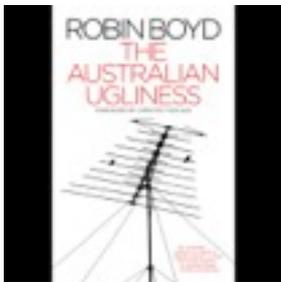


# Grace Makes Beauty out of Ugly Things

## Philippians 4:1-9

In 1960, the architect Robin Boyd published a book entitled *The Great Australian Ugliness*. It was an attack on the poor architecture that characterised the vast and sprawling suburb of Australian cities. I've never read the book, but I am familiar with its title, because it has launched a thousand criticisms, not just about triple-front brick veneer houses, like the one I happily grew up in, but about the ugliness of Australian culture.



A few years ago the book was re-released, with a new cover and a foreword by the Melbourne author Christos Tsiolkas. It was no surprise that the publishers chose Tsiolkas, whose books paint a painfully realistic picture of the ugliness of contemporary Australian life: anger, selfishness and revenge, infidelity and greed. People live behind walls of deceit. It's all about the stuff we have. The means justify the ends.

In many ways, 2014 has been an ugly year. We have a national debate about the rights of refugees to seek asylum in Australia. We have watched various conflicts spiral out of control overseas, in Syria, Ukraine and South Sudan. We are chilled to the bone by ISIS, and its reign of terror in Iraq and Syria. We are deeply saddened at how our Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq are being martyred.



We desperately need to hear the word that the Apostle Paul speaks to us today: a word of hope to a despairing world. Paul's watchword is joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

And he needs to say it again because joy is hard to come by in our society. Bad news predominates, and the good news we see is often forced, trite and only skin-deep.



Being a Christian, however, doesn't mean papering over the cracks of modern life, or pretending that everything's just fine when it isn't. Paul's call to rejoice is built on the rock solid foundation of the action of God in Jesus Christ. We need to go back to the previous chapter to see how Paul sets out the reasons that Christians have to be joyful in the face of ugliness.

Chapter three begins with these words: "Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord." Immediately Paul says this, he warns his congregation about the false teachers who are

seeking to undermine the only thing that can give us confidence and hope: gaining Christ and being found in him, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” Lying behind these words is a world view that confesses that the existence of the universe is not random and that it is the product of God’s creative hand. God has created human beings in his image and shared with them his life.



But there’s a realism about a world in which sin mars

God’s good creation. Paul writes of those “who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.” Evil has perverted what God intended to be good, and this has resulted in all kinds of ugliness in attitude and action.

How, then, can we talk of a living God who gives us reason to rejoice in the face of this ugliness? Only through Christ Jesus, the one who made himself nothing, making himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

It’s the event of the cross and resurrection of Jesus that tips the scales toward hope and a future. Hear the conviction in what Paul says, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

This is the hope in which we all live. “Our citizenship is in heaven,” Paul reminds us. This means that our life project is driven by the knowledge that we are loved by God, and that we are on the trajectory to eternal life. Not only that, but we also believe that God cares passionately for this broken world, and he is rebuilding it through his church.

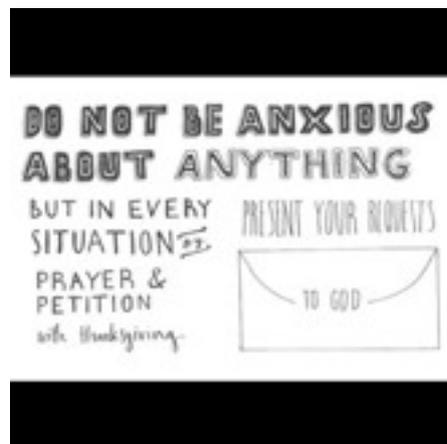
So Today Paul calls us to stand firm. In the face of the ugliness around us, he urges us to keep this faith and confidence in his love and his care for his creation. The joy he calls us to is not self-generated, but it is one of the fruit that his Spirit gives. This joy, much, much more than mere happiness, is a deep confidence in the nurturing love of God. This joy results in gentleness which flows over into our relationships. Knowing that we have security in God, we don’t have to shore up our own position in our interaction with others. Safe in the shadow of the Lord, we can be fully there for others. The word Paul uses here is remarkably broad in meaning. Let your goodwill, friendliness, patience, forbearance be evident to all.



“The Lord is near...” Paul is most likely thinking of the imminent return of Jesus to “bring everything under his control, [who] will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.” I think we lack that sense of Jesus’ second coming, and it serves us well

to remember that the world is not running down to an ugly end, but that God will conclude the drama at the time of his choosing. At the same time, it is also true that the “Lord is near” through the gifts of grace that he continues to lavish on us, his word and holy meal, his presence within, the gift of each other, the way that the Holy Spirit lives in us and links us together.

This then leads to the next point. “Do not be anxious about anything.” I’ve suffered from anxiety in the clinical sense. For me, anxiety is the sense that the world is out of control and I’m not making a success of my life journey. There’s no safe haven, no one who understands my struggle and my circumstances. Even the self is dangerous, because it’s full of self-critical thoughts. Healing came to me in a number of ways, including medication, but also through being able to ask for the prayers of others, especially when prayer was hard for me in the middle of chaos. Paul urges us to “in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, [to] present your request to God.” To do this for others is a precious privilege, and an invaluable gift to them.



We can pray with great confidence because we know that God’s heart is for us. That’s the clear message of cross- that God through his Son Jesus would dare to even suffer and die for us-if that God is for us, who can be against us. On the same basis, we can be sure that the peace God has made with his warring creatures and creation through the cross is expressed at the micro-level, in our lives. God stands like a sentry and guards not just our hearts, but our minds too.



Remember what Paul said two weeks ago: “Have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had...” Paul now speaks about the way that his relationship with us shapes our thinking, which informs our actions.

Whatever is true - “Lord, sanctify us by your truth. Your word is truth.”

Whatever is worthy of respect

Whatever is right - “the righteousness that comes through faith...”

Whatever is pure - “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace

loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Whatever is lovely

Whatever is praiseworthy

Whatever is virtuous.

The Five C’s give each of us a framework by which we can think on these things and put them into practice:

- Centre - dwelling in the Word and praying through it, and praying our lives in response to it;
- Core - pairing with another Christian to share life and faith, to be kept accountable and to encourage one another

- Connect - to journey with a small group of Christians, to together discern how to think and live as faithful followers of Jesus
- Celebration - doing what we are doing today, gathering in God's presence, encouraging one another, praising God, praying for the world, being fed by God
- Commission - this is where our thinking is put into practice- in the world of our homes, our friends, our work, our community engagement. This is where we come face to face with the ugliness of life, but where we also have the opportunity, as Paul writes, "to shine among them like stars in the sky, as we hold firmly to the word of life."



14 years ago, longer than I'd like to remember because it seems like yesterday, the band U2 released the album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. One song had the title: "Grace."

Grace  
She's got the walk  
Not on a ramp or on chalk  
She's got the time to talk  
She travels outside  
Of karma

Grace  
She carries a pearl  
In perfect condition  
What once was hurt  
What once was friction  
What left a mark  
No longer stings

Because grace makes beauty  
Out of ugly things

There is much in contemporary Australian culture that is ugly and life-draining. We all know and experience it. But there is everything in Christ which brings beauty out of ugliness, and healing out of brokenness.

Grace makes beauty out of ugly things. That's your calling, and mine too. And the God of peace will be with you. Amen.