

Trinity Sunday 2011 – why words matter

Genesis 1:1-2:4a (excerpts); 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

I first encountered Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy in its variegated forms upon moving to Cairo in 1990. Having just come from living in “vanishing Africa” among tribal religionists and animists, the Middle East seemed alien territory indeed. Who *were* these guys getting about in strange hats, I wondered? And why did they make such a fuss about their tortuous formulations of faith? “Who, after all cares”, I remember naively grizzling to an English friend and colleague, “whether the Holy Spirit proceeds *from* the Father *and* the Son or, from the Father *through* the Son? And why get so steamed up over whether Jesus has one nature or two held in the unity of one person. And, after all, don’t we all worship One God in some way or other”. “Well, old man”, he replied dryly, “they do tend to take that sort of thing very seriously here”.

It wasn’t long before I came to see first hand just how seriously *they* did take these things...

Two or three times a week, in between verb drills with Madam Nagla, my wife Kirsty worked in Bulaq, a slum of about 25 square kilometres in the heart of Cairo, which housed about a million of the city’s Christians – mostly Coptic Christians. They lived, for the most part, in abject poverty. Stand pipes in the street, provided water (when it was on), to whole apartment blocks. The sewage arrangements don’t bear talking about. Many of the buildings dating from the late 1880s to early 1900s, resembled something out of ‘Blade Runner’ on a fine day – seemingly crumbling before the eye.

In one of these buildings, or more accurately, in a cupboard under the staircase in one of these stiflingly hot buildings, lived Miriam Musa. Miriam was an Anglican – one of the tiny Protestant sects within the estimated 12 million of Egypt’s Christians. Of an indeterminate age, she appeared to be in her seventies though it could have just been accumulated hard work and depravation that aged her. She had diabetes and was crippled with arthritis. With little medication she lived in pain.

She could move, with difficulty, from her bed to her chamber pot and back again. Occasionally someone would take her outside to get some sun. She survived on scraps and the good graces of her Copt neighbours who, desperate themselves, had little to share with this woman who persisted in holding her imported faith – as they saw it.

The miracle of Miriam was her smile which seemed to be always at hand. By contrast, many times Kirsty would return to our apartment, in the expat part of town, in tears – frustrated at her inability to change Miriam's circumstances at all. Often we both prayed that that God in his mercy would take Miriam and relieve her of her suffering. One cold winter's morning God did...

Why didn't Miriam convert to Islam and receive welfare from the nearby Mosque who liberally rewarded such converts? Or at least become a Copt and so better integrated in community networks?

The answer it seemed, was that Miriam *took words seriously*: She couldn't declare she worshipped the monochromatic *Allah*, nor that Mohamed was the prophet of *Allah*, any more than she could declare herself a Monophysite Copt. For her, it wasn't just a matter of belonging to a *human* community and getting relief, it was about being part of the community of God himself, caught up the life of the One True God she believed and trusted in.

I've often thought of Miriam and her sentinel witness to her understanding of the Truth. Westerners have long given up even the idea of Truth – certainly of Truth, with a capital 'T'. Pragmatically, modern science only builds models that help us work with our experience of the world. Commonly by the mid 20th century, school children could talk of light as both particle and wave. Either explanation can be applied depending on what is most useful... While war raged in Europe, the Jewish refugee Karl Popper wrote his thesis in Christchurch – here in little New Zealand – that science was not about discovering 'truth' open to all, but about making conjectures which the *scientific community* then sought to refute and so discard or modify into new conjectures. Newton's mechanical universe soon gave way to quantum mechanics and Einstein's relativities that still remain a mystery to most of us.

Words, then, no longer *correspond* to what's there, they simply help us order our world until something better comes along. All this has had the flow-on effect that, at a social level, truth has become at best about “*authenticity*”, or more commonly, one's own personal perceptions. “Truth is what is *real* to you” – how often have you heard this in some form or other..

I once asked a group of students, keen-ees who met each Wednesday evening to discuss their faith and the issues of life, “what would you die for?”. The answer was, “nothing much”. One older man said he would die for his children. One said “the Gospel” but struggled when asked to articulate what this meant. The others said they couldn't conceive of a situation where they would hold to their Christian confession if it meant forfeiting their life since God looked upon the heart and was not concerned with what we said – a split of experience from content as a way of knowing typical of our time, but more significantly a convenient “truth” that was every bit as far from the faith they said they claimed to have, as the 11 thousand kilometres that separated them that evening from the grave of Miriam Musa.

