

We Who Have Not Seen

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 23 April 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Paul Cotterell

Easter 2A

1 Peter 1: 3-9; Gospel: John 20: 19-31; Contemporary reading: from
"Lent and Easter Readings from Iona" by Peter Millar

When I worked for the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC, one of the most enjoyable things I did was to teach courses in statistics to a whole crowd of people from various parts of the world. To lighten things up a bit, I would occasionally tell the participants - from central banks, treasuries and ministries of finance - a children's story. It goes like this:

There was once a boy who was very adventurous and he loved to explore. One day he got in his little boat and sailed over the horizon to see what he could find. He came to an island and as he drew into the dock he met an old man who asked him: "*who are you?*" The boy announced proudly "*I am an explorer*", to which the man replied: "*Welcome. I am a mapmaker. We probably have much in common. Would you like to see my maps?*"

So they went to the man's house and he showed the boy a beautifully and intricately drawn map of the island. The colours were magnificent, and it was full of so many features such as rivers, mountains and forests. The boy was fascinated and asked: "*How far away are these mountains and how high are they?*" The man replied: "*I do not know, I have never seen them, but I know there must be mountains somewhere on the island, so I drew them on the map.*" The boy was puzzled but he tried again. "*Tell me, how long is this river and where is its source?*" Again, the man replied sadly: "*I do not know, I have never seen it, but I know there must be such a river and so I have drawn it on the map.*"

The boy became frustrated and said: "*How can you draw such a beautiful map when you don't know where anything is?*" The man replied: "*Well I am a mapmaker and that is what I do. You're the explorer it is your job to find out where they are.*"

When telling this story I pointed out that economists are like the mapmaker. They have their theories - how does the economy work - and they develop policies based on those theories. Also, like the mapmaker, economists will be called upon to develop policies whether they have the data or not. It is up to statisticians to be the explorers, to gather the information and pass it on. I used the story to remind economists of the importance of statistics and to encourage statisticians in their professionalism.

I also used the story as an example of needing to continually test our positions and beliefs against knowledge. A sentiment that would be welcomed, I think, by the many thousands who yesterday joined in the first global "March for Science".

It says a lot about our world when the Oxford Dictionary's international word for 2016 is "post-truth". The term describes emotional and personal beliefs that are more influential in shaping public opinion than are facts. Fake News!

Fake news is the first cousin of post-truth. It occurs when we makes evidence-free claims - and then repeat them and repeat them and repeat them, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, until eventually enough reasonable doubt exists for partisans to take it as true. Further, if someone dares to contradict your position, then their views become the “fake” news – whether they’re based on fact or not.

Fake news is dangerous. Just look at the oxymoron of “clean coal” that stymies action on climate change or the objection to childhood immunisation that threatens the health of whole communities. But fake news is not new – even the church is not immune. The incipient anti-Jewishness that developed in the early church is even hinted at in our gospel reading today, where we find the disciples hiding “*for fear of the Jews*”. The fake news - that it was the Jews who crucified Jesus - has caused no end of horror, culminating in the Holocaust – the monstrous murder of 6 million people. Indeed, fake news is dangerous!

Physicist Brian Cox, who was recently in Australia for the *Stargazing Live* program, when commenting on political fake news, remarked that working out how to vote is a very simple scientific concept. All you do is you: “*Look across the political landscape of any country, identify the people with blustering certitude - and don't vote for them.*” More seriously, he continued “*the humility required in good science could teach our politicians a few lessons*”.

“Science is not a collection of absolute truths,” Cox said. “Scientists are delighted when we are wrong because it means we have learnt something and the value of science is in embracing doubt.”

Like Thomas in our gospel reading this morning, it is good to embrace doubt in our search for the truth. It seems to me that in order to speak authentically to this generation, maybe we need to re-examine the language of the faith – not to dispose of it but to revitalize it.

Or as Bruce Sanguin has expressed it, when contemplating the church of the future, “*The church will seek to be enlivened and renewed by the wisdom of other religious lineages; it will be in deep conversation with science, celebrating an evidence-based view of the world, and will understand the realm of facts as a mode of sacred revelation.*”

In the first letter of Peter we find:

“... we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1Peter 1:3)

Resurrection is not resuscitation; it is not the reanimation of the body. What lives after the resurrection is a living hope. To affirm this is an act of faith: it is to be reborn; it is to allow our lives to be to be embraced by hope; our lives to be resurrected; our lives to be transformed. The essence of resurrection is an affirmation that God is active in creation, continually renewing and reforming.

Resurrection is occurring around us every day. Margaret told us last week, of the ancient seed that was buried in the ground, died, and was reborn as a fruitful tree. Or at a cosmic level, I am continually blown away by the knowledge that we - you and I - are made of stardust. All the elements that make us up have come from a universe that has been continually regenerated, reborn, resurrected. I find that amazing! Sacred! Fantastic!

