

Australia Day

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Jesus began his public ministry following John Baptist in calling the people to repentance. He then proceeded through the Galilee region, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing every disease and sickness among the people. This is the pattern of his eternal mission in the world which is to be implemented in every age by the church His Body, charged with the task of going to the ends of the earth with that message of salvation for the whole human race.

So the Reverend Richard Johnson was sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel with the first fleet to Sydney Cove. On February 3rd 1788, under a gum tree, seven days after the landing, he preached to a compulsory congregation of somewhat unwilling convicts and soldiers to give thanks for a safe arrival after many hazardous months at sea and in terrible conditions on board.

His text was 'What reward shall I give unto the lord for his great benefits? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord'. We can't be sure how many in the congregation shared his optimism. No doubt they had some questions similar to what generations of Australians have asked ever since that time.

A more challenging text could just have easily have been 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land', for it was certainly strange and unlike to anything else they had experienced. Indeed it has been a continuing challenge for the Anglican and other churches in seeking to communicate the good news of Christ to people who had little positive contact with the church or any form of organized religion.

Yet, from another perspective, Australia was founded during the high point of the European enlightenment. Later generations of free settlers came to New South Wales to begin a new life free of inherited class systems, free from the constraints of the old world and open to the possibilities Of making a new start in life with the struggle to achieve greater prosperity through hard work.

No doubt the earlier so called wars of religion in Europe were still in their minds, hence a wariness of organized religion. This helps to explain why some were critical of organized religion to the point of profanity and even ridicule. In Australia, there has always been certain condescension towards Parsons who were either the butt of popular jokes or branded as wowsers.

In truth this rough colonial society had little time for the things of the spirit when human survival was paramount on men's minds. It has to be said that with some remarkable exceptions, our Anglican Church has not been sufficiently in touch with the three themes which have shaped the Australian experience. Marist Theologian Fr John Thornhill put it this way some twenty years ago. He wrote about "The spirit of egalitarianism which would establish a society free of inherited status and privilege; the hard lessons which the setbacks of our history have brought [and continue to bring through fire and flood]; and the land within which we have found ourselves as a people and which has become a symbol of immense importance, as we come to terms with the meaning of human existence". Perhaps this helps to explain a growing interest and acknowledgement of indigenous

culture and spirituality in more recent times. Adam Goodes is the latest in a growing list of people with indigenous backgrounds who have been made Australians of the Year

Whether fairly or unfairly, The Church of England in Australia and Anglicanism in general has been identified with the notion of establishment and been seen by some as a means of upward mobility.

This began to change in the 1970's because the numbers of Anglicans as a percentage of the overall population steadily declined, because of the impact of overseas non British migration, a reduction in the number of younger generation Australians who define themselves in denominational terms, all of which has led to a reduction in the numbers of nominal Anglicans due to a loss of institutional connection or contact. Another factor has been the growth of consumerism with growing choices or options and leisure activities, all of which promote and tempt people to feel free to spend as they wish. The TV advertisements during the tennis kept on repeating the jingle 'Do what you wanna do, be what you wanna be.....' Few people stop to think about the negative implications of such jargon.

So Anglicanism, along with other mainstream churches, has lost ground in a world which has become secularized so that their influence has become marginal. In the modern smorgasbord of religious pluralism, Anglicanism has become a kind of acquired taste in matters liturgical, where there is also considerable variety of choice.

We are barely a national church and more like an archipelago which further diminishes our capacity to influence affairs of state, being pushed into the domain of the private, and perhaps feeling more comfortable there. However, it should be added that this does not exclude our efforts to encourage individual Anglicans to exercise a Christian influence in the decision making processes of public life where they work or are placed.

To cap all this off, some people have observed that there is in Australian society today a more virulent strain of secularism now exercising greater influence on affairs of state with the seeming objective of writing religious life and its significant contributions out of the national narrative. Some would say this is being done under the guise of promoting human rights and liberal humanism. This may not be deliberate, it may be due to a form of cultural amnesia, but is quietly happening without much demurring from the mainstream churches and other religious bodies.

