

LIVING THROUGH THE HOLY SATURDAY OF THE CHURCH'S LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

“Have things ever seemed worse for the Catholic Church in Australia? If it were a boxer, it would look tangled in the ropes, sliding towards the canvas and spitting blood. The past 4 years have been horrendous. Endless, horrifying accounts of historical child abuse. A royal commission relentlessly critiquing failures of bishops and processes. The media baying for yet more blood. Cardinal George Pell charged with abuse offences...he has the full presumption of innocence, but the communal trauma is palpable. And now a report from the commission eviscerating the Catholic sacrament of confession. How much worse can this get?”

That's Professor Greg Craven, the Vice-Chancellor of the Australian Catholic University in the Weekend Australian, last year. And it seemed to a classic Holy Sat question, as I'd put it? It is posed, legitimately, by a struggling, shocked, ashamed people.....trying to discern our next direction.

I'd like to read you something of a *counter* however to those sentiments.

“When you climb out a black well, you are not the same

“You come to in the blue air, with a long sore scar circling your chest like the shoreline of a deep new sea

“Your hands are webbed, inviting you to trust yourself...in water stranger and wilder than you've ever known.

“Your heart has a kick, your eyes have a different bite. You have emerged from some dark wonder you can't explain.

“*You are not the same.*”

That's the memorable work of the late, great Australian poet Dorothy Porter, in a poem called Not The Same...and I'd like to suggest that this offers us some psychological, even spiritual road-map: to TRUST that we can, indeed, *emerge*.

Maybe we do have to just wait: just pause and reflect on where we are, as people who may have devoted a lot of time to this institution, in some way or the other. And our thoughts may not be particularly coherent....I've always loved one of St Teresa of Avila's lovely statements. At the outset of her classic work "The Way Of Perfection" she confesses: "Since I don't know what I am to say, I cannot say it in an orderly way!"

Yes, I am struggling mightily with what to say, to feel, to think. And while I'm not trying to be trivial; but I presume people who've devoted their lives to the Commonwealth Bank might have feelings along on a similar spectrum right now: that they've given themselves honestly and vigilantly to their big-beast-institution only to discover a range of egregious things were happening around them, in core areas of their institution. Did they not notice? Should they have?

Was The London Tablet's December editorial post the Royal Commission's release right, that "the entire Australian Catholic community" had been shown to have failed. Was that a fair verdict?

Now of course you might say that the Church's dark-night-of-the-soul is of a different order to say a bank, and of course I'd agree with you. But I'm making the point that we're not the only institution in this predicament. Many of us knew this institution as something that was precious, unique in its draw on us, offering a glimpse of the Divine, though maybe taken for granted a bit despite all that. 'Someone was running it, weren't they? It *would* keep operating, somehow, wouldn't it? We (the laity) would turn up, offer something, confident that it would be there in some form....a bit like our personal circulation system.

As Greg Craven went onto say in that Weekend Australian piece last year, "there is a tremendous tension between some fundamental imperatives, namely acknowledging and atoning for the atrocious crimes committed under its roof; but the second core obligation of the Church is to assess the directions and commendations of the royal commission on their merits".

In other words, we have to bring our conscious mind to bear. It means reflecting very deeply on that sense of something having possibly died---a

confident sense of an institution whose flaws were obvious to us but we knew they were outweighed by its faith, hope and charity. And it was like our personal circulation system, in my view.

Plus we knew that our Church truly represented far more than the awful stories dominating the headlines: we KNEW that and could point to evidence. 700,000 schoolchildren in the Catholic sector, served by 82,000 staff; 66 hospitals include 19 public hospitals run by church-related entities, surely massive hubs of compassion. The St V de Paul Society is the most extensive volunteer welfare network in the country and the church is the largest welfare provider outside govt.

As I've written elsewhere, some of those particularly vulnerable people who have populated the Royal Commission will surely need some of these services during their lives, along with multiple thousands of other needy Australians: option-for-the-poor is no theory in these settings....as I'm sure many of you seated before me today know better than I!

