

## From the Past, with Love

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 15 June 2014, by David Gill. It was a service of Choral Matins, and the readings for Trinity Sunday were Genesis 1:1-5, 26-2:4a and St Matthew 28:16-20*

This morning we are tying our tongues in knots with mid-seventeenth century English. Our form of worship, matins, goes back hundreds of years beyond that. Why this journey into the past?

Partly because matins, and its close cousin evensong, are among the things of beauty that English Christianity has bequeathed to the wider Church. They deserve to be cherished, not as museum exhibits but in living worship.

Partly too because matins travelled from pre-Reformation days through Anglicanism, then via the Wesleys to become part of Methodism – which is part of us. It's in the liturgical gene pool of the Uniting Church in Australia. We should know and appreciate our heritage.

But today's service has a deeper significance.

A couple of weeks ago, in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we remembered our Lord's yearning that his people might be one. Christian unity means churches overcoming their denominational and national divisions. But it also means seeking unity with the Church across the ages.

With today's historic form of worship, we are recognising our debt to people who travelled the way of Christ long before us. We celebrate them and their faithfulness. We open ourselves to their wisdom. And we do this *not to make ourselves prisoners of the past, but to avoid becoming prisoners of the present.*

Let's unpack that.

Some years ago, while on the staff of the National Council of Churches, I found myself in the torture chair of a Macquarie Street dentist. He scraped and probed, then looked at me accusingly. "You've been grinding your teeth again," he said. I tried to reply, through a mouthful of dental hardware, that if he had 15 member churches to worry about he'd probably grind his too. "Yes, these must be difficult days in your line of business," said the man in white. "Maybe the Church needs a new product."

That really did produce choking noises from the chair, but you can understand where he was coming from. Whether your specialty is mousetraps, teeth or religion, offer people what they want and the world will beat a path to your

door. Change your product to fit the market: that's how the world thinks. But it's not how the Church thinks. At least, it shouldn't be.

Christians have been entrusted with a treasure beyond all times and cultures. Yet we're always tempted to lapse into religious populism, adjusting the gospel to make it more appealing for our particular time and culture.

I'm not having a dig at so-called "progressive" Christians here. Or at "conservative evangelical" Christians either. The danger of selling the gospel short runs right across the theological spectrum. It is a risk to which all churches, in all times, are vulnerable. Protestant churches especially.

The danger is real for us in Australia. The nation's spiritual ethos at present is singularly uncongenial to the Christian faith. Gone is much sense of connection with a reality beyond ourselves. Transcendence has been steamrollered flat, beauty and enchantment trivialised, religion dumbed down, wondering and worshipping rendered problematic.

A church that trims its message to suit this ethos, in the name of "relevance," will be gutting the gospel. A congregation that excises beauty and mystery from its worship, for the sake of appearing "contemporary," might more honestly close its doors.

This is a time of peril for the Church. Not because Australia's Christians face persecution. Nobody is planning to feed us to the lions. But because we risk sliding, unaware, into a loss of identity. So what to do? How are we to recognize the danger and resist it?

By cherishing the treasure that has been entrusted to us, that's how. By taking seriously the Spirit-filled tradition of Christian faith. By respecting the wisdom of the past. By seeking to learn from it and grow into it. By allowing *what has been* to save us from captivity to *what is*.

Now, be clear about what a responsible approach to tradition entails. *It means keeping what is worth conserving, letting go of what isn't, and* – this is crucially important – *having the wisdom to know the difference*. Taking the past seriously does not mean that we become reactionaries. It does not require us to switch off our brains, suspend our critical thinking, turn away from contemporary culture or sign on to untenable stances on social issues.

On the contrary. Greater clarity about whose we are and the faith tradition in which we stand should motivate thinking, not hinder it; liberate, not enslave.

Greater confidence about our identity should set us free to explore the risky frontiers of faith and obedience. Greater focus on the faith that unites us should have us more relaxed about our different views on the passing parade of issues that do not.

This morning's form of worship started us thinking about our debt to the past. Take another example. What are we to make of the two ancient creeds of the undivided church? Should they be scrapped as outdated trash or cherished as enduring treasure?

One of the two – the Apostles' Creed – we said this morning. The other – the Nicene Creed – is normally used on Sundays when we celebrate the eucharist. Both go back some sixteen centuries.

The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church acknowledges their significance. This church, it says, "... enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by her use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. She receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and guard the right understanding of that faith".

Sounds good. But ...

Before church union, the creeds were not much heard among those of us who were Congregationalists. It wasn't so much that we objected to what was in them. Our concern was that the mystery of God transcends even the finest credal statements, so they should not be used to restrict freedom of thought or as tests of Christian discipleship. We were right so to insist, but we were wrong, I believe, to neglect them entirely.

I know, those ancient affirmations of faith can cause us headaches. The words are familiar enough, or they ought to be. Having been owned by all the churches across the centuries they carry an authority beyond that of any one author, denomination or time. But the language stems from another age. The thought forms can seem a bit opaque. Using them properly requires empathy and imagination.

Some tips for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians trying to cope with the creeds.

First, when we use one of them we're affirming that this is *the faith of the Church*. Bits of it we may not understand. That's normal. Other bits we may say in hesitant, uncertain voices. That's OK too. The creeds are not primarily about

your understanding, or mine either. They articulate the faith of the weird and wonderful faith community into which we by God's grace have been drawn.

Second, we're affirming this as *the faith into which we seek to grow*. An example. The Apostles' Creed has a passage that speaks of the crucified Jesus descending into hell. I used to think that was quaint, old fashioned, saw hell as a place, assumed a three-story universe, and should be deleted. Then, one day, my own life descended into hell, or what felt very much like it. That line suddenly spoke to me powerfully in a way it never had before. I saw something in the Christian faith I had never seen before. The creeds don't just describe a point of arrival. They resource us for a journey, much of which still lies ahead.

Third, we're affirming this faith *as part of an act of worship*. The focus of the liturgy is not on us, our wisdom, what we might think or feel. Its focus should always be on the holy trinity of love that we dare to call God. If the creed's words about the divine mystery have you wondering, that's exactly right. Like every other aspect of worship they *ought to* have you wondering!

There is a lot more to our heritage, of course, than liturgical forms and doctrinal statements. Don't forget the sacred places, the sacred stories, the sacred rituals, the sacred music, the sacred art. So much to acknowledge, so much to receive, so much in which to revel, so much from which to learn, so much by which to be inspired.

It's a treasure trove, of which we are the improbable trustees. The Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will fulfil its trust to the extent that it allows the treasure to be glimpsed anew by today's generations.

Churches that neglect that trust and surrender weakly to the spirit of the age will go under – and will deserve to go under. Only churches that remain faithful to that trust and remain stubbornly counter-cultural will be taken seriously – and will deserve to be taken seriously.

Yes, Australians today may be reaching new heights of scepticism and unbelief. But, deep down, like human beings everywhere, our compatriots still hunger for hints of the sacred, still seek meaning in the madness, still yearn for love in the loneliness, still listen hoping to detect whispers of grace.

Which brings us to St Stephen's. This church has so much going for it. Its people take worship seriously. You're not afraid to think. You really care for each other. You have a superb location, a building that can help anyone pray, and music that's to kill for. You are well-placed – much more than most

congregations -- to make the Christian faith newly accessible to the people of this great city. What a privilege!

Remember that old grace we used to say at meals – “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful”? Maybe, after this service, remembering the great treasure entrusted to us, acknowledging the great calling set before us now, we should enlarge that a bit.

“For what we *have* received, for what we *are* receiving, for what we *are about to* receive, for the wonderful heritage we have been given to share, may the Lord make us truly thankful”.

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