

Reconciliation, Ingathering, Music and God.

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 6 March 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by John Aitchison

Lent 4C

Joshua 5: 9-12; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "News and Events" tab

A quotation from an essay entitled "*The Contemplation of Beauty*", by Joseph Ratzinger, otherwise known by his more recent name, Pope Benedict:

"An unforgettable experience for me was the Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. I was sitting next to the Lutheran Bishop Hanselmann. When the last note of one of the great Thomas Kantor cantatas triumphantly faded away, we looked at each other spontaneously and right then we said, "Anyone who has heard this knows that the faith is true." The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, not by deduction but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness."

It could not have originated from nothingness.

Usually when I have the privilege of making public utterance within this congregation it is through the medium of music. And that is indeed a privilege. I think it was Ludwig Van Beethoven who once wrote that music takes over at the point at which words fail. We need words and concepts and narratives to explore and express our faith and its implications in our lives - without words, our faith would probably lapse into that amorphous feel-good sort of "spirituality" that is so popular nowadays precisely because it is undemanding - "spirituality" as a sub-branch of the "Health and Relaxation" industry.

However, the experience of many of us is that when we plumb the depths of what it is for us to be human, and perhaps for God to be God, we reach a point at which words fail and, to borrow that marvellously succinct phrase from Charles Wesley, we are "*lost in wonder, love and praise.*" And many of us also find that music has a strange, mysterious ability to search out, touch, open and express, those sub-verbal depths of our existence.

That's why it's so good and right that we include music in our liturgy here at Pitt Street. And that's why it's so good and right that we specifically foster *quality* music here. (And please - by "quality" I don't necessarily mean "old"! For me, the word "quality" covers Gershwin and Billy Joel and Rachel's searing rendition of "*Let it be*", just as it includes the transcendent music of my own hero, Johann Sebastian Bach.) But thankfully here at Pitt Street we have never opted for the facile mass-produced "muzak" of consumerist culture, which so many churches welcome nowadays in their desperate bid to attract customers.

When I'm rostered to play the organ here at Pitt Street - and I bet this is true of the other organists who play here too - I always try to select music that is liturgically appropriate. Before ten o'clock I play something which I hope will be able to draw us gently into an appropriate "head space" for worship. I think that attempt usually fails, more or less, because people are talking at that stage - but I never feel cranky about that because it's probably appropriate that we greet each other before we enter into worship as a community.

(I might mention, though, that I do sometimes wonder if it might be beneficial for us to stop chatting two or three minutes before ten o'clock, to give us all a chance to gather our thoughts and to centre ourselves, as it were, in readiness for worship. Sometimes here at Pitt Street the greeting from the back of the church, which is the formal commencement of our worship, to me feels more like an unexpected and slightly rude interruption to our chat, than the moment we have all been eagerly waiting for. There - I've got that off my chest!)

During the Offering I usually choose to play something particularly heartfelt, and I like to say in jest that I do this in order to seduce people into being extra generous as the plate passes by, but of course, my hope really is that the time of Offering will be an opportunity for prayer and meditation, and not just an interruption to the proceedings. And as for the postlude - well I like to think of that as a sort of extra "AMEN" or "ALLELUIA"! (And I might let you in on a secret - Marlowe is going to be playing the magnificent Toccata by Charles-Marie Widor today, which could certainly be called an Alleluia in music.) Although occasionally too I like to play something that's more like a bit of fun, because, although worship is never trivial, it doesn't always have to be serious.

But the main point I want to make is that music in the liturgy is always an act of prayer - it is never just decoration or entertainment. And since my belief and my experience is that attentive, receptive listening can itself be an form of prayer, I hope you feel that the music in church is an act of prayer in which you too can be a participant

Well, all of that was really by way of a fore-thought, because I'm here to reflect on today's readings, not to talk about liturgical music. However, it's not often that I get hold of the microphone for a prolonged time, and I just couldn't resist the temptation to say something about my pet topic.

But now to the scripture readings...

The word that jumped at me as I read these passages of scripture was "reconciliation". The Apostle Paul writes to his community at Corinth, "*God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself*" (or herself, as the case may be.)

For many centuries this verse was taken as implying the doctrine of the Incarnation. God - located or enfleshed in Christ - reconciling the world to himself. It's understandable how this happened. St Jerome translated the Greek phrase (I'm not trying to be clever here - I know that there are some Greek scholars in this congregation) St Jerome translated the Greek phrase into the Latin Vulgate as "*Deus erat in Christo mundum reconcilians sibi*", and from there it naturally came into the King James Bible as "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.*" And look, that's a perfectly possible interpretation. (The problem we have is that the finer points of meaning often depend on where we put the commas, and Greek in Paul's time didn't have any punctuation.) But the Greek phrase can equally well mean that God was using Christ as an *agent*, or an *ambassador*, in his grand plan of reconciliation. "*God, in (or "through") Christ, was reconciling the world to himself.*" This is how I understand the verse, because Paul was, after all, a Jew, and Hebrew thought is more interested in the question of how God works in, and reveals himself through, the processes of history, than in questions about where the deity might be located.

