CROSS

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a forum for theological dialogue

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CROSS Purposes

Cross Purposes arrives in your hands with a new look. About to enter our fifth year, it seemed to us that a change of face was in order, although there has been no change of heart! We hope to continue to provide the church with material for reflection from a range of perspectives, with a view to sponsoring debate about pressing matters in the life of our faith communities.

Our main article in this issue extends some of themes of "progressive Christianity" opened up in recent issues, with Paul Tonson offering a opinion on the nature and significance for Christian mission of the multi-faith environment the church now inhabits. John Hudson offers a "traditional alternative" to aspects of David Merritt's piece in *CP* 13.

Andrew Collis, Minister of South Sydney Uniting Church, gives an account of the kinds of ministry his congregation is engaged in, and then a reflection on the gospel's call to compassion. Our sermon this issue is from Craig de Vos, a "story homily" on the parable of the prodigal son (or, the two sons!).

And this issue sees the beginning of an occasional column reviewing books relating to some of our themes: Craig Thompson gives a brief account of Howard Wallace's book on the Psalms and its usefulness as measuring stick for contemporary Christian prayer and worship. Worship will be a feature of our next issue, looking at some of the themes raised in Bill Pugh's letter to the editor in this edition.

We hope you find this edition's offerings stimulating and, as always, encourage your response through letters, as well as other feedback you'd like to give.

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Editors:
Garry Deverell
Craig Thompson
Martin Wright

Letters to the Editor are invited to:

editors@cp.unitingchurch.org.au

or,

Cross Purposes
c/- 81 Oxley Road
Hawthorn 3122

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Letters

Some Confusion

In the Preface to *Uniting in Worship 1*, repeated in *UIW 2*, it is stated that services and resources are not required to be used. Liturgical freedom means that we are free to draw on a rich variety of available material, provided that there is conformity to the doctrine of the Uniting Church. However, there is clear reference to an appropriate standard for worship in our church, a standard against which other resources ought to be considered. In our retirement, my wife and I have journeyed to many parts of Australia. We have enjoyed worship in Uniting Churches in every state, cities and country towns, and preaching places, conducted by ministers and lay preachers. There is a genuine desire to worship "in spirit and in truth". We believe there is some confusion in regard to that word "standard".

- Some congregations, in order to be relevant or "with it", have sacrificed order so that the service becomes some kind of entertainment or concert programme, with prayers and reading(s) added.
- In *UIW 1* and *2*, there is clear reference to essential elements of a service, denoted by a triangular symbol. These are often ignored, and the service leader refers to a kind of programme sheet which indicates the next item, rather than a progressive order of service. In these two valuable guides there are special notes to assist worship preparation for the Lord's Day. Have "worship committees", as they are sometimes termed, really looked at these?
- In some places there was no space or time for silence and meditation to focus our minds before the Call to Worship. Do we need to be "warmed up" for worship with chorus singing? Surely music and singing are to be part of the order.
- There was confusion about the participation of children in the Lord's Supper. Have we really thought this through?
- Do we really understand what it means to "pass the peace"?
- What is the difference between a blessing and the Benediction?

I know that many sincere people are concerned and honestly trying to make worship relevant to the needs of today. But I would suggest that some study should be given to what it means to prepare an order of service for the Lord's Day. More fundamentally to the question, "What is worship?". A close look at Robert Gribben's *A Guide to Uniting in Worship* would not be a bad start. So I ask this question, "Whither worship in the Uniting Church"?

Bill Pugh (Revd.), Sandringham

Note: The topic of worship will be taken up in the next issue of CP. *—Eds*

in service

Andrew Collis

Celebrating Community

The following reflection is based on a homily preached at the South Sydney Uniting Church in Waterloo on November 23, 2008. Celebration of the Reign of Christ saw representatives from various ministry groups and projects in attendance. The Moderator of the NSW Synod, Revd. Niall Reid, and wife Paula, as well as Councillors and local members were invited guests.

The parish, which takes in Waterloo and Redfern, Alexandria and Surry Hills, publishes the *South Sydney Herald*, a monthly newspaper comprising news articles and features of relevance to local residents. The *SSH* (www.southsydneyherald.com.au) is one of the few independent papers in Sydney. We distribute to 30,000 readers from Rosebery in the south to Woolloomooloo on the harbour. A number of volunteer writers, visual artists/photographers and distributors were in attendance.

On Wednesday nights our hall is used as a safe place for men to stay. The Garden Shelter crisis accommodation service is run in partnership with a local Catholic group called Cana Communities. Cana members, too, were in attendance. Sr. Anne Jordan, co-founder and coordinator of Cana, gave the Gospel reading (from the *Inclusive Bible*, a translation by Priests for Equality).