So where does my Holy-Saturday thinking take me? I've really struggled, I acknowledge, with pitting all the goodness that I KNOW exists, brokered by the Church....against these awful stories, where the Church as Good Shepherd so obviously abandoned its flock. I've felt myself hoist on a particularly acute petard, trying to sort my way through it. It has bedevilled me and confess I'm not entirely satisfied yet with my answers.

It's as if a virus had entered the organism that I know, this special organism...yet I couldn't really believe it would overtake the body. Was I in denial? Certainly the wider world seemed to believe this virus was irredeemably metastatic, and sometimes this conviction could seem pretty self-serving. Yet I also knew it was critical that I did face up, as a Catholic, to the level of dysfunction, the lack of kindness above all.

Would these revelations repel people of goodwill and interfere seriously with people's strivings towards something beyond the everyday? Would it simply circumvent people's search for the ineffable, a quest brokered by the church in unique ways? If so, what a tragedy, for searching individuals and the community, for that matter?

Would it rob us of joy? Another tragedy? Would it limit our abilities to re-imagine a modern faith community here in Australia?

I had quite a powerful, if poignant, experience at Mass, in my local church recently, listening to a young Australian-Vietnamese priest who obviously was recently ordained: transparently devout and super-conscientious. His emphasis in his homily quite surprised me, I must say, because he very much saw himself as *leading* (his word) as the clear guide, the good shepherd I suppose, US, the people in the pews, through the thickets of life, towards greater faith. And then came this moment, which actually brought tears to my eyes, given his sincerity: "I pray every day, dear people, that I will be up to the task, that I will resist all temptations and fulfil my mission." (Or similar words...as if some of those priests in the headlines had not started out the same way, I reflected!)

I could see his total commitment and of course was impressed. But: I wanted him to say something like: 'I will be there to accompany you, I will learn from you, I will walk alongside you and hope never to deviate...as we all attempt, *together*, to discern God's path for us and our Church in this world"or something like that.

It helped me focus my thoughts. The only way forward for a thriving Catholic Church in Australia, as I see it, is an institution with much, much more collaboration, power and influence-sharing and mutual respect between clergy and laity: between the official and non-ordained people.

It's a very different model of both priesthood and Church. His quite definite emphasis helped me distill my own thoughts, probably quite changed by this crisis, but of course undoubtedly brewed originally in the documents of Vatican Two and the whole notion of a Pilgrim Church.

This means a new laity, I fully acknowledge that. I expect real stepping-up by lay-people in a way I'm just not sure we've been prepared to. I expect reflection of a big order in terms of what's required, just like I'm asked to do on a weekly basis at the ABC, e.g. Yes, I expect leadership training, innovative thinking, planning...as well as kindness and generosity of spirit.

And to match that, I'd hope for humble readiness-to-adapt by clergy: those who *lead are fundamentally called to serve*, which the Jesuits highlighted at a conference a decade ago now that I attended.

In trying to sort my way through these last demanding years, I've sought out surprising areas some sources of hope and energy. I've realised that it requires both humility and perseverance (my word of the year!) to be useful, combined with a propensity to plan, as opposed to just ponder. Not passivity, in other words, not surrender, something more deeply bold in fact.

I'd like to quote a German writer, the dep editor-in-chief of the German magazine Der Spiegel, Dirk Kurbjeweit, who was in Australia last year and appeared on my programme, speaking about the modern German mood post their 20th century cataclysms, because I've found myself intrigued by how they put themselves back together again.

"Germans once believed they had found a saviour," he wrote, "but then *he* tried to destroy the world, and now their belief in salvation has vanished. Sociologist Helmut Schelsky found that there was a 'sceptical generation' of Germans who took part in the war when they were very young and who then went on to build up the Fed Reb of Germany. They rejected all grand ideas, their state religion became Karl Popper's 'piecemeal social engineering', the politics of small measure; turn a screw here, carefully open a valve there, make sure not to create too much hope. That is Angela Merkel's fundamental approach."

Now of course I realise that she has a few problems of her own right now...still being worked out, as you know! But in other words, people at the bottom of the barrel, can become very resourceful and build back, to become the centre of Europe. And after all, they couldn't exactly abandon their nationality, well not easily.

So how might that apply to us, now? Well I do wonder whether the Church ought to suspend all non-essential activities and LISTEN to what the society seeks of it, needs from it: for maybe 12 months: visibly do so for all the messages that sends, explicitly and implicitly.

And I've also turned to another group that might surprise you: the world of *Judaism and the Jewish people*, to see whether their experience offered us real guidance in this dark-night time. After all, they truly had to re-create their whole belief and cultural structure TWICE: when the Babylonians enslaved them and then not long after the time of Jesus, after the Romans destroyed their Second Temple and their whole hierarchy, their kings, their prophets, their priests, their freedom. It was simply impossible to continue as was. And of course in our own times, the Holocaust is one of the terrible scars of the 20th century, where the Jewish people were again tested to their core.

One of the guiding principles of that community's strength, here and overseas, is summarised by a wonderful phrase offered by the former UK Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks: *the invitation to belong before believing*.

Personally I find that so inviting for us right now. I don't believe, of course, that we can simply transpose another belief tradition's whole purpose onto ours.

But as the Tablet editorialised again last year---and this time I think it's absolutely right---there is a fundamental continuity between Jewish hope and Christian hope. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as "conjoined narratives of hope...each looks towards the same ending to the human story, when God will take his own to himself. 'Thy Kingdom Come' is both a Jewish and a Christian prayer of hope...not a passive hope, because the kingdom (however you read that) has to be *built*: it has to be just and at peace, the lion must lie down with the lamb. The Sermon on the Mount is the template, but the faithful are its builders."

I have several very good Jewish friends, very active in their community and I've sought them out, to learn more about the way their community is structured....I asked them: *where does the life lie?*

They are, by choice, a much tighter cultural group. Whereas the Catholic Church is the original multi-national entity, wondrous in its breadth, I've always thought....but not so easy when you're experiencing the type of crisis afflicting the Australian arm. Because to some extent, we're on our own here, discerning a rescue that makes sense to our Australian sensibility, to ensure our children and grandchildren don't consign the Church's wisdom to being a museum-piece.

(My Jewish friend Stephen says that actually he worries that Jews handle crises well...but he does wonder about their ability to handle what appear to be settled-times, without overt repression!)

Rabbi Sacks writes beautifully and he distilled a particular approach to adapting a belief tradition succinctly when he received the lucrative Templeton Prize for Religion in 2016. Again, I found it very helpful.

“What emerged in Judaism and post Reformation Christianity was the rarest of character-types: the inner-directed personality. Most societies, for most of history, have been either tradition-directed or other-directed. People do what they do either because that's how they've always been done or because that's what other people do.

“Inner-directed types are different. They become the pioneers, the innovators and the survivors. They have an internalised satellite navigation system so they aren't fazed by uncharted territory. They have a strong sense of duty to others. They try to have secure marriages. They hand on their values to their children. They belong to strong communities. They take daring but carefully calculated risks. When they fall, they have rapid recovery times. *They play it long*. They are more interested in sustainability than quick profits.

“Cultures like that stay young. They defeat the entropy, the loss of energy, that has spelled the decline and fall of every other empire and super-power in history.

(Suggesting the West was letting some of this go) he went on: “There *is* an alternative: to become inner-directed again, which means recovering the moral dimension that links our welfare to the welfare of others...helping us tell the difference between the value of things and their price.” And so on. I’ll post this speech, if you like, on your website: it’s quite something.

