

Speaking the truth in love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 February 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Bruce Irvine

Epiphany 4C

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30; Ephesians 4:1-7, 14-16

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1tKfdCQzDI>

In Ephesians Chapter 4, Paul encourages Christians to *speak the truth in love*.

What I am about to say is not a “sermon”. It’s a “witness”. A witness to some of the people who spoke the truth to me in love – and who made me who I am.

Of course, *speaking the truth in love* is not always a pleasant experience for the hearer. Its perhaps one of the most misused quotes in the Bible.

For example: in about 1982, Rev Beth Howard, the Minister of Wellington Parish, had the crazy idea that she should invite me to lead a workshop for her Elders – and I was naive enough to accept!

We met in the garden of a farm near Yeoval on a lovely mild sunny day. In the afternoon session, sitting in camp chairs on the lawn, I suggested that it was OK for Christians to have doubts.

“WHADDYAMEAN DOUBTS! WHAT SORT OF DOUBTS!” said one man.

“*Well doubts about the nature of God, doubts about some things in the Bible*”

“*I BELIEVE EVERY WORD IN THIS BOOK!!!!*”, he said, slamming his Bible down!

Well, maybe he thought he was speaking the truth in love – but I felt pretty intimidated – because I continued to have doubts.

Now, though, I’ve come to understand that doubts about faith are a sign of maturity.

That indeed, without doubt, there can be no faith

For 25 years or so, I spent about 1000 hours a year “working for the church” – most of it in the Presbytery, Synod and Assembly - and mostly as a volunteer. I gave a lot to the church – but the church repaid me a hundred fold!

It is fashionable to see the church beyond our local congregation as interfering nuisances. But, for me, my participation in committees and councils of the church was formational – and transformational.

From when I was a teenager, I felt a vague sense of call to ministry. (Hence the picture on the cover of the worship book today of the Child Samuel. (Sir Joshua Reynolds)

At about age 28, I became an Elder of the Narromine Presbyterian Church.

About 5 years later, in the mid-1970s, I became the lay representative to Dubbo Presbytery – a tiny group of 8 Presbyterian congregations scattered from Wellington to Back 'o Bourke.

At that time we began talking with the Orange Synod of the Methodist Church - in preparation for the formation of the Uniting Church.

I met a Methodist man named Jack Scoble who operated a farm machinery business in Parkes. Jack was the long-time mayor of Parkes - and was very active in the church, both in the local church, and in the wider Methodist church.

Jack's favourite story was: *"Sometimes people say to me "Jack, you should be in the ministry!" And Jack would always reply: "But I AM in the ministry! The ministry of the laity!"*

Back in the 1970s, that was a pretty radical statement. *"In the ministry"* meant ordained ministry – Ministry with a capital M.

Lay people might do stuff around the church – but they were just *"working for the church"* or *"helping the Minister"*.

Jack Scoble saw Ministry as the ministry of the Laos of God – the whole people of God - ordained and non-ordained working in partnership together.

I began to see that, perhaps, I was called to this Ministry of the Laity. I certainly never felt called to ordained ministry!

I became a passionate advocate for lay ministry. Sadly I was not always wise enough to recognise that some Ministers saw this advocacy as a threat to their status and their role.

But not all of them. In 1981, I was elected Chairperson of Central West Presbytery – mainly because the "capital M" Ministers encouraged me to stand.

At that time, Rev John Paton, a Consultant from the Board of Mission, visited our Narromine Trangie parish. John stayed in our home and seemed very interested in the farm. I was delighted to have a captive audience - as I enthusiastically talked about the crops we grew and the machinery we used, when we planted and when we harvested, when we irrigated and how we irrigated, where we sold the crop and how we sold the crop.

Then, when I paused to draw breath, John said: *"and where is God in all this.?"*

I was stunned, because I really hadn't thought about it!

The question took me straight back to Jack Scoble. Was God involved in my daily life as a farmer – or was my ministry just what I did in the church?

I was an Elder and Lay Preacher in my parish. I served 2 years as Chairperson of Presbytery. I had been a member of Synod and its Standing Committee. I had been a member of the 1982 Assembly.

I knew all that was ministry - because it was in the church. But what about all the rest?

Jack Scoble saw that what he did in the church, and what he did in Local Government, what he did in his Farm Machinery business, and what he did among his family and friends – ALL of that was ministry.

John Paton and Jack Scoble challenged me to see all of life as ministry.

