



## Knowing our Limitations Moderator's Comments Posted 15 September 2020

By Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

If anyone is looking for suitable reading in lockdown – or in wild freedom, for that matter – Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* is indeed food for the soul and for the intellect. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a distinguished French scientist who sought to write an apologetic for the Christian faith, but death took him before the work could be completed. No matter, for Pascal's work in its unfinished state outdoes other writers whose works are finished and neatly revised. Pascal was especially incisive when it comes to exposing the human condition. He wrote:

*Man is only a reed, the feeblest thing in nature, but, he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary for the entire universe to take up arms in order to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water, is sufficient to kill him. But if the universe crushes him, man would still be nobler than the thing which destroys him, because he knows that he is dying, and the universe which has him at its mercy is unaware of it.*

Somehow we are the crown of the creation, yet the cause of its ills; we are strong yet also woefully weak; aware yet ignorant; proud yet debased.

Back in the sixth century B.C., when the Babylonians crushed Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, razed the temple, removed the kings, and exiled the people, Jeremiah lamented: 'I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Lord, but in justice; not in anger, lest you bring me to nothing' (Jer.10:23-24). If Covid should have taught us anything, it should have made us less susceptible to the prevailing culture of self-esteem, with its attendant embarrassing claims of 'I'm proud of myself', and 'I need to take control of my life'. The way of man is not in himself.

Our limitations are such that we do not know what the next day will bring (James 4:13-16). Our grasp of providence is tentative at best. All the efforts of the geniuses who run our governments and public services seem to be hit and miss. The obvious lesson of the coronavirus ought to be that we are vulnerable. A germ can kill us, as Pascal said, yet that was true before the coronavirus struck. The wisdom of the media, universities, and the whole zeitgeist was that we had outgrown the need for God. Yet common sense, let alone godly wisdom, seems to have departed the scene. We are not even sure of how many genders there are.

During the tortured struggle against the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer often cited the prayer of Jehoshaphat: 'We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You' (2 Chron.20:12). It was also quoted by Franz Hildebrandt in preaching for Bonhoeffer's memorial service after his execution by the Nazis in 1945. The difference so far in the modern West is that there has yet to be a widespread turning to God. Jeremiah cried out for correction; we just want things to return to 'normal' – bread and circuses each week lest people have time to think deeply; the Full Monty to keep viewers titillated and occupied; a judicial system that protects what is debased; and an education system which shows that it is unbiassed by keeping out Christianity but allowing in Safe Schools and Cultural Marxism. Whatever could be wrong?

Even the prophet Jeremiah feared the anger of God, and being brought to nothing. Preachers these days tell us that God has no anger. Their starting point, and finishing point, is the equal love of God for all. The truth is that we are feeble thinking reeds, aware and culpable. We do not know our way in this world; we



need to look to God for correction and justice lest we perish. That is the sort of note the pandemic ought to be sounding to us. The more in control we think we are, the more God will chasten us. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, walking humbly before Him has to be the next lesson. The world has mocked God but God is not mocked (Gal.6:7). We do not know

the way, but Christ is the way (John 14:6). On our knees we can yet find that way.

*Rev. Dr Peter Barnes, Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.*