Now, you may think: ah yes, he’s their chief rabbi so obviously he’s massively embedded in their recoveries. But no, as I understand it, (not in all the different traditions of Judaism of course but in significant ones in Australia), while rabbis and shule are still essentially the symbolic core and known to be, the real locus of energy and commitment is in *secular Jewry*: benefitting the individuals concerned, and the health of their community.

It’s true that they don’t explicitly (except in some distinct areas) aim to penetrate the wider community, the way Catholics would. And I want to acknowledge that it’s one of our great strengths.

But as my friends say, and it makes such sense: Jews had to enable their own group to survive because they knew *no-one else would do it*. So they simply had to work out what was required. They suggested to me that the maintenance of doctrine *as such* was less emphasised or worried about...what *pre-occupied* them was engagement, straddling various age groups, an explicit aim.

In fact, rabbis e.g. associated with Jewish schools are said to be responsible for “Jewish life”: a title encompassing a subtly broader concept I think you’d agree compared with the brief for our chaplains....and definitely living out that dictum of ‘belonging before believing’.

They set up groups like Jewish Committee of Australia (JCA) or Council of Jewish Women (let alone their better known groups like the Jewish Board of Deputies or Bnai Brith) who are well-funded (important issue!!) but who aim to support activities that embody the VALUES of Judaism, more than stated beliefs: now of course we do that too. But I do wonder whether we could articulate this better, especially to younger members: to display a confidence

in the values-base and its roots, more than we do, to be conspicuously involved.

I'm told that a big driver of these Jewish groups is *engagement before fund-raising and

*persuading people that
Jewish community vibrancy is in *their individual and family interest*

*and that the projects chosen were understandable...not abstract, based rather more on action than explicit and stated beliefs. Well run and sustainable, to encourage younger talented people to take part.

I also think the Jewish tradition of eating together on Friday night for a Shabbat meal is just SO clever: but I admit I can't see how that can easily be applied, though I'd love you to all dwell upon just that. Because I think it's very affirming in a collective sense, it's personal, it's anti-loneliness (the great need) it exposes people to their spiritual base; it has the potential to be fun!. (But of course there are also plenty of Shabbat-refugees having dinner in Double Bay away from their families as they remind me)

Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* is quite helpful here.

..

That phrase: “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.” ...was, for me, the most startling challenge issue to *me personally* in E.G. I liked the way the Pope warned against defeatism, that we couldn’t leave it to the “professionals

What that said to me was that to navigate the way forward, we had to forge more unity with our communities, *re-articulate our own values* with some confidence...re-examine the structures with a view to borrowing from our secular world!

To me, whether he’d put it quite like that—or even fully agree with me---I think the Pope is saying to us: don’t *delay* examining the Church’s role in your modern life. Don’t fall back on the excuse of what you consider non-negotiable foes, like being too busy, or being put off by the clergy, or because you find a ‘sterile pessimism’...and you don’t feel capable of breaking through that....

..”the grey pragmatism” that develops around daily life. I think it’s incredibly important that in quite colloquial language, he’s trying to name the beasts that rob us of any chance of a rejoicing faith...partly drawn from people’s feeling about an overbearing need to protect their “personal framework”, I think he says. Spot on.

Truthfully, I don’t think he does demonstrate that he fully understands WHY people—including priests and parish workers---feel so *powerfully* about this need to protect their personal realm: to protect their free time. Many of us feel, I sense, that we have to *snatch* at security a quiet life, to preserve a precious core of identity. And snatching is never a thoroughly desirable motive!

But then I think my Jewish friends would say: just do it! Show it can be done, and the words will then come. Young people, they say, want it obvious and they'll draw the conclusions, thank-you. Tricky!

I'll finish with Oscar Romero's words:

"We cannot do everything

And there is a sense of liberation in realising that.

This enables us to do something,

And to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results

But that is the difference between

The Master-Builder and the worker."

...a perfect Holy Saturday prayer. Thank-you and good luck.