"God, in (or "through") Christ, was reconciling the world to his / her self."

It's a good clear sentence, isn't it. People often complain that Paul's writings are complicated and unpalatable, and that might well sometimes be a fair complaint. But here, his statement is simplicity and clarity itself. Paul sums up God's agenda in and through Christ in just one concept - reconciliation.

"Reconciliation" is, incidentally, a concept peculiar to Paul in the New Testament. Others write of repentance, forgiveness, redemption - only Paul writes of "reconciliation."

And it's a good word, isn't it, because "reconciliation" means the healing or mending of rifts and fractures, and if there's one over-riding ailment and one mortal sin in our world, in our age and every age, it's the rifts and fractures, which afflict us at every level - between nations and tribes, between different cultural groups, within neighbourhoods and families, perhaps even within ourselves. And, as Andrew frequently reminds us, there is that massive rift of abuse between the human race and the rest of the natural order.

I expect all of us here have at some stage experienced the pain of rifts and fractures in our own lives, perhaps with our spouse or partner or our parents or children, or close trusted friends and have known what it is to long for reconciliation.

"God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to his / her self."

There's just one word in that attractive concise sentence that bothers me, and that's the word "God". It's an odd word, that "G - O - D" word, isn't it - quite unlike any other word. Most words gain their currency by being defined - tied down - given clear boundaries of meaning. But we can't define the "G" word; in fact, if we try to tie it down we find that we've lost it. The "G" word gains its currency, not from having a clear meaning, but through resonances - through intimations - through a sort of magnetic field or gravitational pull - perhaps through a whisper or a call that is as soft and indecipherable as it is insistent. Perhaps through that sudden awareness that came to Ratzinger and his Lutheran friend simultaneously - that the profound beauty that sometimes overwhelms us can't have come from nothing - it has to have come from something - maybe Someone - even though we can't say with any precision what that something or Someone might be.

I want to tell you a brief story about my dad. My father would certainly have considered himself a Christian. He was always in church on Sunday mornings, and he tried to follow the teachings of Jesus in his daily living. He was a music-lover (he was quite a good amateur organist - guess where I caught my love of organ music from!) he had a strong sense of the sacred. He was also a scientist, by profession a university physics teacher, and as a scientist he was totally committed to rationality and common sense. He would have concurred with that phrase I've heard quite often at Pitt Street, viz "*I don't believe in an interventionist deity.*" In fact, come to think of it, he would have fitted in at Pitt Street rather well. He used the "G" word rarely and sparingly, which of course is how it should be used.

However, a few years ago I was sitting at my father's bedside at a nursing home in Canberra, where he was dying. He was no longer able to speak, but he had a card with the letters of the alphabet printed on it, and by pointing at the letters he could communicate in a slow painstaking way.

He held the card towards me, and with a trembling slow finger - because he was suffering from Parkinson's amongst other things - he pointed to three letters, "G" and "O" and "D". There was a slight pause, and then I nodded and said, "Yes - GOD! It's a strange word isn't it, because we find it hard to say precisely what it means, and yet we sense that it's the most important word of all".

He looked me straight in the eye and nodded.

The "G" word is a dangerous word, and I can sympathize with Buddhists for choosing to eschew the word altogether. Religious people too often use the word "God" as a hanger on which to hang their bigotries, or as an oracle that will give them easy answers to difficult questions, or as a crystal ball that will make the future seem all safe and manageable, but in the process will excuse them from the marvellous adventure of risky unpredictable living. The "G" word is used to legitimize all those weird and dangerous phenomena which David Gill categorized last Sunday as "*shonky religion*".

And yet, for all that, "God" is a word which ultimately - and perhaps *only* ultimately - we need. There are moments of transcendence or ultimacy, of awe and wonderment, of completeness and consummation, when no other word will do.

Well that's all as may be - but why does it matter to Paul that the world should be reconciled to GOD? Don't we have enough on our plates, trying to heal the rifts and fractures within this world? Why fuss about reconciliation with GOD?

Well, let's consider for a moment what reconciliation with God might involve. I expect if we opened up this question for general discussion we could be here for hours. It probably means different things to different people. For the moment, I'll just have a tentative jab at what reconciliation with God, being restored to right relationship with God, means to me.

