

The Liberal Catholic in Australia



## EASTER REFLECTIONS

presented by

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"Then opened he their understanding." (Luke 24:45)

### The Purpose of the Liberal Catholic Church

On the notice board in front of the church it declares that we are part of the one true Church, the "catholic and apostolic church" of Christ. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that we are a new branch of it, founded as we were in 1916. We also have several distinctive tasks that make us different from other churches.

First of these tasks is to present not just one but many facets and dimensions of the Christian Faith - the mystical, mythical and experiential dimensions, to name just a few.

Secondly, to impart a gnosis, i.e. a deep understanding of the sacred, including those things that are revealed and also concealed in Scripture, Doctrine and Tradition. This gnosis is a particular understanding and experience of the world, of ourselves, and especially of the higher levels of reality.

Thirdly, to explain the various ways in which our sacred writings are to be understood and applied - to reveal how the writers of scripture used symbol, metaphor, allegory and parable etc. to convey on different levels their message. One of our tasks, therefore, is to show how a literal interpretation of our scriptures is only one way of understanding them. Our Church endeavours to present other layers of meaning, layers that reveal the true splendour of their message.

Some people today accept only the human aspect of Jesus, i.e. they deny his spiritual nature altogether and his special relationship with God. They also tend to relegate his message to that of a social

gospel. Others go to the other extreme and claim that the founder of the Christian religion was a mythical person and that the stories about Jesus of Nazareth are an amalgam of earlier traditions, and that much of it was borrowed from other religions.

### The Primordial Tradition

It is worth noting here that the teachers of other world religions, such as those of Hinduism and Islam, do not deny the existence of Jesus or the truth of his Teaching, although they may wish to quibble with some aspects of our theology. Having said this, we must accept the fact that our religion has woven into the fabric of its teachings and symbols, much which is an echo of the Mystery-Teachings of previous civilisations and cultures. Especially is it a re-presentation of the Ancient Wisdom, the Primordial Teaching, i.e. that knowledge of the world and of things eternal that have been known in one form or another since the dawn of time.

As to the other issue I raised, if we wish to deny the historicity of Christ (which is still a popular pastime for some) and to see our religious practices as being based on myth only, then we would also be denying the authority Jesus claimed to have and the reality of the Apostolic Succession on which the spiritual and sacramental life of the church is based. There is no halfway position on this particular issue. The bottom line is the empty tomb and how we come to terms with it.

The spiritual life and work here at St.John's is founded upon these events in history; this is its source of authority and inspiration, however much we may vary in our personal interpretation of them. Our founding bishops had slightly different perceptions about some aspects of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth - their writings indicate this. But they were united in claiming him to be an

historical person and the very incarnation of the Word. They took the Prologue to John's Gospel quite literally in this respect.

Referring back to my comment on the authority of scripture, it is important to note here that none of the founders of the world's religions (e.g. Jesus, Buddha, Zoroaster, Mohammed) wrote down any of their teachings. They left this task to their disciples to do as best they could once they themselves had departed the scene. As this appears to have been a deliberate policy on their part, it must be telling us something very important about the rôle of the written word.

### Religion

I think all these great religious leaders are suggesting that Religion (i.e. humanity's response to and link with the sacred) does not really have much to do with a book as such, or with rules and regulations. Rather, the chief concern of Religion is with the soul, with the spiritual health and spiritual growth of the individual. Thus, Religion is something which is to be experienced rather than something which is taught and to be obeyed. Have a very close look at the actual words attributed to Jesus - they are to do with personal transformation, change, attitudes and priorities, rather than rules and regulations per se!

I think this is what the founders of our faith community also understood to be the nature and purpose of Religion. (I refer you to Wedgwood's wonderful little book entitled "The Meaning of Religion" for an exploration of this subject.) And so, in this context, they advised us to hold lightly to our doctrine. At the same time we are directed to hold firmly to the inner life, to our experience of the sacred, to our desire to know God more intimately and more completely.

## The Rôle of the Church

To experience the blessings of the living Christ is what we seek above all things, and we are told that this will occur more richly if it is sought within the framework of the sacramental life and worship of the Church. Such experiences of the divine and of communal support strengthen us and empower us to be of more effective service to others.

And so you can see from my outline that our Church has shifted the emphasis away from a preoccupation with theology, doctrine and scripture. Of course, we still have these, they are part of our foundation and cannot therefore be put to one side. (What is a feature of our Church is that we are given the freedom to interpret these - it is not true to say that we can believe what we like!). However, we place greater emphasis on developing a personal life which is truly sacramental, and it is one which is based on personal prayer and meditation, corporate worship, and frequent entry into the sacred. It should also include a personal study of the scripture readings for each week.

## The Mysteries

Our religion is a religion of mysteries, and these mysteries cannot be completely explained by the written word. Our founding bishops also remind us that we come here to church not just for ourselves but more especially to help in the healing of the world, that healing which our Lord commenced and commanded us to continue in His Name. This world is our world and is not to be despised or rejected. Rather, "it was very good", (Gen. 1:31). It should also be stated that we are 'world-affirming', not 'world-denying,' that is, our church has a positive view of the world, not a negative one. Also, we believe in a loving God, not a God of vengeance and judgement.

The world also needs our help. We are stewards of Mother Earth and we must respond to this call. We are also stewards of the sacramental presence of Christ in his church and community.

### A Personal Challenge

Our Lord Christ has shown us in his own words and deeds what our priorities should be. He has also given spiritual power and authority to those who are initiated into his fellowship - i.e. his mystical body, the church, and also a challenge - to help in "divinising", i.e. make sacred once again, the world in which we live. (This is one of the teachings of the Incarnation which we should explore another time.) This we can do, as we are now our Lord's hands and feet, the bringer of his words of comfort, the channels of his grace and instruments of his peace and consolation. This is no pious expression or wishful thinking; it is a fact, for He is the source of all that we need in order to do our work in the world in general and in this church in particular.

In placing greater responsibility upon the individual to work out his own destiny without the fear of clerical domination to inhibit him, our founding bishops believed that this new movement, the LCC, would provide a more conducive environment in which people can find their true selves and grow spiritually in accordance with the Divine Plan. Whether the Church has been successful in its sacred purpose is a question we must answer for ourselves. But in answering the question, we must remember that we are the church and we are, therefore, part of the solution as well as part of the problem!

St. Paul was the first of many to declare "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col.1:27). Again, this is not just a pious statement of belief but a living experience for Paul. He was a great mystic, as his writings show, and also a gnostic in the true sense - he knew God, he

knew the Risen Christ. The mystics and saints of the church have all proclaimed the reality of the transforming power of the Spirit and the presence of our Lord in their lives. And the message is that this experience is not just for the few, but also for the many.

### The Church

Our Church, in line with other sacramental churches, believes that we have communion with our Lord in a tangible way through the sacrament of the altar, i.e. the holy eucharist. By means of this sacramental rite instituted by our Lord himself, we join with him as well as with each other through this special form of communion. And so, for us, our service today, indeed our celebration of Easter at every eucharist, is more than a memorial, a recalling of a past event and a loving friend. And there is also the divine response to our sacred work ('liturgos'), that response which our Lord declared, on Maundy Thursday, would occur every time at this service. This we believe to be true; this we also claim to experience.

The Altar before us is many things. It is his birthplace once again for the Word is again made flesh, the Holy One dwells among us. It is thus an epiphany of the Christ as we believe in the Real Presence of the Christ in the sacrament. It is also his Calvary (the place of sacrifice) - and not only his but also ours. It is also the Throne of Glory of the Risen Christ, indicated here by the plain cross above the altar and our reverence for the sacrament on the altar.

### The Holy Mysteries

And so here, in this sacred space and at this sacred time, all of these events and places are presented, re-enacted and brought together through the work of the Liturgy. The altar, therefore, is that sacred point where past, present and future meet. A great Mystery indeed!

(Some traditions describe the eucharist as "the Holy Mysteries".) This is why we can call this time at church the 'eternal present' and why the apostles used this term themselves when referring to their initiation into the Mysteries of the Kingdom - for they experienced the Kingdom here, now and forever.

It is right and proper for us to reflect on and examine the "why" and the "how" of the many aspects of the great drama of Easter, of the "Paschal Mystery". The scripture readings set down for these weeks between Easter and Ascension Day are designed to aid us in this "journey of discovery". But we also need to go beyond the events of history they refer to and seek the spiritual knowledge and experience to which they are pointing. And in so doing, we discover not only new insights about God, but also new insights about ourselves.

Our Scripture, our Tradition and our beautiful Liturgy convey to us, in this 'world of signs', something of the wonder, something of the mystery and transforming power of God. They also point to His continual presence in this world. And so one could say that the veil is lifted from our mortal eyes, albeit for a short time, at this celebration of the Holy Eucharist and we behold the face of the Beloved. Here we are in touch with something wonderful, something that is far greater than anything we can possibly imagine - our Lord the Christ, the Risen Christ, is with us.

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