As implied by the name of the accommodation service, a community garden is established in the church grounds. Members of the Luncheon Club, an HIV/AIDS support group based in Waterloo, contribute a great deal to the Eden Garden, as landscape designers and as permaculture-influenced gardeners.

A special feature of the day—we called it Celebrating Community—was a musical concert that followed the service of worship. Luncheon Club volunteers, along with members of the parish's Tongan Congregation, worked hard in the preceding week to tidy the garden, to clean the frog ponds and to set up a performance space beneath a pergola.

Over a lunch of fine barbecued fare, including chicken, taro and vegetarian sausages, two of Sydney's premier *a cappella* groups (both of which rehearse at the church), "Voices from the Vacant Lot" and the "Cleftomaniacs", performed, as did the Tongan Congregation's own youth choir. Dark, dream-pop trio, "theredsunband", delighted the gathering with a superb acoustic set—played, due to unseasonably cold and rainy weather, in the bomb-shelter-styled garden shed.

in service

Parish premises in nearby Alexandria are currently used as a site for a Tutorial Learning Centre. Employing teachers from Macquarie University, the Centre helps young people (early high school) to develop essential skills in reading and writing. Revd. Bill Crews, director of the Exodus Foundation which co-ordinates the Centre, was in attendance.

Intercessory prayers were offered with the help of various symbols of ministry. Revd. Crews, for example, placed a storybook at the foot of the altar-table. Others placed a fork and spade, a pillow, and so on. Founding editor of the *SSH*, Trevor Davies, placed a copy of the most recent edition of the paper, the front page bearing the story of a Bangladeshi refugee reunited with his wife and daughters (thanks to an inner-city woman providing accommodation for the family), news of local actor Deborah Mailman's directorial debut, and another story, headed "Elderly residents at risk in public housing complex".

Towards the end of 2008 the parish undertook commitments to an arts program (building on connections made through the *SSH*), employing a community arts worker and an art teacher, and commissioning an oral history theatre production. Paintings and still life drawings were on display in the church and hall. Hand-made thank-you cards were presented to the musical performers.

Our Celebrating Community event was one of the year's highlights. We plan a similar event to mark the Reign of Christ this year.

The parish is indeed blessed with a dedicated team of councillors, congregants and activists—not just hard-working but visionary in the sense of seeing the wider community in all its diversity, its hurts and aspirations, through an evangelical lens: as a people and place of infinite promise, beloved of God. It's a vision that assumes the personal, social and ecological relevance of the gospel.

It's certainly encouraging—overwhelming in the best sense of the word—to offer leadership within a worshiping community of politicians, playwrights, public housing activists, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, teachers and cyclists and energetic ecumenists. No doubt the life of the parish is sustained by participation in a weekly eucharist, a practice not so common in churches across the Synod, but given expression in a key sentence of our soon-to-be formally adopted Mission Statement: "By the loving power of the Spirit, we participate in the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ, God's Own, the Truly Human One."

Ephesians 1:15-23; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

I've been feeling a little anxious during the week, which, at its worst, is quite neurotic. Concerns that today's service and music event go well, that needs for recognition, food and drink, a certain happiness, are met, can be turned inward and become self-regarding, obsessive. A sense of responsibility can become a sense of self-importance—even if negatively.

Today's gospel might be read in a similar way—a quite neurotic way. Am I a sheep or a goat? I worry. Have I met the needs of the hungry and thirsty? Have I welcomed the stranger, the neighbour? Clothed the naked, comforted the sick? When was the last time I visited someone in prison, or even wrote her/him a letter?

Is it even possible for me, alone (let alone locked inside my own head, my own anxieties), to do all this? To do any of it?

A neurotic reader is prone to miss the opening reference in the parable to the "nations assembled" before the throne of the Promised One. The *nations*.

A second reading unfolds questions of a more social, political, institutional nature. How might we, as a church, a synod, a parish, a community of various groups and diverse individuals, share passions and resources in the name of justice? How might we maintain faithful relationships, work and witness, on behalf of our nation—that our nation might be a nation in which the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the refugee, the vulnerable, homeless, addicted, ill and incarcerated are treated with respect and dignity? How do we advocate for fairer distribution of resources and essential services in the face of entrepreneurial/competitive/privatising politics and religion? How do we help to promote a persistent and consistent opposition to the death penalty—for our own citizens and for the incarcerated and condemned elsewhere? How do we most effectively lend support to voices calling for better quality and more equitable health care, aged care, education, housing, more environmentally sustainable technologies?

How might we do such things with a passion too often reserved for zeal of one or other fundamentalism? One or other fundamentalism that blinds us to the presence of God in the most needy. One or other fundamentalism that distracts us from what the gospel tells us is the crucial and ultimate concern—mercy/compassion?

