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By

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## Growing where you are planted

Nothing is more embarrassing and more humiliating for a fully trained psychologist to find himself in the midst of a nervous breakdown. In 2003 despite all my training and scholarship this is exactly where I found myself. I, like many arrogant psychologists, think that nervous breakdowns happen to other people and at any rate armed with all the latest psychological science I would avoid such *slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*. But there was something peculiar to my breakdown, being raised a Christian of the Roman Catholic tradition there was something else going on. I was not just seeking psychological health but a meaning and purpose beyond myself – at the time I didn't know it but I was seeking God.

This path like many in the midst of a crisis was not pathed in a straight line. At the time I was interested in Buddhism and so I thought I would go to a dharma teaching hosted in the Church of a rather upmarket Anglican boy's school overlooking the Swan River. I knew it would be well attended so I came early, and being a pious Catholic I blessed myself with the Holy Water at the nave entrance of the Church symbolising my baptism and my preparation to enter into sacred space. Upon entering, I reflexively genuflected to the Blessed Sacrament a place where Catholics believe the real presence of Christ is housed in the Tabernacle. The characteristic flickering red light next to the Tabernacle symbolised Christ's presence. The act of genuflection is an ancient Christian practice which imitates the Wise Men who came to bow or genuflect in front of the Lord at his birth. Not done with my rituals, I simply knelt in silence and asked God for me to be open to the wisdom teaching from the Buddhist nun who was soon to arrive. Within ten minutes that Church was filled to gunnels but it no longer felt like a church but a town hall – I noticed people had simply walked in, took their seats and started talking loudly to each other. I became increasingly annoyed by all the noise. When the Buddhist Nun finally arrived everyone was silent – in a gesture of piety and respect she simply walked to the side of the alter and bowed to the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. It was at this moment that I broke down and wept. On later reflection, I didn't weep just for myself but for all of us in the Church at the time – apart from my pious little rituals, the only person who recognised the sacredness of the place and the presence of Christ in the room was the Buddhist nun – how did my culture become so spiritually illiterate? It is this question that has fascinated me ever since both as a psychologist and a Christian – how did the West become so incapable of seeing and

recognising the symbols of the transcendent in their own tradition or more accurately come to reject it outright.

Armed with this curiosity my search continued that year leading me to New Norcia. New Norcia is a Benedictine Monastic Town some 100 km north of Perth founded by Dom Salvado in 1847. It is still a working monastery with some 12 monks who pray seven times a day starting with *Lauds* at 5.15am.

On that same visit to the monastery I was sitting on a park bench outside the Basilica completely lost and alone – I had absolutely no idea where to go in my life – it was then I had an internal locution, an image of Christ's bloodied feet walking in front of me on a dusty road, and I heard a clear and firm voice with absolutely no tone of sentiment within it - the voice said "walk with me". It was then I realised despite my greatest wish and intention to become some funky Western Buddhist that I had to turn back to the most unfashionable decision in my life – to return to the Church from which I was born – I knew then I had to "grow where I was planted". I realised without knowing it that I had fallen in love, and that love was Christ – I also realised that love is not a feeling but a choice, and brothers and sisters in Christ, I have been saying yes ever since.

I want to address tonight's topic on *keeping the faith within a post-Christian age: challenges and opportunities for the Uniting Church in Queensland* in four movements – these being

- Who do you say that I am? The four possibilities of Jesus Christ
- The Atheist Delusion and Christianity's fashionable enemies
- Competing stories – what have the Christians ever done for us?
- Proclaiming the light of Christ

I was asked to contribute to your festival of dangerous ideas and so I apologise in advanced if the ideas contained herein are either too dangerous or not dangerous enough – having run many retreats across many denominations and indeed faiths, I have come to learn that you can't please everybody when it comes to witnessing faith. I have also learnt that if you upset

both the conservatives and progressives in any Church gathering in equal proportion, you are in good company with Christ – he managed it seems to me ‘to be an equal opportunity agitator’.

## Who do you say that I am? The four possibilities of Jesus Christ

John Carroll an outstanding Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University wrote a remarkable book called the Western Dreaming. Taking his inspiration from the Aboriginal Dreaming he wanted to investigate the big foundational stories of the Western Culture. He argued that the West is dying for want of a better story. In other words, the great grand stories from our tradition no longer compel, hold or even disturb us. In addition, he added in his curious book “The Existential Jesus” that the spectre of the life of Christ looms large over our culture and at every age throughout our history the Gospel stories burst into the Western psyche like a cosmic bomb or like some ‘passing irritant’. Carroll like many others argue that Christian identity comes most primarily from Mt 8:29 where Christ asks Peter "But who do you say that I am?". Peter answered, "You are the Christ". In this exchange, Christ is not interested in the opinion of the crowd, but asks a most urgent and pressing question intimately to one person only – who do you say THAT I am Peter? In this question, Christ is not asking a question of personal identity where the answer is a perfunctory “you are Jesus the Nazarene” but a question of being or substance – it is a much deeper question. Carroll argues that through every age in the West this question is asked of every person and in every cultural circumstance. In C.S. Lewis’s fine apologetics “Mere Christianity” he tackles this question with the famous “trilemma”. Either Jesus was a *lunatic, liar or lord*. While the Gospels may allude to others thinking Jesus was a lunatic (remember they came with chains and his mother no less to lock him away) or a liar, the Gospels are particularly clear that the powers of the day both Roman and Jewish found him not an idiot nor a liar but a blasphemer or innocent of all chargers at least in Pilot’s case. In other words, the Gospels if anything are an historical account of the witness of what people encountered with Jesus as Lord and were prepared to go to their deaths over their claim. However what is intriguing in our age around the life of Jesus is the rejection of all three possible accounts that C.S. Lewis gives in his trilemma apologetics – the most common held view of our time at least in the West (and this is certainly not held in the Muslim middle-east I might add) was that Jesus Christ was a myth. Even myths from the Iliad – the writings from Homer etcetera are treated by most Western people as ‘fables’ or ‘fairy tales’. They are not grand stories (like Aboriginal Dreaming Stories) which guide and inform the

fundamental questions of our lives which are, how are we to live and act in the world – but rather they are flattened to be equal to any other curiosity. Brothers and sisters in Christ we live in an age where the tales of Homer and Homer Simpson are of equal cultural worth. They have become passing fancies that are flattened and eradicated of any higher meaning – the story of Jesus is viewed by and large like this – *a great myth amongst many other myths but a myth all the same.*

But there is another more startling reading of the Gospel stories, one so radical that it places the life of Christ so unique in human history that the West would not be the culture it is without understanding its implications. According to Rene Girard, the brilliant French philosopher and anthropologist, the Gospel is not the continuation of myth but an end to myth altogether. Girard argues that through the passion of Christ, Jesus exposes the scapegoating mechanism used throughout human history to make violence sacred as a religious act. What is utterly unique about the passion story in human history is that God is so thoroughly on the side of the victim that he emptied himself to become one. This is not a triumph of the powerful but of the most vulnerable; the most powerless. Brothers and Sisters in Christ the Good News (the euaggelion) appears at first glance as the most ridiculous story about the triumph of the most vulnerable innocent victim whose last words to his followers before going to a most ignoble death was to “put away the sword” – violence cannot be used to justify God – religion or the sacred. We are so immersed in this cultural fact that we have forgotten how scandalised people were to hear it in the early Church.

The Christians were so counter cultural that they allowed women to participate in Church life and together with men in Church service, to take care of those who had no status under Roman law, and built the first hospitals and hospices for the sick and the dying. We now have historical anthropological evidence that the rates of infanticide a common practice in Roman times, dramatically decreased with the arrival of Christian communities. This is neither a historical accident nor a natural progression of any society towards ‘civilised behaviour’. According to Girard, the Gospels act like a virus throughout all cultures it meets where power and absolute rule is met with powerlessness and the elevation of the victim to full divine status. Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is like an antiseptic that kills the germs of violence as a sacred way of restoring order by exposing the scapegoating mechanism once and for all – the death of Christ is not just an event but a process, of which we have the privilege through revelation and faith to be sons and daughters of its capital T Truth. Wherever you are advocating for a victim of