On Australia Day 2001 as Chair of the National Centenary of Federation Council, I said this in Canberra [little knowing what was to lie ahead later that year]. I believe this still applies today.

So what do we want to make of Australia today? How are we to develop policies, strategies and the national will to get to where we would like to be? How might we foster a broad spirituality based on vision that embraces but does not exclude anyone? How can that vision release a new and dynamic energy that will enable us to achieve all these things? It is appropriate to present the Federation slogan, "Australia – It's What We Make It", but also to remind ourselves of the words of the Preamble to the Constitution, which begins with the Foundation reference "humbly relying upon the blessing of Almighty God". Clearly we need to draw upon the strength of all the spiritual resources that are available to us, if we are to make some significant headway as a nation.

We need to see ourselves as being a people who have always been on a journey of discovery. Our forebears, going back 60,000 years, all made long journeys to settle here on this island continent.

We ought, therefore, to accept the idea of journey as an essential motif to our life together as a nation, recognising that the journey is a continuing process which is never entirely completed.

To address the question of the kind of nation we seek to become, an obvious foundation point to remember is that the world is driven by two countervailing though not necessarily incompatible forces – the sense of continuity with the past and the fact of constant change. We need to be more effective in holding both these factors together in a creative tension in order to act responsibly in shaping our nation's future, to foster a better knowledge of our history, a sharper analysis of the contemporary forces and values shaping society and something like a prophetic ability to anticipate and shape our future.

Our present quest is to develop a common set of ethical values containing sufficient breadth and flexibility that will allow for diversity and difference. This will demand a high level of mutual understanding and tolerance and above all it will require that in all these things we are prepared to put our trust in a power greater and higher than ourselves.

Progress toward national maturity will also occur as we improve our capacity as a people to discern the difference between those things which are of ultimate worth and value and those things which parade themselves as such but in reality are self-serving and transitory. Speaking as a Christian here, I should say that this sense of discernment, according to Christian understanding, comes to us as humans as a gift of the Holy Spirit which then has to be fostered in the life of the community of faith.

These days "spirituality" is a term used to embrace many different things, such as a sense of heightened personal responsibility, the release of untapped human potential, the practical expression of good works, the release of creative energy, a sense of vision and for some, the fostering of a disciplined life of prayer and meditation.

There is a great need to restore public confidence in the political process in general and in our politicians in particular. Politics, after all, is about that essential task of ordering the common life and upholding the common good in society. The task of politics and politicians is to safeguard our democratic traditions and to make those institutions work effectively for the benefit of all people.

As we seek to recover and foster our civic tradition, which is so essential to the life of our nation, there is another aspect that should not be overlooked, the challenge for us to be involved in the wider community, offering practical help and mutual support, participating in good works for the benefit of others in a shared commitment to the common good. Thus, volunteering is a vital part of maintaining our civic traditions.

It is sometimes asked if these so called civic values are ends in themselves and from my perspective I would view them as practical distillations of deeper values relating to the Kingdom of God. They are, however, important practical expressions of that vision we hold in fostering a good society in our midst. Growth towards maturity would also mean that we might feel a little less inhibited about discussing such matters openly and publicly without a sense of awkwardness.

Clearly the Anglican Church of Australia in partnership with other churches can continue to have important things to say on occasions such as this. Despite the grave difficulties confronting us today, we must recover our confidence with due humility, to address the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our national and international life as they relate to the Kingdom of God.

One of the special qualities our branch of the Catholic Church offers the world of faith lies in the ancient collects in the Book of Common Prayer, such as the one set for today and so I conclude with it.

Loving God, The light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: help us to know you that we may truly love you and so love you that we may faithfully serve you, whose service is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

+ Peter Hollingworth