A few years later, in the mid-1980s, I was in a meeting of the Synod Standing Committee – discussing something to do with Indigenous people.

At that stage I was still a very conservative country boy. My theology and my political views were still the product of conservative Anglican Sunday School and a posh Boarding School education. I was a rusted on Country Party voter.

So I was stunned by the “radical” ideas being expressed in the meeting. Support for Aboriginal land rights! Indigenous Self-determination! Praising subversive leaders like Charles Perkins.

So I made a speech opposing the proposal!

Peter Tebbutt, a wonderful, gentle lay leader of the church stood up and said:

I want to say that I love Bruce dearly. But I want to disagree violently with everything he has said?

Then he proceeded to demolish every argument I'd made!

Peter Tebbutt was able to speak the truth in love in a way which enabled me to recognise my assumptions of entitlement and privilege and my unconscious racism. He spoke in a way which didn't belittle me, which didn't alienate me.

He confronted my assumptions and prejudices - but he did it in a way which gave me space to change my convictions!

Peter Tebbutt offered me a profound epiphany and sparked in me a passion for justice.

Another epiphany followed in 1990, just before I served as Moderator. A lady we met briefly in Canada gave us some audio tapes of Bishop John Shelby Spong's series of addresses to the Manitoba Conference of the United Church of Canada.

I'd been mildly supportive, at that stage, of LGBTIQ inclusion, but Bishop Spong's exegesis of Biblical texts finally released me from the hang ups of my Wellington encounter with Biblical literalism.

Spong gave me the courage – and the language - to advocate for LGBTIQ inclusion, as I met with congregations and presbyteries and elders as I moved around the state as Moderator.

(I am still remembered in some places as the heretic Moderator!)

One day I was guest preacher at a morning service, followed by a community lunch. A friendly young man came up to chat.

He said: "*That sermon of yours this morning...* I nodded, half expecting the polite flattery the Moderator often gets. Right Shirley? (Aside to Past Moderator Shirley Maddox).

That was the greatest load of crap I've ever heard!"

Perhaps my most formational experience of all was my 9 year membership of the Assembly National Mission and Evangelism Committee.

In a committee comprising hotshot mission and evangelism practitioners from all over Australia, I was the token rural person – and the person who knew nothing about mission or evangelism!

We met for a weekend twice a year, in Sydney, beginning on Friday night and ending on Sunday lunch time. Two things from that experience stand out.

In the first Friday evening session of the very first meeting, the Chairperson, Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon, said she had not wanted to chair the committee. She had agreed only because she was told she could do something different.

Dorothy explained that each person was to have as long as they needed to talk about what was happening in their life. She took the lead and talked a little about her work life, but mostly about her personal life – in a very vulnerable way. Others followed, but by the end of that first Friday evening session, less than half the group had actually spoken.

As a task oriented person, I was appalled!

The church had spent hundreds of dollars to fly about 15 people to Sydney from all over Australia. People who I was sure had much more important things to do than to sit and gaze at our navels!

I also knew there was an agenda of business, but it looked as though we might never even get started on that!

Eventually, just before lunch on Day 2, we tackled the agenda. To my surprise we breezed through that agenda in double quick time!

It took me a while to work out that Dorothy had transformed this group of strangers into a community. And because the members of the community knew and understood one another, nobody needed to grandstand; nobody needed to give long winded justifications for what they were saying. The business proceeded effectively and efficiently.

After a couple of years of these twice a year meetings, I realised that I would have been quite happy to skip the business sessions - and go back home again after the community sharing time, because I had again encountered this wonderful community.

One of the wonderful things about this Pitt St congregation is our sense of community. Liz and I have been coming here for 9 years now - and this community gives us life! It gives us connection. We know we are loved in this community.

The second stand out from the National Mission and Evangelism Committee was that we spent a lot of time developing a vision statement for the Assembly to adopt in 1987. Working through draft after draft, the committee finally settled on this vision:

To be a Uniting Church in Australia which risks living the way of Jesus, participates in God's action in the world, enables people to discover new life through the Spirit and to live by that discovery.

To risk living the way of Jesus encapsulates for me the heart of discipleship.

The core of being a Christian.

Thirty one years later, it still thrills me to hear people use that phrase:

To risk living the way of Jesus.

To risk the way of grace –

grace received and grace offered!

I am indeed so fortunate to have had Beth Howard, Jack Scoble, John Paton, Peter Tebbutt, John Shelby Spong, Dorothy McRae McMahon, the leadership team of this congregation – and many many others – speak the truth to me

in love!