We need each other in order even to begin the task of responding to these questions. We'll disagree, and we'll make mistakes, and we'll need the patience and forgiveness, the mercy, of one another, perhaps most of all. Lest we all end up in "everlasting fire"!

> "The extent to which we understand the parable depends on our empathy with the one who tells it."

Which prompts a third reading, a deconstructive reading. At the mention of "everlasting fire" the parable is at its most unstable, at its most combustible. The parable is at its most combustible at this point of extreme suffering—a suffering that recalls the suffering of the hungry and thirsty, the unwelcomed stranger, the naked and exposed, the sick and imprisoned.

The satisfaction we are tempted to feel in the face of a violent "justice" for the merciless "goats" of the parable is undermined by the same parable's teaching on mercy. We are left with the uneasy thought that those consigned to an "everlasting fire" are then precisely the ones in most urgent need of mercy—and precisely the ones to whom we are called to show mercy.

The parable, in other words, is not giving us information about the end of the world, but dealing a poetic judgement that aims at inducing repentance—that a new and more merciful future might be opened for us, and for all.

The extent to which we understand such a judgement—as a plea for mercy in the Spirit of God whose mercy is, as we have sung, "for ever sure"—depends not merely on our scholarly knowledge of the scriptures, and not on our academic interests in deconstruction, but, rather, on our empathy with the one who tells the parable: the Promised One consigned, as a political prisoner, as a "nobody", to suffering on a cross. The extent to which we understand the parable depends on our empathy with the one who tells it.

Is this not always the case? When we know someone well, we are better able to know when he or she is being serious, when ironic, when exasperated, or angry, consoling or provocative. The Orthodox icon of Christ Pantocrator, or Christ the Ruler of All, shows Christ as interpreter of the scriptures. This is the Christ we need.

The scriptures arose in the context of communities in solidarity with Christ and suffering others (Paul calls them "the holy ones"), and in spite of social, political and religious pressures to conform to the mainstream, to keep quiet, to disengage. The scriptures arose in the context of flesh-and-blood assemblies like our own. Singing, praying, breaking bread and sharing wine.

Participating in the life of Christ, may we, like those before us, hear the parable as a call to compassion, an urgent call to compassion.

In a few moments we will bring forward symbols of our life together, and we will offer prayers of thanks and support for all works of love. Each symbol, I'd suggest, is a sign of God at work among us to care for the most needy—is a sign, that is, of Christ.

What's overwhelming—I say this as a parish minister who feels proud and happy to the point of embarrassed to be here with you, with such rich opportunities for ministry (not just opportunities, but a colourful 130-year tradition of community engagement, and people of faith, present and past, people of character, warmth, vision, creativity, eccentricity and humour)—is our common life saturated by the mercy of God.

In the silence, let us receive, that we might share what the Spirit brings.

Andrew Collis is Minister of the South Sydney Uniting Church, and Managing Editor of the *South Sydney Herald*.

through a glass darkly

Craig de Vos

What Kind of Father Would Do That?

A Story Homily on Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

You know… I just couldn't believe it! I'd *never* been to a party like this! The band, with their flutes, and drums, and harps—they must've cost a shekel or two. So, too, that troupe of belly-dancers. Not to mention this sumptuous banquet. All the plump olives, figs and dates… the char-grilled peppers… the creamy, soft goat's cheese with its mouth-puckering tang… the fresh, crusty loaves of bread, straight out of the oven… the pigeon pie, delicately spiced with cinnamon. And now, that grain-fed beef… slow roasted on a spit till it'd melt in your mouth. Mmmm! Old Eli's been fattening that steer for *ages* now. I could've sworn it was destined for market. Up there in Jerusalem. After all, only someone like a King Herod would've been able to afford it! Never thought the likes of *me* would be eating it! And not at an occasion such as this: a lavish celebration, no expense spared, and all because young Jacob's come home. Huh! I still can't believe old Eli took him back like that, after the way Jacob treated him. Fancy! Having the gall to go to your father and demand your share of the inheritance—while your father's *still* alive. And then to *sell* it. *Nobody* sells land in our society… not unless they have to. Not unless they're stone broke or something. Because without land, you're nothing. You've no security. No means of livelihood. Huh! Asking for your inheritance, selling it, then taking off. And old Eli just let him go. Didn't try to stop him. Didn't try to talk him out of it. If it'd be me… well… I would've forbidden him. I would've pointed out his responsibilities. I would've jogged his memory about how much *I've* done for him, and all that he owes me. I would've reminded him of what the neighbours would say. But no! Not old Eli! *He* just let him go. I don't understand it! Turning your back on your whole family like that. Rejecting your father. As if to say, "I don't care about you—as far I'm concerned you might as well be dead".

Then again, Jacob's older brother—Mordecai—he isn't much better. Nobody heard *him* protesting when his father offered him his share. Took it without a whimper. If he'd had a modicum of decency or honour, he'd

have refused. But I suppose at least he hung around and didn't sell it. Let alone go scampering off and living the high life: the seedy nightclubs; the high-class hookers; all those designer-label tunics and sandals. And then to come running back *only* when he'd wasted all of it. And look at him! Sitting there. All smug. No sign of remorse or regret. Didn't come back because he realized what he'd done was wrong. Or the pain it'd caused. Or how his father's reputation was tarnished. No offer to repay it or to make it up to the old man. Only came back because he was hungry. Because he decided he'd be better off. What's to stop him taking off again, given half the chance.

And old Eli just took him back. Actually *ran* to meet him… half way across the village. It was quite embarrassing, really. I saw it all, while I was out fixing my front fence. Old Eli went running past, tunic hitched up. All very undignified for a man of his stature. Embraced young Jacob and kissed him… *in public*. And didn't care about any of his feebly rehearsed excuses. Paid absolutely no attention to them. Just started barking orders at his slaves, who'd come running after him, like some procession of clowns. Even gave Jacob that robe he's wearing now—dyed with the most expensive purple you can buy, and inlaid with *real* gold thread. Not to mention a new signet ring. Just took him back as if *nothing* had happened. If it'd been me… why… I would've made him grovel. I would've worked out some repayment scheme. At least given him the menial tasks to do, made him sleep with the servants, muck out the stables, empty the bed-pans, or clean up the slaughter house. Not throw a lavish party like this. As if he were being rewarded for how he'd behaved.

But, looking around the room, it suddenly occurred to me… where's Mordecai? Why isn't *he* here helping his father entertain the guests, like the eldest son is supposed to?

"Eli just took him back as if *nothing* had happened. If it'd been me… why… I would've made him grovel."

Just at that moment, a servant came in from outside looking quite visibly shaken. Went straight up to old Eli and whispered something in his ear. Eli leapt to his feet and rushed outside, leaving all of his guests behind. Someone called out, "Shhh! Everyone! Stop the orchestra. Can anyone hear what's going on?" Being closest to the door, I listened, then replied, "Seems it's Mordecai. He's *finally* turned up, now, after *all* this time. And he's *refusing* to come in. He keeps yelling all sorts of obscenities at old Eli. Berating him for taking Jacob back. Doesn't want to be seen condoning his brother's behaviour. And he's angry that his father seems to be doing so."

And, I thought to myself… he's got a point. Still… old Eli's done it. And if Mordecai were a good son, he'd do what

his father asked. Only goes to show, *he's* just as bad as his brother, really. Not coming in and joining his family. It's like… *he's* turning his back on them this time. It's like *he's* rejecting his father. Mordecai's even accusing Eli of treating him like a *slave*. Despite *all* that Eli's done for him and all he's given him. Why, the ungrateful so and so! If it were me, *I* wouldn't stand for it! *I'd* drag him in here by the ear. Tell him to grow up, and stop acting like a spoiled brat. But no! Not old Eli. He just stands there, letting him blow off steam. Keeps telling Mordecai how much he loves him. And how much he loves Jacob, too. And how thrilled he is that Jacob's come back, safe and sound.

You know… sometimes I just don't understand old Eli. He doesn't seem to care what other people think of him. He doesn't seem to care what his sons do. How ungrateful they are. How they ignore him. Turn their backs on him. Run away. Abuse him. Refuse to do what he asks. And he doesn't seem to care what sort of feeble excuses they make. Doesn't even wait for them to say that they're sorry; or demand that they change; or insist that they mend their ways. He just keeps loving them. Taking them back. Welcoming them with open arms.

I really don't understand it! What sort of a father treats his children like that?

Craig de Vos is a UC minister currently serving at Mulgrave and Wheeler's Hill.

double take

Hilary Howes

op. cit.

John Hudson

A Traditional Response to "Progressive Christian Thought"

Some Personal Responses to and for Christian Communal-Revelation

The Christian tradition has had a fairly bad press for at least the last hundred years, if not more. Westerners particularly, being children of the Enlightenment and beneficiaries of the wonders of the scientific age, are so immersed in a tradition of secularity that the Christian tradition is regarded as peripheral at best, and down-right dangerous at worst!

Some contemporary Christians find that to live with the seemingly irreconcilable tension between Christianity and secularity, one must fashion one's beliefs accordingly, often resulting in either a totally world-denying or world-affirming creed. Neither stance is acceptable within the biblical tradition.

As a callow youth, my infrequent presence in the pews of the local Methodist Church had little to do with the "Holy Trinity" and more to do with a worldly trinity of:

1. Compulsory church-parade for members of the church cricket team.
2. Being there with my mates.
3. Casting a discerning and appreciative eye over the youngest daughter of the new minister, whom I later married (the daughter, not the minister!).

Occasional snippets of scripture, mainly from the Psalms, or a Charles Wesley hymn, would lodge in my mind and present a not unpleasant puzzlement to my self-understanding and the world I lived in. Psalm 121:1f was a case in point:

> I will lift up my eyes unto the hills—
> From whence cometh my help?
> My help cometh from the Lord,
> Who made heaven and earth.

Coloured posters displaying a glorious sunset profiling a line of equally majestic mountains often adorned the walls of the church hall, or the minister's vestry, with a significant alteration to the text in which the emphasis on the question mark was subtly changed, suggesting that the creation itself was the source of the believer's inspiration and help, leading to an appreciation of the God who made it so. Some preachers offered this as proof for the existence of God. In my "unconverted" mind this seemed a logical but strangely insufficient explanation, made even more so by that annoying question mark.

op. cit.

Only later did I discover that I had been provocatively drawn into a "communal tradition", which changed everything. Apparently, my self-constructed trinity of meaning had been gently subverted by another Trinity of communal grace.

In David Merritt's article (*Cross Purposes* 13) he takes issue with, amongst other things, sin and salvation in relation to the biblical creation accounts, the place and purpose of Jesus Christ, and the importance of human mind-expanding knowledge and wisdom, when dealing with Christian orthodoxy.

My brief and concise response to the matters he has raised is not meant to be dismissive of a personal offering, coming as it does out of the "liberal tradition" which he and others find meaningful.

Rather, I want to affirm the Christian tradition of the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which, I believe, is our only living hope in life and death.

The creation stories in Genesis have nothing to do (in the popular sense) with how God made the world, and everything to do (in the biblical sense) with God's purpose. This purpose is not for the writers and readers of the "biblical tradition" to simply be in awe of the making of the world as an end in itself, but to see the Creator's loving and *redeeming* Word accomplishing his will in heaven and earth, from and for all eternity. Hence, the writer of Psalm 121:1 says, "I lift my eyes to the hills—from whence will my help come?"

The psalmist's answer is not found in a postcard presentation of the sun setting behind a row of majestic mountains, however much they remind the observer of the inspirational beauty of Mother Nature. The psalmist's answer is clear: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth". In fact, it is God's providence which will prevent his people becoming subject to the fatalism and capriciousness of the created order: "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night".

In other words, although God has made everything in heaven and earth, and declared it to be "good", it is not to be worshipped or determinative of humankind's destiny. Likewise, God's promise that "He will keep us from all evil" covers not only external catastrophes, but *personal integrated evil* which, according to Genesis, forms the basis of our desire to be "as gods". As children of the Enlightenment, we refuse to believe that we ought not to have "eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". It will only be a matter of time, we think, as the creation evolves and we with it, that our need for the God of traditional Christian revelation will become less and less relevant.

Genesis is not just a venerable piece of primitive folklore, denoting a "wonderful example of early searches for meaning by a people with a profound sense of God" (*CP* 13, p. 15). Quite the contrary, it is the gift of *God's sense of them* as his people. If there is any "searching" it is as Israel struggles with God; constantly resisting and submitting to the One who is Yahweh, unable to be named and labelled, but exercising his creative and saving purpose for Israel, and through

them, for "all nations". The highly sophisticated and profound Genesis narrative, dealing with sin and salvation, sets the scene not only for the remainder of the Old Testament, but also makes the New Testament unintelligible without it.

The issue of who and what Jesus is brings us, obviously, into the world of the New Testament; to a place where David Merritt warns us of certain texts, mainly from the pen of St. John and St. Paul, that distort an understanding of the true Jesus. One text in particular from John's Gospel, "…no one comes to the Father but by me" (14:6), is so prone to misinterpretation that, in his words, "it would have been better if never uttered". Taken in isolation from its context, of course it smacks of arrogance, intolerance, self-righteousness, and all the attitudes (sins?) that are biblically unacceptable. But the whole of John 14's presentation of Jesus is the direct antithesis of such attitudes. John cleverly places the incredulity and puzzlement of the church, then and now, as to the person and work of Jesus, through the doubts and questions of Peter, Thomas and Phillip. Far from being an exclusivist guru-like figure dispensing eternal wisdom to itchy-eared followers, he invites all who see and hear him to become one with him in his humiliation as the man who goes to the cross, united with the Father in *redemptive* suffering for the whole world.

What we are invited to see here is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as our Father, who (far removed from an authoritarian child-abuser) graciously gives himself unreservedly for all creation, thus revealing its true destiny as the theatre of God's love. The text also shows the link between revelation and ethics. Having revealed the true nature of the Father, Jesus tells his church that if they love what they been allowed to see, hear and touch, they will keep his commandments through yet another gift, that of the Holy Spirit.

The orthodox tradition, stretching from Genesis to Revelation and under the guidance of the Spirit, has given God's church a life and a language through which we can know God and love ourselves and our neighbour in ways that simply would not be possible if we were to be left to "the devices and desires of our own hearts".

John Hudson is a retired UC minister.

on Areopagus Hill

Paul Tonson

The Significance of the Multi-Faith Environment

for the Christian Confession of Faith and Mission

I bring to this reflection a life journey in the Christian faith and biblical scholarship, significantly interpreted by the last five years of my experience with Jews and Muslims, together presenting our faith to Year 10 students. These presentations occur under the auspices of Jews Christians and Muslims in Australia (JCMA).

A presentation has four components: (i) 6-minute DVD in which young people say what is good and bad about religions and invite the young people present to ask their questions; (ii) each of the 3 presenters reads some fast facts comparing and contrasting the 3 faiths; (iii) each presenter speaks personally about his/her own faith experience and understanding; (iv) up to 45 minutes responding to questions from the audience. This presentation, to several thousand students, has drawn great acclamation from teachers and students of private and state schools in city and regional areas.

In this paper I am reflecting mostly on the multi-faith environment (MFE) of the three Abrahamic faiths. My remarks are directed towards practical responses to this MFE and I first set out some viewpoints that lie behind the practical responses that I propose.

In historical terms, the MFE of today represents a move back towards some features of the first century. The Christian community can no longer express itself as it did under the monocultural umbrella of Christendom. We now have to speak as a small voice that is not immediately heard amidst the noises of wind, fire and earthquake that are abroad. The major difference in the MFE of today is because of a watershed paradigm shift in viewpoint, within the Christian community and within other faith communities. This change in viewpoint is *the acceptance of pluralism* in our community, the understanding that people other than Christians have a grand narrative as well as cultural and religious patterns that constitute a legitimate and valued spiritual and ethical life.

Here, as in other aspects of Christian theology, I take pains to place the Christian experience in *the context of the Jewish experience*. Jewish history is largely the story of a minority struggling to survive in a dominant culture, such as in ancient Egypt and Babylonia, or in modern Europe. From the time of the Yahwist (10th century or possibly late 8th, due to the impetus of the fall of Samaria), Jewish theology

recognized and accepted a mission to be a blessing to all the world (Gen. 12:1-3).

One aspect of the Jewish approach to this mission provides a reference point for the Christian approach, namely *the inherently pluralistic character of Jewish tradition*. Jewish texts/scriptures are pluralistic in that they embody contrasting viewpoints from different historical periods. I give three examples.

The Documentary Hypothesis revealed the contrasting theologies and agendas of J E D and P in the Torah.

In the latest Tanakh texts we have the contrast between the racial cleansing of Ezra-Nehemiah and the affirmation of Ruth the Moabitess as ancestress of King David.

My own research explored the contrast between the theology linked to Abraham and that linked to Lot.

Through the story of Abraham we are introduced to the great themes of call, promise, blessing, covenant and faith. The story of Lot has none of these elements but in the vivid narratives of Genesis 14 and 19 we are first introduced to one of the great themes of the Older Testament, *divine mercy or loving kindness* (*chesed*, 19:19) which is not found in relation to Abraham at all. Lot is primarily a figure, seemingly without faith or religion, who is saved unconditionally by the grace of God through the divine messengers.

Clearly Christians value both groups of themes in the stories of Abraham and of Lot, but in Genesis they are starkly divided. Each of the three Abrahamic faiths, based on the principle of covenant, inherits a strong sense of faith boundary. Some are in the covenant, some are not. Genesis says Ishmael would be blessed, in ways similar to Jacob, but that he would not be in the covenant. Similarly the story of Hagar, as powerfully explicated by Phyllis Trible, represents profound elements of divine encounter with humanity, but she was not in the covenant. The surprise of the story of Lot is that he was a figure outside of covenant but was still saved by divine grace and mercy. So scripture places right in the middle of the primary covenant story something completely different, that says covenant is not the whole story. Here is an early affirmation of a pluralist understanding of how God deals with humanity.

It is my hypothesis that the writer of the Lot narratives may have deconstructed, not only the Abraham story but the entire covenant theology of the Torah from a viewpoint close to that of Jesus, to present a story of *salvation of a person outside of the covenant*. There are some indications that the Lot narratives and theology come from a Deuteronomistic base, particularly in relation to the theme of love from God and love for God and neighbour and stranger that clearly distinguishes the second "law" from the first in Exodus. Apart from the story of the cross, no other story in scripture more eloquently portrays the absolute grace of God towards humanity, particularly to the outsider, represented by Lot. The stories of Zacchaeus and the woman of Samaria come close.

These particular insights regarding the Abraham and Lot narratives, and their different theologies, illustrate that *much*

of the Christian gospel arises from the Older Testament. Through Jeremiah (ch. 31), the Deuteronomists bequeathed to the world the ideas of the new covenant (New Testament), including the thorough democratization of religious faith: "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. No-one will have to teach his fellow to know the Lord, because all will know me from the least to the greatest." Why then do Christians seem mostly oriented towards distinguishing ourselves from our Jewish roots rather than embracing and celebrating them?

With these perspectives I turn to the question of our approach to the MFE. My belief is that in the MFE, the first agenda for Christians is to reflect afresh on *what Jewish faith and experience has to say to us*, rather than what we have to say to them. There are two complementary questions here that are both challenging.

1. To what degree can Christians fruitfully perpetuate the pluralistic aspect of Jewish tradition?

One way may be to develop a more explicitly pluralistic attitude within Christianity. This would enable us to be more open to acknowledge the meanings of other faiths. Our acceptance of the OT as canon implies such an openness. From the other side of this issue, the gospel elements of Jewish tradition remind us that Christianity may be described as a type of Reformed Judaism.

2. But at what points are the claims of Christian faith radically distinct?

These kinds of questions are not new, and they are not peculiar to Christianity. Practically, they are not going to be determined prior to our engagement with other faiths but only in the journey of drawing near. The MFE in most countries of the world, especially in "western" countries such as Australia, is a challenge to every faith that takes root. The topic of this reflection is equally an issue for Muslims in Australia, and Islam has its own account to give. For this reason, the MFE calls not just for an exchange of views and information about beliefs and practice but also for *a common exploration* of what the protocols of confession and mission should be in a respectful MFE.

My view is that Christians, engaging with each other, can fruitfully identify the questions of pluralism and distinctiveness as important aspects of our own agenda. *We can also acknowledge this agenda to our partners in dialogue from other faiths*. We can be open-hearted in dialogue and cooperation and allow our existential engagement, alongside our inherited tradition (creeds), to inform our conclusions.

This proposed strategy, I believe, is supported by elements in the New Testament, despite the fact that for much of twenty centuries, Christians have been burdened with the concern to ensure that we all believe the same things, and that all non-Christians would accept Christ according to an established pattern. This concern has often been at odds with the strategy Paul himself adopted towards Greeks (and Romans), summed up in his famous words "to be all things to all men that I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul's advice is relevant both to our method of responding to the current MFE and to our message.

As for *Paul's method*, we see him going into places of debate to engage Greek philosophers and opening discussion with them by reference to their agendas and viewpoints, e.g., as represented by the statue to an unknown God (Acts 17). We also discover that he was free to speak the word relevant for the conversation in hand, and did not feel the need to present a total theological system on every occasion.

As to *Paul's message*, we find him offering certain language that is as accessible to us today as then, when he speaks of God as "not far from any one of us; God in whom we live and move and have our being". For me, this God concept complements the Johannine language regarding the Spirit, breathed into the disciples by Jesus, and the powerful implication that God lives and moves and has God's being in us. These are metaphors of a God who infuses all creation. For dialogue within the MFE, *Christians have a mandate to choose the language and metaphors that will connect with others most fruitfully*.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Christian apologetics in the MFE is what we have called the two natures of Christ. I take this as an example to which the above discussion may be applied. I wonder if the metaphor of infusion can transcend the dichotomy created by the language of "over against humanity"? Can Christians be satisfied to affirm "God was in Christ, reconciling the world, … not counting our sins … and giving us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19) without having to proclaim up front the more developed traditions of Christ as Son of God, or Christ as an offering for sin? I struggled with Paul's language of sacrificial atonement and propitiation until I realised that Paul chose these metaphors because they were understood by Jewish Christians. They have dominated Catholic and Evangelical theology but perhaps we do not have to absolutize nor perpetuate them. Nor does the Johannine language that "God sent his son into the world" bind us to images of God coming from somewhere else to intervene in this world. Jesus offered us the metaphor of the wind to convey that the intervention of God is subtle and mysterious: we know not whence it comes or whither it goes but in mystery, and through human agency, God influences the creation.

The third element of the MFE I want to acknowledge is my experience of a sense of call in the task of interfaith cooperation. This has some elements of the call of a missionary to evangelise but it might be described as an Obama version—because I pursue it within a sense of mutual respect and a mutual desire to learn from each other. In the process of speaking to Year 10 students I discovered that while Jews, Christians and Muslims have irreconcilable differences in theology, we do not need to get a divorce! That is because of our mutual concern for the "children" (to extend the metaphor), meaning the urgency to bear witness to God, in whatever way, to young people growing up in a near pagan-life style. This is because I share with my interfaith partners, (i) an understanding that life is the gift of a gracious God, (ii) the values of spiritual devotion and forgiveness; and

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what are you reading?

