



The Scots' Church Melbourne

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN VICTORIA, FOUNDED 1838

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Dear friends

Encouragement in uncertain and hard times

The job description of the Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria includes, *"where appropriate, exercising a pastoral responsibility towards the ministers and members of the denomination."*

In this light, Rev Peter Phillips, as the Acting Clerk of Assembly, has written a pastoral letter of encouragement to all of us. It is reproduced below. It is in two parts:

1. Encouragement in the Lord in uncertain times, and
2. Encouragement to be faithful in giving in hard times.

Please take the time to read what Peter has to tell you. May his words bless you and bless our church.

REV PHILIP COURT
Interim Moderator

1. Encouragement in the Lord in uncertain times

The times are always uncertain – but the arrival of COVID-19 has made us painfully aware of that uncertainty – and not feeling in control is uncomfortable, even frightening.

Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy (1789) wrote 'Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.'

Thankfully, he was wrong, for while many things are uncertain, our God is not; he says 'I the LORD do not change' (Mal 3:6); 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8); neither the power of God nor the promises of God change; he is infinite in power, and faithful to his promises. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, 'when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.' (Heb 6:17-18)

It is good for us to be shaken out of our comfort zones, good for us to reaffirm a God-centred, heaven-oriented perspective on life. It is good for us to read and meditate upon the scriptures, to be reminded

of the faithfulness of our God and his promises to provide for our every need and to pray, not panic. In uncertainty it's time to practise the Faith we profess, 'to encourage the fainthearted, help the weak ... to do good to one another and to everyone, to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances; [knowing that] this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us.' (1 Thess 5:14-18)

John Wesley, bound for America, was greatly impressed by the peace of the Moravians in the face of danger: he wrote (Sunday January 25, 1736) 'In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die." From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbours, and pointed out to them the difference in the hour of trial, between him that feareth God, and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen.'

The impact of the Moravians' practical faith in God on Wesley culminated in his conversion. Only God knows what blessings he might be pleased to give us and others through us if the peace he gives those who trust him in uncertain times is evident in our actions and in our words. Let us not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known to God, so that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, may guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

2. Encouragement to be faithful in giving in hard times

The present crisis also has financial implications for the church and its congregations. Many members are increasingly restricted in their ability to support the work of the church financially; some have lost jobs, others have had their hours of work severely restricted, others have had the value of their superannuation greatly reduced.

Also, the income of many congregations will be reduced because many members who make their contributions through the weekly 'open plate' offerings only contribute when they attend – and so many congregations are facing a catastrophic collapse in their financial support that threatens their very survival.

In recent conversation the Convener of the Assembly's Maintenance of the Ministry Committee, Elder Dennis Wright, expressed grave concern at the bleak prospects facing many congregations of the PCV. Mr. Wright said that while the Committee was willing to do what it could with the funds it had in reserve, and while he encouraged congregations in desperate straits to apply through their presbyteries for financial support, ultimately the survival of most congregations depends upon the faithfulness of its members in maintaining their giving even while not able to meet in the usual way.

If we are not faithful in our giving to the Lord's work, when the crisis has passed and we are able to return to weekly worship there may not be much or even anything to return to. The crisis is not going to be short – and so rather than allow our giving to drift it's time for considered giving, even sacrificial giving.

We value the promise 'my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus' – but we easily forget that was given in response to sacrificial giving by the Philippians. The apostle writes, 'Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ... I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*. And then come the words we delight to remember, 'And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 4:14, 18-19)

Matthew Henry comments: 'He does as it were draw a bill upon the exchequer in heaven, and leaves it to God to make them amends for the kindness they had shown him. "He shall do it, not only as your God, but as my God, who takes what is done to me as done to himself. You supplied my needs, according to your poverty; and he shall supply yours, according to his riches."

The apostle makes the same point in writing to the Corinthians, 'The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.' (2 Cor 9:5ff)

In encouraging you to be faithful in giving in this crisis time I am not implying that the people of our church are mean or slack in their giving; I am not – but it is easy for those who do not have to pay the bills to be unaware of the financial crisis facing the church – and while it is most definitely true that we are to give 'not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver', the apostolic teaching makes it plain that our giving to the Lord's work is to be considered, thoughtful, under the authority of the word of God and after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that we by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

Peter Phillips
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Presbyterian Church of Victoria

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