injustice or violence – wherever you are clothing the poor or visiting the imprisoned you are turning the dominant culture upside down. The God-Man became the perfect victim in order to overturn the principalities and power once and for all – it is why (after the sermon on the mount) the most subversive text I have ever read is uttered from the lips of St. Paul – he concludes that Christ flattens everything to divine status by proclaiming in Galatians 3: 28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. If this does not scandalise you concerning the radical equality of this statement, you have possibly forgotten that for the vast majority of human history and to this very day, many people simply don’t believe this to be true and will exercise their power either secular or sacred in authority, to challenge it. Identity in Christ is about personally answering that question – honestly and in full freedom – who do you say that I am? - is Christ just a great moral teacher amongst many elevating him to mythological status along the pantheon of “other great people”. In deed any cursory look on Facebook comments by many of those who have left the faith, never had one or actively opposed to it, do not necessarily see Christ as a liar or lunatic or the lord but a good bloke who did good stuff just like other good people throughout the ages. The Gospels rendered in this fashion have no compelling narrative nor scandalised protagonist in its story; nor in human history.

## **The Atheist Delusion and Christianity’s fashionable enemies**

I am a classic Generation X person. My generation is known as the lost generation, we fall between the gaps of what has been described as the overly greedy Baby Boomers and the overly narcissistic Gen Y’s. Listening to the song anthems of my generation may give you a clue of our existential take on the world. At least for me the three defining songs from my generation are “Smells Like Teen Spirit” from Nirvana whose seminal album “Nevermind” brought in the era of grunge. On the British side, Billy Bragg sang the lyrics “I don’t want to change the world I’m not looking for a new England I am just looking for another girl” opined that his generation was not seeking the idealism of the Baby Boomers – Thatcher’s England laid waste to any hope of that – more modest stories of romantic love felt more achievable. Finally REM’s explosive hit “Losing my Religion” surprised everyone when singer Michael Stipe sang “that’s me in the corner – that’s me in the spotlight - I’m losing my religion - and I can’t keep up with you – I don’t know if I can do it”. How did this anthem grab the imagination of an entire generation? By the end of the 1990’s (my decade), social science departments around the

Western world were predicting the end of religion as we know it – a declining anachronism from the past that was shot through with Freudian ‘infantile regression’ or Marx’s “opiate of the people”. Atheism was now confident to ‘now take it from here folks’. Many Christian denominations didn’t help either – many evangelical denominations took on a more literalist and scientism form of hermeneutics creating a god that frankly was too small, too deterministic that he ended up looking like not only a blind watchmaker but an irrelevant one at that. The God of the gaps shrunk ever more into a small corner of the universe best reserved for naïve followers who wanted god to be a thing amongst other things in the universe – this god had become a convenient straw Man-God that could be mercilessly beaten to death by any decent rational critique. As we moved into the new millennia the ‘new atheists’ armed with a very old trope, broke through in the minds of most Westerners by demolishing a god that never existed by creating a god that many people naturally assumed always did. The god of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens (amongst many others) is best described as a demiurge, that is a ‘world-maker’ who is a higher-being amongst other beings, rather than being itself. Any first year theology student can bat away what Terry Eagleton humourously describes as the “Ditchken’s yeti theory of god”, where god is a thing like a yeti that if we can get the right scientific camera, at the right angle, we can catch him in the act of creation somewhere in the rain-forests in far north Queensland. God is not a thing but being itself and is not just creator but creation itself – God for Christians is the love in which we move, and breathe and have our being (Act 17:28). The surprise here is not how ridiculous the misunderstanding that new and antagonistic atheists hold about their notion of god, but how little Christian’s themselves know what we mean for two millennia when WE mean God.

### **Competing stories – what have the Christians ever done for us?**

It is not however just that the new atheists tear down a god that never existed in any classical sense of what we know God to be, in practically any of the world’s great religions, but that the historical revisionism these so called experts have past-off as fact in order to make their claims true, has now become the most common story at least amongst most people in the West including Queensland Australia. Ask anyone outside of your church and the most common story about the West and religion goes something along these lines.