Words to God, Words From God

Howard Wallace · Ashgate: Aldershot, 2005

Reviewed by Craig Thompson

As its title suggests, Howard Wallace's book on the Psalms unpacks the double role which the Psalms have come to play in the life of the church (and the synagogue), being employed both as prayers and hymns spoken and sung by the community of faith, and also part of the scriptural revelation addressed to the congregation. This book provides the church with a rich resource for reflection upon its practice of worship.

Wallace offers a useful introduction to the general types and significance of the psalms; in this his book serves as a good basic text on this much-loved literature. After a historical overview of the use of the psalms in scripture, synagogue and church, Wallace turns his attention to the words-to-God theme, with particular reference to the psalms as prayer. As an Old Testament scholar he is very well aware of the integrity of the Psalms in themselves as elements of the Hebrew Scriptures. At the same time, however, he does not shrink from a specifically christological reading of the Psalms, and this is perhaps the contribution which most helpfully sets the book apart from other introductory texts, and marks it as particularly useful for leaders of worship in our churches at this time. The christological reading draws particularly on the reflections of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Life Together* and his short *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, Bonhoeffer himself having drawn on a tradition, going back to Augustine, which professes that the true singer of the psalms is Jesus himself.

Two important thoughts meet here: first, that prayer is something which arises properly not from the "poverty of our hearts" but from "the richness of the Word of God" (Bonhoeffer). We are, then, in need of *learning* how to pray, and the Psalms stand as such lessons in prayer. Wallace gives a helpful overview of the range of prayers to be found in the Psalms. Second, these lessons in prayer are understood to come from the lips of Jesus himself. Clearly, as the Psalms precede the birth of Jesus by centuries, this is no "historical" assertion. It is, rather, based on the understanding that, to the extent that Jesus himself is the true human being, the true image of God, his prayers exemplify what is possible in prayer to this God, and it is this which is embodied in the Psalms. To understand the Psalms as the prayers of Jesus is to allow them, in him, to be the expression of the full range of human experience and emotion in our approach to God. Thus, "the Psalms

are given to us to this end, that we may learn to pray them in the name of Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer, again).

This important point challenges not only that common use of the Psalms as prayers we might flick through to find one which happens to reflect how we feel at any given moment, but also the understanding of the character of worship itself. Worship and prayer are understood here not as what we do or what we generate from ourselves to offer to God, but rather our being caught up in what God has already done—indeed in what God has already "prayed" in Jesus. To worship, or to pray, is to participate in the possibilities God has laid before us. This opens up the possibility of our praying things which are not (yet) our prayers but which, as such, might actually extend our experience of both God and ourselves.

The final part of Wallace's book considers the Word-from-God theme. Here he calls for greater use of the Psalms as Scripture and as sources for preaching, and not simply as encouraged by our familiar lectionaries: reduced to congregational responses to themes found in the other set readings. Wallace argues that it is intentional preaching from the Psalms which will enable them to become the prayers of the church (p. 143). His final chapter explores ways in which a few particular psalms might be used as material for preaching.

Wallace's book is complemented by his website (hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au), which features expositions of the Psalms for each week in the Revised Common Lectionary, as well as suggested ways in which the language of the psalms might be employed in the liturgy. Both his book and his web offerings are important contributions to the understanding of the nature of worship and valuable resources for worship leaders aspiring to a greater integrity in their use of the Psalms in worship. At the same time, the book would serve well as an extended study "advanced" bible study group or worship committee, offering as it does a helpful introduction to the Psalms within a constructive theological understanding of the church's work in worship.

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(iii) a whole of life commitment to peace and justice for all.

I believe God has given me a vocation to work with others in JCMA. This endeavour has become my one ministry commitment outside of congregational ministry. All this means that I count the MFE to be of huge significance for the Christian confession of faith and mission. In the case of high school students, if we did not approach schools with a shared vision to witness, none of our three faiths would get a hearing individually. In fact our presentation elicits a very enthusiastic response from teachers and students who are surprised by the mutual respect and common perspectives we present to them.

Paul Tonson is minister of Holy Trinity UC, North Balwyn. He would welcome the chance to discuss these issues more fully, perhaps in the context of UC study groups: e-mail paultonson@optusnet.com.au.

CP

coming in issue 17...

Garry Deverell
on alternative worship

John Evans
on Good Friday

Sandy Yule
responds to Paul Tonson

Anita Monro
through a glass darkly

Rohan Pryor
in service

John Vander Reest
what are you reading