It may seem, on the face of it, that I am making much ado here about nothing –am I? This last week Synod reps have been circulated with papers in preparation for our church's regional gatherings and Synod in September. The key issue is weather the Arch Bishop of Canterbury's ‘covenant’ which seeks to unify a church in crisis over the ordination of practicing homosexuals, should be endorsed. The problem is, of course, that while we all want to live in unity we find it hard as a communion to agree on what we believe nor how or on what basis we can decide. Hermeneutics (how you approach and read the bible and understand your faith), has also become “what is real to you”, it seems. Again words seem to fail us even if our relational commitment of each to the other at least vaguely mirrors that of a Trinitarian dynamic of love, if not the reality of unity in diversity as a reflection of God's image.

Contrast this to theologians in the Diocese of Sydney, whose adamant argument for a kind of role based hierarchy within Trinitarian relations – that is, the eternal subordination of the Son of God – has provided it

with all the basis it needs to place woman in a role hierarchy where-in, it is argued, woman will find who they are created to be by submitting to patriarchy. If women are *made* to submit to men, then it follows that their freedom will be most fully realised when they do this, just as Jesus finds his identity by submission to the Father.

In his closely argued critique ‘Trinity and Subordinationism’, Australian theologian Kevin Giles, himself a conservative, never-the-less warns that an understanding of the nature and character of God articulated in such a way has not only been regarded as heresy since Athanasius, but also has close parallels to justifications used in the past for slavery, not just for women and homosexuals today. It seems the Latin fathers were right after all to disagree with the Greeks over who proceeded from, or through, whom.

Meantime the gender wars continue regardless, partly I suspect because, again, words seem to fail us. Many struggle to speak of God as Father and Son, seeing this as relational language for sure, but inextricably bound to an oppressive patriarchal heritage. Yet to feminise God has proved as problematic as to maintain a ‘male-ized’ God – the point being that God is beyond gender even while our male and ‘femaleness’, as our reading from Genesis today declares, reflects, in some way, who God is. The solution lies not in exchanging a matriarchal lexicon for a patriarchal one, but coming to terms with the type of relational understanding of God the Trinity seeks to express.

It is because of this that objectifying God by dropping personal pronouns all together, has also proved unsatisfying. Adjectives such as “loving God”, “creator God”, “merciful God”, “God of this”, “God of that”, in the end serve not to bring God closer, but in making God more acceptable to our sensibilities, have the opposite effect. They depersonalize and even divide God’s nature by defining God in terms of roles – the very slippery slope (some would argue) our Sydney brothers (and even a few sisters), are trying to traverse.¹

¹ See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate*, IVP Academic, 2002. See also <http://philgons.com/2007/10/the-failed-strategy-of-trinity-subordinationism/> for a refutation of Giles argument.

Our own prayer book, in places, I believe, comes dangerously close to falling into this kind *neo-modalism*. The alternative blessings are ambiguous, to say the least:

“...And the blessing of God,
our Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life...”

runs close to being misleading (despite the insertion of “our”), given the point our readings today clearly make, by possibly inferring that the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Spirit sustains.

Yet our readings insist that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are *all* involved in both the original creation and the sustaining of that creation.

So too they are equally involved in the redemption, the reconciliation, the salvation of all God’s creatures and the earth – the *re*-creation of the whole of God’s world.

So too each makes the other present to us, each speaks to us, each reveals the nature of God to us. Paul’s blessing to the Corinthian church which we read today, may well reflect God’s workings among us as we can know it (the “*economy*” of the Trinity, as it were) – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and existential experience of God in the Spirit – but it is not attempting to express God’s divided nature. Rather Paul is pointing to the love and peace – the “*good order*” he encourages the Corinthians to pursue – that an encounter with a God who is *all* these things, will bring.

What’s my point here? Well, it’s Miriam Musa’s point actually: *Words matter. Theology matters. Doctrine* (seemingly no matter how arcane), *matters*. Scripture speaks of the “*thoughts of our hearts*” that determine our actions,² not the intuitions and emotions of our hearts.³ Thoughts use words.