"Once upon a time Western humanity was the cosseted and incurious ward of Mother Church; during this, the age of faith, culture stagnated,

science languished, wars of religion were routinely waged, witches were burned by inquisitors, and Western humanity laboured in brutish subjugation to dogma, superstition, and the unholy alliance of church and state. Withering blasts of fanaticism and fideism had long since scorched away the last remnants of classical learning; inquiry was stifled; the literary remains of classical antiquity had long ago been consigned to the fires of faith, and even the great achievements of 'Greek science' were forgotten until Islamic civilization restored them to the West. All was darkness. Then, in the wake of the 'wars of religion' that had torn Christendom apart, came the full flowering of the Enlightenment and with it the reign of reason and progress, the riches of scientific achievement and political liberty, and a new and revolutionary sense of human dignity. The secular nation-state arose, reduced religion to an establishment of the state, and thereby rescued Western humanity from the blood-steeped intolerance of religion."

This is a "simple and enchanting tale", as the quite brilliant theologian David Bentley-Hart observes, captivating in its explanatory power. According to Hart, however, there is just one problem with this story: every detail of the story, as well as the overarching plot, just happens to be false. In Hart's book *The Atheist Delusion* the problem with this narrative he argues, is that most serious scholars of religious and scientific history know it to be completely false. What has this got anything to do with the Uniting Church of Queensland you may ask – Dr Preston get to the point! The point here it seems to me is simple enough – *stories matter* – and the stories we tell ourselves is how we see and act in the world. Having worked with aboriginal peoples in Western Australia, I have come to appreciate why the dream-time is so important – if you forget your dreaming – your stories, you forget who you are – and if you forget who you are, you are not free to become who you are called to be - but fated to become no one at all. Our Western Dreaming for me has Christ at the centre – he pokes his head in at every age and with every person and annoys them with his simple question – Who do you say THAT I am? If he is a myth like any other myth, Christ recedes in the background in your life as a good bloke amongst many, however like Thomas, if you stick your finger in your wound and find Christ is not a myth but the end of all myths, an event so monumental in human history that we cannot



even begin to fathom its ramifications, let alone know how to imitate Him and to bring the Kingdom He asks us to co-create as sons and daughters of His fellowship. It is up to you and the Uniting Church of Queensland to ask this question again and again – who do you say THAT I am? How you answer it matters – but be careful – by answering “both” you may fall into some nebulous ‘relativism’ where Christ can be both part myth and part God. This is only a hop skip and jump away from finding in no time at all, garden ornaments of Crosses or Jesus that you can buy in Bunnings along-side the concrete Buddas that you find now. So what’s the problem with that you may ask? Everything and nothing – Christ is reduced to a consumer product like any else, and is sacrificed to the secular god of consumerism and hyper-capitalism. Not every Buddhist I know is happy that through the growing appreciation of Buddhism in the West, that we then appropriate Buddha into our consumerist fantasies for our well-kept “Zen gardens” scooping out the four noble truths and the eight fold path along the way. For me this goes to the very heart of where we are heading with a secular world without religion in the public sphere. “You can’t have the sublime without sublimation”. Freedom now looks like too many choices, and having any transcendent values that restricts our choices to treat babies as commodities for trade, or aged or frail persons as a burden, or the right for refugees to flee persecution lest they may destroy our “way of life”, speaks of a society where restraint, obligation, sacrament and covenant are just so yesteryear. Am I sounding like an old fart? Perhaps, but let David Bentley-Hart explain it better:

“Late modern society is principally concerned with purchasing things, in ever greater abundance and variety, and so has to strive to fabricate an ever greater number of desires to gratify, and to abolish as many limits and prohibitions upon desire as it can. Such a society is already implicitly atheist, and so must slowly but relentlessly apply itself to the dissolution of transcendent values. It cannot allow ultimate goods to distract us from proximate goods. Our sacred writ is advertising, our piety is shopping, our highest devotion is private choice. God and the soul too often hinder the purely acquisitive longings upon which the market depends, and confront us with values that stand in stark rivalry to the only truly substantial value at the centre of the social universe: the price tag.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we have been here before. The early desert fathers and mothers way before Constantine and his mob, said to hell with all the trappings of “the world”

(as Paul liked to refer to it); we are off to the desert to seek an encounter with Christ. What people are thirsting for in the dry deserts of consumerism, is not more choice but a love so great and disturbing that proximate goods become but a pile of straw when compared against the ultimate good. Yet the approximate goods in the end never really satisfy do they? – if we are not seeking God, we are likely to be seeking Him elsewhere in our addictions, obsessions and anodyne consumer follies. The great responsibility it seems to me of the Uniting Church and any Christian Church for that matter is to proclaim the transcendent Truths where neither rust nor moths destroy Mt 6:20. I contend though that it is not enough to proclaim God's truth or even to live by them, but to encounter them altogether – one sure fire way to do this, is to put our fingers into our wounds. I certainly did one cold winter morning in New Norcia in 2003, and what I saw was bloodied feet commanding: "to walk with me".

The most dominant story our current Western Dreaming seems to me is one that is based upon the consumption of an enormous amount of energy both planetary and psychic. In Charles Taylor exhaustive tome "A secular age" he comes to the conclusion that in the West there are two types of persons, the *buffeted* and the *porous*. The buffeted person is one steeped in technology and hyper rationalism, away from the vagaries and contingencies of the physical world. The porous person allows the world to get into them, or by circumstances of their poverty or powerlessness has no choice but for this to happen. The Christian God sides with the afflicted, the poor, the voiceless, the victim. The world gets into these people, but also so too does God. The love and enthrall of technology has created buffeted people where neither the world nor God can get in. If the Uniting Church is to be anything it must be a place where people encounter Christ and the best way to encounter Christ is through prayer, and the most sublime form of prayer at least for me (encountered with those monks many years ago) is silence. If we can provide a place where people can simply breathe without judgement, without analysis and I would contend without words, we are providing something the world cannot give for the world we live in is made of noise, sound, colour, light and a thousand endless distractions. We may first need to teach people how to pray in silence (see Mt 6:6) before we are ready to be porous enough to hear the living Word through Mt 6:9 – the Lord's Prayer that we say as a Christian family. We should as a Church never be too tempted to fall into the trap "where the Word became flesh and then we make it word again". Let us not rush too quickly for answers, formulas and glib sentiments, but run to silence, mystery and gentle loving

encounter to discern what the Holy Spirit is calling us to be, not what our private fantasies of what the Church “should be”.

So what have the Christians ever done for us? In the Monty Python comedy *The Life of Brian* the People’s Front of Judea ask what have the Romans ever done for us? So steeped in Roman culture the hapless protestors first failed to recognise anything until they start to enumerate the many benefits of Roman culture. Could this too be where we are in our society with Christianity – what have the Christians ever done for us? Well for starters Christians were the first movement in human history to intuit let alone take to heart what is known as “total humanism”, the conviction that every single human being has infinite value (remember Paul’s letter to the Galatians). Christians were the first to take care of widows in the pagan world and to restrict infanticide – they were also the first to develop hospices and hospitals – the modern city as we know it is literally designed around the Benedictine Monastic towns of the middle ages. In addition, Christians were the first to recognise divine over rule and not the divinity of Rulers – all Church leaders are given divine representation not divine status although in some Churches you may question this amongst their leaders. Most radically, Christians were the first to recognise and elevate the victim to equal divine status. This has given birth to our legal jurisprudence with the amalgam of both Greco-Roman law and the Judea-Christian metaphysics of equal status in law regardless of social status. And finally, through John 1:1, Christians first gave credence to the notion that the universe is rationally ordered by an utterly transcendent God – this gave birth to what was once called ‘natural philosophy’ but what we now call science. What have the Christians ever done for us? We may not have created the aqueducts but we have created the very culture in which we now live and move and have our being. Despite our many limitations throughout history (and they are many) – we should be proud of our total humanism that we bring to an aching world Uniting Church included!

### **How we can become the light of Christ- the Illuminati Christi?**

In the back of my garden fixed to the back fence is what my twin brother and I call “Illuminati Christi” (the light of Christ). It is simply a cross fashioned out of recycled wood that Terry finds on his many walks in the bush – fashioned to the four extremes of the cross are four tiny light emitting diodes that are attached by a long wire to a small solar panel fixed to the fence railing. As the sun goes down, the solar panels discharge their stored electricity and Illuminati Christi splutters into life. I often wait for the ritual to occur and take delight, as first the vertical then

soon after the horizontal diodes fashion the sign of the cross in my back yard. It often reminds me that we-you, are the light of world, that Christ must somehow shine through his people and His body through His Church in order to present a compelling story so true and real that our whole lives are fashioned in its wake. This story, this narrative still lives in us today, and if we are awake enough it should continue to scandalise us. We must remember that the word scandal comes from the Greek work *scandalon* which means to trip or stumble on a rock. To be scandalised is to literally trip over a rock as you walk on your path – remember the scandalised disciples on their road to Emmaus?

To me, before we know how to be the Light of Christ we may need to consider where we find ourselves in the West and in particular Australia. It appears to me we are living in a post-Christian world or what Girard says is a hyper-Christianised world. Girard believes the elevation of the victim is everywhere but without the restraint of Christian metaphysics. In addition, we live in a secular world who takes for granted the Christian humanism I earlier explained but without the Christ story. Tom Holland the British historian who wrote “The Shadow of the Sword” about the rise of Islam, commented that even atheists think like Christian atheists such is the influence of the elevation of the victim as the most dominant story of our times. It seems the only legitimate voice worthy of being heard these days is someone who has been subject to some victimhood. I have no concern with this whatsoever, but there is little thought about the very origin of the sacredness of the victim these days, it is as though the secular world is saying “thanks Christian people, we have grown up and out from your shadow, and we can take it from here now folks”. But not all commentators are as sanguine of a future in Western societies without the influences of the Christian Churches. Bently-Hart once again remarks that:

“Christians, indeed, have a special obligation not to forget how great and how inextinguishable the human proclivity for violence is, or how many victims it has claimed, for they worship a God who does not merely take the part of those victims, but who was himself one of them, murdered by the combined authority and moral prudence of the political, religious, and legal powers of human society.”

And so it is today. Without the Christian humanising effects in our society could it be possible that our country our society would draw down on its humanising – civilising effect? I believe without true Christian witness in our communities, we are likely to see an increasingly commodification and transaction of all stages of the life cycle, that may mean a crass

materialistic view of human dignity - we are created in the image and likeness of God and so the United Church amongst other churches must become this ICON, this image by which the culture sees through to God. The most dominant view on the street is that every society given the right circumstances will naturally evolve into a more caring, compassionate and egalitarian society with the respect of all forms of human rights. Many commentators and historians are sceptical about such optimism, since not all societies evolve through the same trajectory that we in the West have inherited nor is it inevitable, that they will. In other words, what we enjoy is often the product of our Christian witness in our communities and it is the Light of the World that darkness cannot see, nor comprehend it not Jn1:5. The Uniting Church is a humanising and compassionate witness of the love of Christ to the community. I am struck when I read the Acts of the Apostles, how public the early Christian witness was. Recall how Paul got up in the Areopagus in Athens to proclaim the Good News – Christianity has always been a public religion, in fact all the great religions of the world are. To make a religion a private matter in the real sense of the term is anti-religious, you can't have Buddhism without the Sanga, Islam without the Mosque or Christianity without the Ecclesia. A private religion is a dead religion. If the Uniting Church is to become through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Church it is called to be, the first thing it must do is to listen. Remember that the word *vocation* comes from the Latin 'vocare' meaning voice. It is set in the passive tense meaning to be called out – that is to listen to a calling, not to call out. In order to be the light of Christ, it seems to me, each Church must become an icon of the living God. In the orthodox tradition, icons are not painted but represented since they are represent what is already present. To be an icon as a Church, we must take on the nature of the living God. What would this nature be? According to Thomas Keating the four great natures of God is –*silence – solitude – solidarity and service*. Churches that foster these four qualities reflect the image of God. In order to listen – to truly listen, we first need to be still, and silence fosters the first nature of God. St John of the Cross (one of my favourite mystics/saints) said 'the Father spoke one word from all eternity and he spoke it in silence, and it is in silence that we hear it.' This Word is his Son – we can hear him in the still small voice of silence. In the liturgy of silence, it is almost impossible for the false self to survive. In all other liturgies including devotions and vocal prayer, sometimes it can point to the person (the wrong icon) and not to God– this is virtually impossible in silent prayer. To foster silent prayer is to foster an interiority that is the first nature of God.