On the Easter weekend, in *The Age* newspaper, there appeared a cartoon that reflected on racism in the AFL. In the first frame, the champion aboriginal footballer, Adam Goodes, is being crucified, while a Roman soldier stands in the foreground facing a crowd of hecklers. The second frame shows the same soldier outside a tomb where the stone has been rolled away. Filling the tomb is a crowd of AFL footballers - aboriginal and not. A community against racism has been raised – resurrected.

It struck me that this is exactly how I see the events of Easter. Resurrection raises a community - the frightened disciples are empowered and change the world. Before the crucifixion, Jesus was a Galilean man who preached and taught. After the resurrection, the scriptures refer to him as the Christ – God with us. The cartoon reminds me that Margaret has often referred to one manifestation of Jesus’ resurrection as being Christa/Community – the body of the risen Christ. In this community, here at Pitt Street, we are part of that body!

No matter how you see the Easter events, or how you understand resurrection, there is no doubt that we are all now in a post-Easter world. We can listen to the accounts, but we were not there. We didn’t see, we didn’t touch, we didn’t experience it for ourselves. Rather we heard. Someone told us the story in such a way that invited us to say yes. Perhaps it was a small something that spoke to us, from depth to depth, as if calling our name. Whatever it was, we have believed. We have been reborn. We have been blessed.

In John’s gospel we find Jesus saying about us:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20: 29)

Or as the author of 1 Peter puts it:

“Although you have not seen Christ, you love Christ; and even though you do not see Christ now, you believe and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1Peter 1: 8-9)

Some have understood salvation to be about the future reward given to those who remain faithful throughout their lives. This is indeed the message we get from our reading from first Peter this morning. It is helpful, I think, to be aware that the author of the first letter of Peter was writing to the churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. At that time, they could expect to endure persecution simply for being Christian. They are exhorted to suffer the persecution so that the genuineness of their faith may be seen and for which they will be rewarded. That message is understandable in the difficult circumstances of the church’s existence at the time, but some have frozen the message and fixed it for all time, making it the only interpretation of salvation. I find that problematic.

The word salvation is derived from “salvus” meaning healthy or whole. For our time it may be better to place less emphasis on getting to the other-worldly place called “heaven” because such an emphasis may lead us to miss out on the this-world saving grace of the gospel. Salvation is not so much about some future reward as it is about living now – and experiencing God’s grace - here and now. It is about being made whole.

In his book *Thank God for Evolution*, Michael Dowd argues compellingly that religion and science are mutually enriching. He speaks about faith from a modern evolutionary world-view and in the context of the ever-expanding knowledge obtained through science. For Michael Dowd, faith is synonymous with trust. It is about relationship with God rather than adherence to a set of beliefs. With regard to being saved, he writes:

"To know the joy of reconciling when I've been estranged; to experience the relief of confession when I've been burdened by guilt; ... to feel passion and energy when I've been forlorn; ... to find comfort when I've been grieving; ... to sing when I've been short on hope; ... to embrace truth when I've been in denial ... each of these is a precious face of salvation".
(Page 182).

None of us knows what happens after death and frankly I don't worry about it too much. I am more concerned with living and I believe that salvation is about more than any reward in afterlife. It is about empowerment, and providing a place where relationship comes first. It is about enabling people to be engaged, and fulfilled. In short, it is about community and being made whole.

For whenever we affirm one another, even in our doubt, we foster hope. Whenever we allow ourselves the freedom to explore and test alternative understandings of God and what it means to have fullness of life in the Spirit - *resurrection life* as our friend Dorothy McRae-McMahon calls it - fullness of life in the Spirit, then we build community.

Friends, we are those who have not seen, yet believe, and we have been called to be the Body of Christ, animated by the Spirit of Christ. We are commanded to love as Jesus loved, with a love that is inclusive and freeing.

As I understand it, this means seeking to be the hands, the feet, the voice, the mind, and above all the compassionate heart of God. St Teresa of Avila put it this way: *"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion on this world."*

Echoing St Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador maintained that *"The church can be the church only as long as it goes on being the Body of Christ. Its mission will be authentic only so long as it is the mission of Jesus in the new situations, the new circumstances of history. It is the church's duty in history to lend its voice to Christ so that he may speak, its feet so that he may walk, and its hands to build the reign of God."*

In March 1980, just before Easter, Oscar Romero was assassinated for speaking out with courage against the violence and oppression that was being meted out to the poor in El Salvador. He knew that his stand might lead to his death, but still he spoke out. A few days before he was killed he said *"I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people."* And so it has been.

Isn't this the message of God's love revealed at Easter? A message that affirms:

- violence will not succeed but will be overcome by non-violence;
- evil, pain and death will not have the last word;
- love will prevail; and
- joy will come in the morning.

The command to *love as Jesus loved* requires the church to stand in stark contrast to this Good Friday world of post-truth, fake news, and violence.

May we rejoice in being the body of the risen Christ, we who have not seen and yet believe. May we have the courage to obey his command to love, and have the grace to see the other as our brother and our sister. Let us live lives of generous love, in honour of the love given to us.