Reconciliation with God involves having my foundations sunk deeply into that stable bedrock that alone is totally trustworthy - it involves being oriented towards or connected with the Source of Life - being open to the possibility of perennial Hope and Joy - of being attuned to that Inner Voice that calls us to responsibility and accountability (that "voice" that we used to call "conscience".)

And this right relationship with God actually *matters* - it REALLY matters. Because if I am not attuned to the voice of conscience I will inevitably slip into dishonest and dishonourable ways, perhaps in quite trivial ways at first but soon enough I'll be accelerating down the downward slide. If I'm not at least open to the *possibility* of hope and joy - and of course I recognise that we can't all be joyful all the time - then I will inevitably become part of that dead weight of cynicism that drags down not only myself but everybody else with whom I come into contact. If I am not oriented towards the Source of Life, then chances are I will become a predator or a parasite, sucking from others the supply of life that I need and am unable to find for myself. If I don't have the security that comes from being grounded in the Bedrock of Eternity, then chances are I will seek a false security - perhaps for example the false security of fundamentalism, of needing to know all the answers and to know that I am right when everyone else is wrong - that fundamentalism which in its various forms, Christian as well as Islamic, is such an immediate threat to our world today.

I would contend that reconciliation with God is a "sine qua non" for any genuine lasting reconciliation within this world.

Of course, I don't mean by that, that everybody has to become a Christian. I don't even mean that everybody has to be able to say explicitly, "I believe in God". There are many people - my loved Peter was one such - for whom the word "God" has been irretrievably degraded and ruined by encounters with the aggressive salespersons of "shonky religion", and who, therefore, have to try to express the same openness and connections and commitment as best they can with other vocabulary. But unless the human race "en masse" sincerely tries to rediscover connection with the deepest and most authentic energies and realities of existence - that presence which we anyway name as "God" - then I believe all quests for reconciliation within the human race are doomed.

And now we move on briefly to that Parable of the Prodigal Son. Like so many gospel parables, this one has been individualized over the centuries. It's read as a story about the individual Christian - you and me. We go out of church - but alas we are no sooner out of church than we start doing bad things. Like Snoopy in last week's sermon - we SIN. Perhaps we forget to say "thank you" to the bus driver, or we get slightly irritated with the grandchildren or we're too sleepy one evening to say our prayers. But then we see the error of our ways, and we turn around and come back to the Heavenly Father and say that we are sorry, and he gives us a hug to show us that we're forgiven, and that he always welcomes us back.

This parable is a favourite with religious people, probably because they like the idea of being hugged by the Heavenly Father. And I suppose it might be rather nice to be hugged by God. But I find when I pass through times of crisis - and I've experienced more than my share of crises these past six months - I need real hugs from real, live, flesh and blood people, not hugs from God. (And might I mention in passing, incidentally, that Pitt Street people are superb at giving hugs - verbal hugs and hugs in the post and email hugs, as well as physical hugs - and hugs that are sensitive and appropriate, hugs that bless without being invasive. Thank you!)

But anyway, I don't think this parable is meant to be a story about the individual sinner at all. I think that the younger son is intended to represent the GENTILES, who now, in and through Christ, are being welcomed, being reconciled as participants into the biblical drama and into the great blessings of Israel. This parable is primarily a story about *ingathering*. It struck me, incidentally, when the first reading was being read, a nice tidy balance that the first about Israel being gathered into the promised land - and then the second reading is about the whole of humanity - the Gentiles - being gathered into the chosen people.

So this parable is a story about ingathering. And those who are gathered into the Father's embrace - why, they are you and me - the Gentiles - who with surprise find ourselves unexpectedly and undeservedly included amongst the recipients of the "amazing grace".

And furthermore, I don't see the Father's hug as the climax of the story - attractive though hugs are. The climax of this story is the PARTY - the party of celebration, the Banquet of Ingathering.

What a happy coincidence it is, then, that today happens to be Communion Sunday here at Pitt Street, for what is the Eucharist but the Banquet of Ingathering? The Messianic Party to which all are called - not just Jews, but Gentiles too - odds and sods, all of us - the poofs and the crims and the organists and the drop-outs - and the happily married and the successful and prosperous too.

Shortly we shall gather as a community around the Lord's Table. The fatted calf isn't going to be killed today - he was relieved to hear that he's had a reprieve - but the bread is ready to be broken and shared, and the wine - or the grape juice as the case may be - is ready to be poured out and passed around.

In the Latin Catholic tradition, the other Christian tradition to which I belong, this mid-Lent Sunday, on which some of the Lenten austerities are relaxed, is known as "Laetare Sunday", "Rejoice Sunday". Another happy coincidence! So, on this "Laetare Sunday", this "Rejoice Sunday", as people reconciled with God and so reconciled with each other, let us be glad and rejoice, as together we celebrate the Great Banquet of Ingathering.