With regards to solitude our Churches must become a refuge from the violence and rapaciousness of modern life. Thomas Merton another favourite mystic of mine once prayed (and I paraphrase here) “may there always be a quiet little Church on the corner of busy streets where a person can step out of the madness of the world, light a candle, find a dark corner and for the first time in their day – simply breathe”. Solitude is how God makes love to us in our uniqueness. Without solitude we end up imitating each other and never come to know who we really are ‘hidden in Christ’ (Col3:3). May our Churches encourage solitude where we are restored to ourselves in ways that affirms our uniqueness. Brothers and Sisters, it is almost impossible to proclaim the Good News if we do not know in our very bones that “we are the beloved daughter, beloved son of whom the Father is well pleased” (Mt3:17), we need to know first that we are outrageously loved regardless of what we have done or who we are, in order to love one another as we are loved (Jn 13 34-35). Solitude it seems to me helps restore not only this conviction, but the unique encounter of outrageous gratuitous love.

The third nature is solidarity – our obligations as Christians to understand the question “who is my brother who is mother?” (Mt 12:48), is to know there is no other. We are all one under Christ whether we are Christian or not. I would extend that our solidarity extends not only to others or our Church but to all created things “groaning in the pains of childbirth right up til this very moment” (Rom 8:22). The wonderful female theologians like Ilia Delio and Cynthia Baugault argue eloquently, that Christ has redeemed all of creation, and we must be in solidarity with every created thing to come and know Christ, because indeed they, like us, are groaning to meet the Christ. Our Churches it seems to me must be in solidarity not only to the voiceless people but our very voiceless planet, that voice is the work of a loving living God.

And finally to service. It is true to me that God serves all creation. My encounter with the silent loving God is one of service and not domination or submission. Our Churches must reflect this service to those most in need whoever they may be in whatever circumstance. Papa Frank wants my church the Catholic Church to be like a field hospital attending to the wounded. He is worried that our service deteriorates into outcomes and efficient delivery mechanisms for the state – he does not want to be just another NGO. Service without justice is not Christian service. Churches and their good works is not the handmaiden of the State. Church service operates with two hands it seems to me – both good works and social justice, without either of these, soon we will become another NGO.

Finally, brother and sisters in Christ, our Church must be a place for hope but not necessary optimism. Optimism can often look like a psychological trick used by consulting gurus to create what the psychologist James Hillman calls 'a manic defence against what is'. Our Church should be full of hope. Hope is our investment 'in things unseen' (Hb11:1), despite the darkness which surrounds our world. Our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ through our faith, while optimism is through a buoyed up spirit of our own making, exercising our own will. Mother Teresa once said 'it is only a drop in the ocean, but once we have made our drop the ocean is never the same again'. As crazy as it seems, as Christians, we are all called to sainthood. One reporter shoved a microphone into Mother Teresa's face and asked "Mother Teresa what does it feel like to be a living Saint?" – she answered "All of us are called to become Saints, what are you doing about it?" The fruits of the Uniting Church in Queensland that you hope for, may not be seen in your lifetime, nor maybe even in your own very life, but it is not your private garden that you are tending. Do your work humbly in God's vineyard, do not ask why you are not paid as much as the later chosen labourers – know that you are the light of Christ, that through you the Gospel is made flesh – the Kingdom will Come, and the Glory of God will shine through you and your Church, so that they know how much they are loved, and how much WE as Christians are loved.

Thank you, may God bless you, and Amen.

Dr Neil Preston.

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