songs of joy... Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy." (Psalm 126)

With Alan Paton we may well 'Cry [for] the Beloved Country'. Like Stephen Kumalo the priest from Ndotsheni in the foothills of the Drakensburg, we may search in vain for peace and consolation in the City of Gold. However, like Paton's protagonist, ours' too is 'A Story of Comfort in Desolation'

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