



A Message from Mark!

Overwhelmed?

22 Nov 2008 - The Reign of Christ

Scripture: Revelation 1: 4b-8

Therefore, this morning, if we really want to face our problems squarely, if we really want to pursue our life with confidence, the best thing we could do is to sing. We need to sing some exuberant hymn about the triumph of the grace of God.

You have undoubtedly experienced this yourself here on Sundays. You come here and, despite my best efforts in the sermon, despite the clear reading of God's word in Scripture, what really moves you, what really fills you with power to go on is the singing.

When we join our voices together in some great hymn of praise, then you know, in the very depths of your being, that Jesus Christ reigns; that he shall rule until all things have been put under his feet; that the enemies of God will ultimately be defeated; that goodness is stronger than evil and that victory is ours through him who loved us.

You know this, not in some rational, intellectual way, but rather in the deepest, most profound depths of your being. Worship enables you to go on.

May I suggest that that is the major reason why you are here this morning? You are looking for strength to go on in an *"age of overwhelmedness."* The only way to go on is to counter the seeming overwhelmedness of evil with a counterbalancing affirmation of the overwhelmedness of the power of God.

Our God is not some distant, aloof, uncaring deity, some empathetic but essentially powerless being. Our God not only cares, but also acts. Our God has power to heal the brokenness among us, that we might not be **overwhelmed**, but **empowered** to join our energies with God's to make a tremendous difference in the world.

And that is why we sing.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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Introduction The newscaster had just reported the death of a young girl who took her own life, saying that she could no longer bear to live. She was simply overwhelmed by the cruelty of her classmates who ridiculed her and made fun of her because of her weight problem. The 10 year old girl said in a suicide note that she had nothing left to do but to take her own life. After the news-person had read this report in businesslike, unemotional words, she looked up from her script, stared into the camera, and said, *"Isn't that the worst thing you have ever heard. Just overwhelming in its sadness."*

I thought her comments rather remarkable. Here was a newscaster who made her living, day after day, week-in, week-out, reading reports of assorted tragedy and heartache. It was amazing that she still had any feeling left. It was wonderful that she could still be moved to great empathy despite her daily diet of assorted heartache and tragedy. Empathy is no small achievement in an age when we are so often overwhelmed by tragedy.

That is why the British theologian, David Ford, has called our age, the *"age of overwhelmed-ness."* Ford says that in our age, we have been so exposed to assorted tragedy, heartbreak, and despair that we are overwhelmed. The occasional natural disaster, which humanity once heard about from vague reports long after the event, has become our daily diet in the news.

There are people who spend their entire lives compiling statistics of the pain: the number of road deaths each year; the number of babies who die in their cots; the carnage due to cancer, or AIDS, or other epidemics. Little wonder that vast numbers of us are overwhelmed.

Some of us attempt to defend ourselves from being overwhelmed by the pain. We turn the news off or else we become numbed. We lose ourselves in engagement with the sports pages of the paper rather than the current events section. And yet, in our better moments, we know that this numbness, this psychic turning away is an inappropriate response to the problem. We must face the tragedy. Tragedy is a fact of life, and we must face facts. If we are going to do anything about the problems that beset us, we have to confront the problems honestly.

During an age of overwhelmed-ness, however, it's difficult to look at things honestly, but next Sunday we'll have just that opportunity. We'll welcome **Jeff Wild** to our Christmas Bowl Breakfast and our services. Jeff will report to us the good news of the powerful impact of our Christmas Bowl giving last year resulting in the clearing of many hundreds of Cambodian land mines to make safe the rice fields for agriculture once again.

In Shakespeare's **Hamlet**, the young prince muses to himself, asking what he ought to do in response to the sin of his mother and his uncle who had killed his father and now have married one another. Young Hamlet wonders if it's better to take up the sword against "*a sea of troubles*," or whether it's better to simply pull the covers up over his head, to sleep and dream and maybe end it all. Young Hamlet is faced by a sea of troubles that has become a veritable flood. He is overwhelmed.

Presently, there are many people who feel they lack the capacity to even talk about these problems. As our Summer kicks in and a new bushfire season begins, how do we feel? Do we feel confident about what lies ahead? Or do we feel overwhelmed? On a global scale, our problems seem so large, so intractable, so resistant to our little actions. What can anybody do? Like Hamlet, we wonder if the most prudent course is simply to quit, to anaesthetise ourselves in some fashion, to sleep, to dream. Where on earth would we get the strength to take up arms against a "*sea of troubles*" when that sea has become an overwhelming flood?

Here, at the end of the church's year, when we traditionally celebrate the "**Reign of Christ, the King**" our text is from The Revelation of John. As I was saying last week, Revelation, the last book of the Bible, arises out of a troubled church. Rarely does the writer turn aside and give us a hint of the troubles that these fledgling congregations faced, but we know, reading between the lines, that here was a church clinging for its life on the fringes of the Roman Empire. You can almost see them there, a little band of Christians, surrounded in the pagan cities. They seemed so small, so overwhelmed. What are they to do? Where on earth might one find hope for the future in such circumstances?

Interestingly, Revelation begins with great shouts of praise. One might expect the vision to begin in despair, after all, the church is in deep trouble and the empire is stepping up its persecutions of Christians. What hope is there in that?

However, despite all evidence to the contrary, Revelation is noted for its sustained outbursts of exuberant joy and praise. The vision begins, not in despair, but in doxology, in praise, in cadences that scholars believe were derived in great part from some of the hymns of the early church. They certainly sound like hymns. Listen to today's Scripture again: 1:5b "*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen!*"

John, who should have been overwhelmed by the great sea of troubles that faced him and his beloved churches, responds by an overwhelming affirmation of the grace and triumph of God in Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has decisively entered the world and is busy reclaiming a lost world. Revelation begins with poetry that evokes images of invasion, of cosmic battles, then of decisive victory by Almighty God.

John on the island of Patmos responded to the overwhelmingness of the present evil with affirmation of the overwhelmingness of the victory of God in Jesus Christ.

Sweeping claims are being made here. What happens in Jesus is not just something that is personal or private, as we sometimes pervert the Christian faith. It is all very public. Political even; Cosmic even. Matters of vast importance are being addressed. Seemingly intractable problems are being defeated. There is no corner of creation that is immune from this sweeping influx of grace.

I find an analogy here to the Wesleyan revival in England during the 18th century. In the mid-18th century, John Wesley began his ministry in an England that seemed overwhelmed by social problems. The gin trade had led to huge problems with alcoholism. The industrial revolution had laid waste the rural English countryside, resulting in a vast influx of people seeking employment in the cities. Child labour was the scourge of the land. There was vast social dislocation and chaos. Things seemed overwhelming.

Eventually, John Wesley countered these problems not necessarily with a new social program for human betterment, but rather with a revival which, "*responded to the problems of the day with an overwhelming affirmation of Divine grace.*" The Wesley brothers responded to the problems of their day with singing, with hymns. Among the great legacies of the Wesleyan revival are some of our most beloved hymns such as "*O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*," "*Hark the Herald Angels Sing*," and "*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.*"

What good do hymns do? Do they put food on the table? Do they solve any of our economic or social problems? What good did the hymns of Charles Wesley do for England? Or for that matter, what good do the opening hymns of Revelation do?

I think they respond to the overwhelmingness of evil with an affirmation of the power of God. And that is the place to begin. If we lack confidence in the ultimate triumph of the will and purposes of God, then we will never have courage to honestly face our situation. We have to have a place to stand, some great foundational affirmation that will enable us to be truthful about our circumstances. Only secure, confident people can be truthful. Therefore, Revelation begins with a great shout of joy, a great, exuberant, confident affirmation of the power of God.