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CONVOCATION ADDRESS

Voices in the Storm

Mr Principal, members of the faculty, graduands, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, let me begin by acknowledging that it is indeed a very great privilege to address the 142nd Convocation of The Presbyterian College, with its long history of preparing faithful ministers of the Word. I am delighted to be with you tonight. I should also like to bring warm greetings from the Theological Faculty of the University of Zurich, from the Zurich Reformed Church and from the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches.

I wish to congratulate each of you who have been awarded your degrees today. Tonight we celebrate what you have achieved in completing a tough academic program. We recognize the sacrifices you and your families have made to make this achievement possible, and in good Reformed tradition, we anticipate what we can expect of you as you begin a new phase of your life that no doubt will be filled with a much broader range of responsibilities at the personal level, in your ministry, and in your civic and social roles.

As I was gathering my thoughts for this occasion, I came across Acts 27 and the account of the apostle Paul with his two companions on a storm-tossed

ship on the high seas in the company of a multi-cultural and multi-religious group of 276 passengers. I believe Luke's story is more than a metaphor of the condition of the Christian church today, a minority in a multi religious and secular society. The dramatic description of the distress in which the ship's passengers find themselves - Luke calls the wind that catches the ship a "typhoon" – is relevant for us above all given the current destructive tendencies of our world.

Many of us sense that the state of the world markets, the unprecedented gathering of power in ever fewer hands, the impoverishment of two-thirds of humankind, as well as the destruction of nature are converging, and like howling winds and mighty waves crashing against a boat on a stormy sea, are threatening humankind with shipwreck. Many are fearfully proclaiming apocalyptic warnings. And many seem unwilling to take the weather report seriously; despite dark clouds and warning signs, they believe that the cruise will have smooth sailing. Others, like the centurion in Acts, live under the illusion that the progress of modern technology will at least assuage the danger, maybe even prevent it. Those who would seek biblical wisdom to ride through the storm must listen to the voice of the shipwrecked apostle and take it to heart.

However, before we continue with Acts 27, let us pause to consider another story of the sea found in the most beautiful pages of Roman lyric, in the didactic poem, *De rerum natura*, On the Nature of Things, by the Roman poet Lucretius from the first century BC. His second book begins with an impressive nautical metaphor that could be titled "As I watch the storm."

Pleasant it is, when over the great sea the winds shake the waters,
To gaze down from shore on the trials of others;
Not because seeing other people struggle is sweet to us,

But because the fact that ourselves are free from such ills strikes us as pleasant.

Pleasant it is also to behold great armies battling on a plain,

When we ourselves have no part in the peril.

But nothing is sweeter than to occupy a lofty sanctuary of the mind,

Well fortified with the teachings of the wise,

Where we may look down on others as they stumble along,

Vainly searching for the true path of life... (2.1-10).

It would be wrong to interpret these verses as merely a poet's reverie. They clearly echo the brutality of history at the time when Julius Caesar extended the borders of the Roman Republic into Gaul and Britain through military conquest. It was a period full of violence, civil wars, political assassinations, revolts, mass executions, and social and economic crisis. We would also err if we were to understand these verses as an expression of egotistical thought. Lucretius is tugging in quite another direction. He understands himself as a critical observer above the fray. He stands aloof, a scornful yet at the same time sympathetic witness to humankind's dark strivings and tribulations. In these verses we see the essence of epicurean philosophy. And this idea of philosophy as a private citadel or quiet refuge in a world of anxiety and turmoil, or as some form of contemplation and the true path to enlightenment has been a recurrent theme in world literature from the Buddha to Boethius, from Socrates to Schopenhauer.

Returning to the book of Acts, we can compare the behaviour of the solitary thinker to that of Paul. The apostle is not on the shore meditating, but rather on board the tempest-tossed ship. Although he himself is in distress, he does not withdraw into solitary quiet refuge. On the contrary, he gets involved and identifies with his fellow passengers, with their grief, their suffering, and their struggles in the storm. And at the right moment, he has the right words, and the right sign to rescue all of his shipmates. He proclaims the

saving grace of God. His proclamation, however, is not in abstract terms, but rather with words and deeds which are relevant to the storm fraught crowd.

As the danger of shipwreck grows acute, the foundations of communal existence are shaken. The sailors of the Alexandrian ship let the lifeboats down into the sea, as if they are trying to escape to dry land, instead of steering the ship. The mood on board suddenly changes and it is “every person for them selves.” At the climax of events, Paul takes charge. He tells the soldiers to cut the ropes and let the lifeboats go. Paul not only holds a view for the welfare of all, but he is a role model of how self-interest can be overcome for the well being of everyone. A feeling of unity, solidarity, and belonging comes alive on board. His holistic engagement of everyone has its foundation in the overall saving intention of the free grace of God. His clear view for community was only possible because he never lost sight of the crucified Lord, who gave himself for many for the forgiveness of sins, or to be more precise, because he trusted that Christ never loses sight of us, all of us.

The concrete proclamation of the love of God goes far beyond a specific situation. As our world sinks deeper into economic crisis after blindly accepting and embracing the most obvious „myth of un-limitedness" and the inevitable “culture of greed” as the truth, it is for churches and individual Christians to announce the saving power of the Gospel and to engage in debate about the ethics of the dominant global economic model. The Accra Confession issued in 2004 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches did indeed declare that matters of economic justice are integral to faith in Jesus Christ. Being faithful to God’s covenant requires that

individual Christians and churches take a stand against economic injustices.¹

The account of Acts 27 goes on to tell us that before daybreak, Paul encouraged the weakened, fearful, and apathetic passengers to eat and be strengthened in case of shipwreck. With a simple and meaningful gesture, according to Luke, “He took the bread, gave thanks to God in front of them, broke it, and began to eat” (Acts 27:35). The two words “thank” and “break,” remind us of when Jesus fed the multitude, but more importantly of the Lord’s Supper; his gesture reminds us of a Eucharistic celebration. One might ask oneself, what? In the midst of the storm a Eucharistic celebration? Yes, indeed, because sharing in that meal we are fed, not just with vague spiritual experience, but also with real food. As Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff rightly remind us: “The Eucharistic life is about the real stuff: bread and hunger, food and pleasure, undernourishment and global food politics, private property and the common good. It is about holiness and resurrection; it is about gift exchange, sustainability, and the economy of grace.”²

Luke reports that under the circumstances this apparently simple gesture was decisive. The text goes on to add: “Then they plucked up courage and began to take food themselves” (Acts 27:36). This was followed by an orderly evacuation of the ship and the rescue of all passengers on dry land.

Is this a happy ending? Indeed, for it shows that God’s love sustains, and his promise is true. It keeps the apostle going, and fuels him for living the Christian life. It gives him a reason to keep striving for justice, courage to

¹ See “Covenanting for justice: the Accra Confession” in, *Reformed World* 55 (September 2005), 185-190.

² Andrea Bieler, Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread and Resurrection* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2007).

keep working in situations of distress, to be a voice of hope in the storm. But it is also a wonderful lesson for the church of Christ. On our journey together in the church, we cannot point our compass in just any old direction in search of orientation. Our commission is to bring forth the depth of God's love for humankind. Thus while governments and big business seem to seek bail-out packages to save an economic model that has been around for 500 years, we are called to remember first of all those who have been victims of the food-crises, climate change, and other results of injustice in global financial arrangements. We are called to discard economic models propelled by values of unlimited consumption and greed, and search for a way of life that is based on sustainable and just relationships with our neighbours.

Dear sisters and brothers, as we consider the history of the church in light of these two stories of the sea, we must recognize, no doubt painfully, that we have often played the part of Lucretius and silently watched the storm. So today I appeal to each and every one of us, to you especially dear graduating class of 2009, to leave the sidelines and to take a stand. I challenge and encourage each of you to be all that you are called to be in your future ministry as *verbi divini minister*. May God eternal through his Son and the Holy Spirit grant us, and especially those whom we are honouring today, to be voices in the storm proclaiming His grace.

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