Scripture also says that “from the heart flow the issues of life”⁴ and that “a person speaks what the heart is full of”.⁵ Behavioural therapists

² Gen.6:5; Matt.15:18-19.

³ See also the ‘Collect for Purity’ from the NZPB, said every communion service throughout the Anglican church.

⁴ Prov.4:23.

express this in contemporary terms by saying that we act and speak out of our cognitive framework which is shaped, in part, by the words we use when we articulate that framework. Good “*self talk*”, or “*alternative stories*”, as narrative therapists would call it, become very important in shaping how we behave – *words matter*.

Is it just coincidence, then, that in a time of uncertainty in our wider society and culture, a time of lack of confidence in Truth and in words that can articulate truth, there is widespread confusion and, frankly, disbelief in the basic tenants of our faith within our church? Words are connected to outcomes. When we lose faith in their power to articulate the content of our faith, we lose faith altogether. Fuzzy words point to fuzzy belief – belief that will not sustain our church in its mission of announcing the arrival of God’s reign in Jesus Christ and calling sinners to repentance and faith.

Scripture tells us we should “always be ready to account for the hope that is within us”.⁶ Are we? What is the nature and object of this hope? Who is this God we worship and why do we worship this Jesus Christ – who is Jesus Christ anyway? What do we mean when we talk of God as Holy Spirit?

We need to address these questions clearly and concisely if our answers are to penetrate the ether of our present social and cultural malaise and its associated crisis of confidence within our Church– especially among our young. To do this we need to employ words which have agreed meaning.

True, having a grasp of the broad narrative sweep of the scripture, of God’s great story of creation, redemption and his present and coming reign of justice, gives us a framework within which to place our thinking about God. *God’s story asks us* to ask the right questions, questions we might not otherwise ask: if the Yahweh of the Old Testament and Jesus of the Gospels didn’t make claims to being faithful, loving and just, then accounting for dishonesty, betrayal, injustice and suffering wouldn’t be an issue. Without this narrative frame of reference, like the Hindu we

⁵ Lk.6:45.

⁶ 1 Peter 3:15.

could see these issues as just part of the nature of things, or, with the Buddhists we might regard these experiences as illusory.⁷

But when we come to think and talk about these issues from that narrative framework, then we start to theologise. Creed and doctrine, the words with which we summarise and formulate our thinking, become important as we come to answer these questions of God and his activity among us – not to nail down the jelly of life, nor to straight-jacket our experience of the transcendent, not to determine what is and is not permissible and punish any who deviate, but to *punctuate* that experience, to give it, as George Lindbeck⁸ would say, some sort of *grammar*, some sort of *shape* and so render our experience of God, in all its diversity, intelligible.

Our theology of God, whom we worship as Trinity, is not the reality of that God himself. Neither is our theology about boundary setting. It is about using a sort of language that allows us to talk about who God is in a way that is true, even while it allows us to keep on talking in an open kind of way. Knowing the questions to ask is important. Framing answers that are true while remaining open to further thinking is even more important if we are to proclaim the One True God as opposed to the false ones of ideology.

If we don't take struggling with these questions and their answers seriously, because they are too hard, too abstract or apparently disconnected to our daily life, then how will the butcher, the baker and candle stick maker take us seriously in our witness? If reciting the liturgy is evacuated of hard-edged meaning, it becomes boring routine at best or little more than an attempt to connect with some sort of emanation from the numinous, we reduce our worship to magic, differing only in culture rather than essence from the largely vacuous rock-n-roll religion and fundamentalism increasingly prevalent in Protestant Christianity.

⁷ See Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death*, , chapter , p. ., for a very moving yet prescient exploration of the failure of Hinduism and Buddhism to deliver pastorally in this area.

⁸ George A Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KN, 1984.

It is important if we are to have a sufficient base for talking about relationships between men and women, the economy, environmental issues or any other matter of import, that we *ground* our thinking and speaking in *God*. From our understanding of who God is, will flow the way we address the issues of life. This is why disputes over the Trinity have always been controversial, why they have always divided even as they have united.

Regardless of how we have formulated this korero, then, it is no mistake that the church has placed Trinity Sunday directly after we celebrate Pentecost Sunday – the dramatic story of the church’s call and equipping for mission – of making disciples and baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen!